

BERTHA'S ENGAGEMENT.

BY

MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

AUTHOR OF "BELLEHOOD AND BONDAGE," "FASHION AND FAMINE," "MABEL'S MISTAKE,"
"THE OLD COUNTESS," "RUBY GRAY'S STRATEGY," "THE REIGNING BELLE,"
"LORD HOPE'S CHOICE," "MARRIED IN HASTE," "WIVES AND WIDOWS,"
"MARY DERWENT," "THE SOLDIER'S ORPHANS," "THE REJECTED WIFE,"
"THE OLD HOMESTEAD," "A NOBLE WOMAN," "THE CURSE OF GOLD,"
"THE GOLD BRICK," "DOUBLY FALSE," "PALACES AND PRISONS,"
"THE HEIRESS," "SILENT STRUGGLES," "WIFE'S SECRET."

*Genius completes itself when God has given
His own sweet heart flowers to the human soul.—
The gentle voice, the smile that speaks of Heaven,
Those human sympathies whose soft control
Blends gentleness with power, all these combined,
Make perfect grandeur in the human mind.
Bereft of goodness, gifts that seem divine
Are ashes cast upon a fireless shrine.*

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TO

MY BROTHER,

THE HON. JOHN H. WINTERBOTHAM,

OF MICHIGAN CITY, INDIANA,

THE PLAYMATE OF MY CHILDHOOD, THE FAITHFUL FRIEND OF MY
RIPER YEARS,

AND NOW,

AS THE EVENING OF LIFE IS DRAWING UPON US BOTH,
FAR DEARER TO ME THAN EVER,

I MOST AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATE THIS VOLUME.

ANN S. STEPHENS.

ST. CLOUD HOTEL, NEW YORK,
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BERTHA'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD WOODEN BRIDGE.

“IS there no appeal, Miss Canfield—no hope in the future? Great Heavens! do you understand that these words are taking away my life?”

The young girl, who had just refused the most ardent love that man ever offered to woman, turned her horse half around, and looked with earnest sympathy into that handsome face.

“Do you think that I am cruel enough to say what I have said for the miserable pleasure of enticing you on to a renewal of the honor you have done me—or that I have not felt as much pain as it is possible for me to give? If human love were the growth of human will, Egbert Fletcher, you would not have asked for mine twice.”

She spoke frankly, and with intense earnestness, for the white despair in that face appealed to every noble feeling she possessed.

“I believe you; God knows, if you were less honorable, less perfect, some of this bitter disappointment would be spared me. Forgive me if I have been importunate; if I could not yield you up without a struggle.”

"Forgive *me*, rather," answered the girl, with sweet humility, leaning from her saddle, and reaching out her hand; "but if I have misled you in anything, I shall never forgive myself."

"It is my own wild hopes that have misled me," answered Fletcher, taking her hand, and pressing his lips upon it with tender reverence, that brought tears into the proud eyes of Bertha Canfield; but she hastily snatched her hand away, for, turning a corner of the hilly road through which they were riding, came two young ladies, fairly mounted, and sitting their horses gracefully; but their long cloth skirts were spattered with mud, and the black feathers fell limp and uncurled from their riding-hats.

Very young and pretty were these two girls, as they galloped down the rough hill-side, one ahead of the other, laughing merrily, while the moist air swept their cheeks till they glowed like wet roses.

One, a bright-faced, slender girl, whose braids of ruddy hair had been shaken down in masses from under her hat, checked her horse and appeared to wait, while she attempted with one hand to force the braids into order again.

The other, a lovely blonde, with eyes that seemed to have stolen their color from a robin's nest with newly laid eggs in it, galloped on, turning her head and shaking her whip in triumph at the school-mate she had so recklessly outridden.

"Ah, ha, you cheated us by a short cut," she said. "We rounded the hill to head you off. So here we are ready for a new race."

Bertha Canfield strove to shake off the distress that was too visible in her countenance, but failed utterly,

and broke down in an effort to answer this speech, gayly as it was spoken.

"What, angry because we caught you trying to run away?" said the fair rider, glancing from Bertha to her lover. "I have ridden at this break-neck speed only to disturb a tender *tête-à-tête*, and wish I hadn't dashed in upon you; for Clara's hair is all down and our habits are so heavy with mud that they fairly drag one from the saddle. Now, what is the matter, Bertha Canfield?"

"Nothing! nothing whatever!" said Bertha, "only—only—we were thinking that there might be some danger."

"Danger! Oh, nonsense. Still there may be," said the girl, darting an arch look from Bertha to her lover.

"We have been wondering what kept you so far behind," said Fletcher, quickly. "Have you seen the view from that sharp curve of the road? It gives us command of the whole valley. I see Miss Canfield is determined to wait for her friend. Let us ride forward."

Bertha Canfield gave Fletcher one quick, grateful look, as he rode away from her.

"Oh, this is superb!" exclaimed Mary Noel, with school-girl enthusiasm. "Such depth, such richness of color! How gloriously this burst of sunshine breaks over the wet leaves and blossom-laden branches, with here and there a patch of vivid green in the hemlock hollows. Was ever anything so beautiful! But, mercy on me, how the river has swollen! All the banks are gone, and that picturesque old mill absolutely stands in the water. Yes, yes, there is danger."

The young man took a swift survey of the scene at his feet. A rich valley, scattered with farm-houses; the broad, deep Naugatuck sweeping into it through a gorge

in the hills, an old stone mill, where the stream fell most rapidly over a high dam, and below that an old wooden bridge, with its arches buried in the water. On all sides the hills were rich with abundant summer foliage. It was no wonder the girl cried out, when the view first broke upon her. At all times it was beautiful; but now the swollen river, rolling through it in a great amber-hued torrent, made it majestic.

"Beautiful, but dangerous! We should have returned," said the young man. "The river swells every moment—see how it creeps toward the mill."

Fletcher wheeled his horse, and rode back to the party, which was coming leisurely forward, enjoying the freshness of the air.

"We must make haste," he said, "the flood is rising. It has already reached five feet, at least, on the ford."

Bertha Canfield was the first to tighten her bridle.

"We have done wrong to stay so late. My poor mother will be frightened. The very name of a flood makes her turn pale. This will drive her frantic if we do not get home at once."

"But she must know that the storm kept us," said Mary Noel. "The morning promised to be so pleasant; but I never saw such rain in my life. Of course, the dear lady knows that we could not start in a tempest like that."

"She knows how fearfully such rains swell the river. It is as much as our lives are worth to attempt the ford after dark. Come, let us set off at full speed, or it will be too late when we reach the bridge."

Bertha settled down firmly in her saddle as she spoke, and adding, excitedly, "Come on! come on! ride for your lives!" dashed recklessly down the road.

The mountain road was rough, and the hills steep. Still Bertha would have led the way, but for Fletcher, who kept pace with her, while the others followed in almost dangerous haste; for the descent of those hills was at all times a perilous matter, and few women could ride like Bertha Canfield. But on the whole party went, in a wild gallop, down the hills and into the valley, which, just that moment, was all aglow with sunbeams, that shot fiery lances through a break in the gray clouds that hung above it in turbulent draperies, and grew terrible in that struggle of light and darkness.

Bertha Canfield was a brave-hearted girl, but when she saw that vast body of water heaving and rolling through the valley, her eyes widened with fear, and a deathly paleness came upon her. For one instant she drew up her horse, and seemed about to fly back to the hills.

Her companions, who had never seen a flood before, and knew nothing of its power, set up a laugh. The danger that frightened her only excited them.

"Come on!" she cried, stung by their triumphant laughter. "If we *must* pass. The peril will not be less for waiting. On to the old bridge! the ford is swallowed up!"

Away the whole party dashed up the valley, scattering a storm of mud-flakes from their horses' hoofs, which were washed every few minutes by pools of water, swept over the highway from the river as it spread wider and deeper over the road and across the meadows.

The mill, with a broad dam above it, and the old bridge some few rods below, was in full sight now; but a great flood of water had lifted itself almost to a level with the dam, and was pouring through the lower win-

dows of the mill, whose foundations of heavy stone were already buried in a wild whirlpool formed by some broken timbers.

Bertha checked her horse.

"Great Heavens!" she cried, "the old bridge seems to move! All its arches are buried—it looks like a railroad spanning the water. I dare not attempt it!"

The whole party paused. Bertha's unusual terror had a momentary effect upon the rest. She turned her eyes from the bridge to an ancient low-roofed farm-house on the opposite side of the valley. Usually a broad meadow divided it from the river, but now the water came within a few rods of the door. At a window of this house she saw a lady, fluttering like a pigeon in its cote when a storm threatens.

"It is grandmother—she can see the danger clearly from that window," said Bertha. "There, she flings up her hands—it is to warn us! Thank Heaven, my mother does not see us yet."

"No, no," cried Mary Noel; "she beckons us. Why, Bertha—Bertha Canfield, how can you be such a coward? The idea!"

Bertha turned to Fletcher, consulting him with her eyes.

"The bridge has withstood all floods for thirty years, they tell me, and there is no other way of crossing."

"But the water is already even with the planking. See how the drift-wood chokes up the timbers!" cried Bertha, panic-stricken.

"Still, it seems firm; and we have no other way."

"Firm!" said Mary Noel; "I should think it was! There is timber enough in it to build a city wharf. Why, there must have been fifty floods in the valley,

worse than this, since the old bridge was built, and it hasn't given way yet."

"Oh, yes, it has," said Clara Anderson, whose home was near the mouth of the Housatonic. "Half of it broke away, in an awful flood, just twenty years ago. It all happened the very year I was born."

"Half of it broke away!" exclaimed the others.

"Yes; it was an awful time. The old mill there was flooded to the second story; sacks of wheat and barrels of flour went whirling down the stream, and a man was killed."

"A man killed! How?"

"He would not take warning. The neighbors told him that it was unsafe; but some one was waiting for him on the other side, and, spite of everything, he dashed on to the old bridge just as a great drift of logs and a pile of boards from a saw-mill that had been swept away up the gorge plunged over the dam and struck it. There had been an awful strain on the timbers before. They gave way now, and while the people stood shouting for him to turn back, the flood was upon both man and horse, and swept them under, struggling to the last.

"It was terrible, the neighbors said, to stand there helpless, and see that poor horse whirling and whirling about in those fierce eddies, with the rider still upon his back, sometimes completely under water, sometimes tossed up by the current, till his deadly white face could be seen like that of a corpse.

"They had an awful contest for life—both man and beast—but a whirlpool dragged them under at last. Then a cry of dismay went up from the people on the shore, who were casting out-ropes and planks, with a

desperate hope of saving them. But the poor man was gone. They found him, the next day, ten miles down the valley, and he was buried from your grandfather's house, Bertha. Grandmother has told me about it a hundred times."

While Clara Anderson was telling her story, the whole group had drawn their horses together, and were listening with breathless interest.

Bertha said nothing; but she thought that twenty years ago was the very year that she was born; for she was just the age of Clara Anderson.

"I seem to have seen all that," she said, at last; "but I am certain no one ever told me of it before."

"That is strange," replied Clara Anderson; "because the man was going to your grandfather's. A wonderfully handsome man he was, the people said—an Englishman, travelling in this country, or something like that."

"Well, Clara Anderson, you have half frightened us all into cowards, and here we are huddled together like chickens scared by a hawk!" said Mary Noel, courageous in her ignorance of the real danger. "Are we to pass that old bridge, or not? That is the question. I, for one, am not to be turned back because a man was drowned half a hundred years ago. Of course, the bridge was made stronger after that. Come on—come on! Who's afraid, 'let him turn and fly!'"

As Mary Noel uttered this reckless speech, she put her horse to his speed, calling on the rest to follow, and dashed on toward the bridge, sending back a laugh, that was half a shout, as she went.

Clara Anderson, seized by the same reckless spirit, rushed after her, and, in very desperation, Bertha fol-

lowed, but more slowly; for Fletcher, struck by the ghostly whiteness of her face, was persuading her to turn back.

"No! no!" she said; "I will not prove myself the coward they think me! Besides, the people at home are suffering tortures."

"Come, then. We shall be over in three minutes. Hear how their horses' hoofs thunder across the planks."

Fletcher put spurs to his horse, and Bertha kept up with him, trembling all over, but fired with desperate courage, such as makes cowards brave when forced into the heat of a battle.

When these two reached one end of the bridge, their companions had passed over, and, waving their whips in triumph, drew up to wait for the party to unite again.

Bertha was ready for anything now. She struck her horse a sharp blow, and even led her companion on to the bridge.

Scarcely had those hoofs struck the planks, when a great dusky object appeared above the dam, like some huge toiling monster heaved up from the slime of the flood.

The people on the other side saw this horrible danger first, and flung up their arms in useless warning.

It came tumbling and reeling forward—a huge forest tree—heaving toward them root foremost, raining coal-black mud from a hundred scraggy arms, and dragging behind it great gnarled boughs and masses of foliage, that swayed and writhed in the turbid water like serpents trailing after a monster more hideous than themselves.

One instant the two sat paralyzed, gazing upon the hideous thing which menaced them with such awful and

sudden peril; then the young man gave a quick glance right and left, and seized Bertha's bridle.

"We must turn back. Keep your seat firmly!"

"I will," she answered, for positive danger had brought back all her courage. "Go on; I will follow."

Fletcher's horse obeyed the spur, and wheeled around; but that huge forest oak, with all its entanglement of roots and branches, reeled over the dam, that moment, with a mighty plunge, that sent all the mass of its knotted roots deep down into the boiling waters, and was held, for one awful moment, perfectly upright, its branches snagged and broken—the bark torn in great patches from its trunk—a thing of terror, planted deep in a whirlpool.

Again and again Fletcher plunged his spurs into the maddened horse, and urged him on with desperate vehemence. But the poor animal stood lost in fierce amazement—grinding the bit between his teeth, and quaking in all his limbs, for he saw the great tree looming down upon them.

"Save yourself! For Heaven's sake, save yourself! I cannot manage him!"

"No!" cried the brave girl, still reining in her horse.

"I could not love you, Fletcher, but I can die with you!"

"Then, for my sake—for God's sake—turn back!"

"With you—not else!"

Fletcher was about to leap from his horse and force her to retreat; but, that instant, the bridge shook and swayed in all its massive timbers. The mighty forest oak was hurled against it with terrible force, and the shock set Fletcher's horse to plunging. But for the planken sides of the bridge, he would have backed into the flood.

The pressure upon the bridge became more and more appalling; over the dam rushed the roof and logs of some mountain cabin, and these were hurled forward with a violence to which those old timbers, strained to the utmost, must give way.

Fletcher saw the increasing peril, and gained almost superhuman power over his horse.

"On! on!" he shouted, lashing Bertha's horse with his whip.

The beasts leaped forward neck and neck. Two-thirds of the bridge was spanned. Another minute, and they would have been safe; but now the broken cabin took the timbers at their weakest part. A fearful crash followed.

"On! on! Oh, my God, give us one minute!"

Fletcher seized Bertha's bridle. The frightened horses obeyed, and leaped forward, snorting with terror.

"On! on! on! God of Heaven!"

The bridge had given away; both horses recoiled from the leap which would have brought them among the timbers sinking in the chasm before them.

Each moment the gulf was widening. There was no chance of retreat, for behind them the planks were swept away, leaving nothing but skeleton timbers writhing in the torrent.

Fletcher, still holding Bertha's bridle, dug both spurs into his own beast, and lashed the other with his whip. Maddened and frantic, both horses leaped together. One cleared the awful abyss.

The whole end of the bridge dipped and sunk downward. When those impetuous hoofs struck the planks, they were under water. Bertha's horse slipped down them. He made a desperate struggle, gained a new

foothold, lost it, and, with an awful cry, that seemed more than human, rolled back into the flood.

A shrill cry broke from the men and women gathered at each end of the ruined bridge.

For one instant Fletcher and his horse disappeared; but, relieved of a double weight, the timbers rose a little, and hove him into view. Then a wild shout cut through the roar of the flood; out, as it seemed, from the very whirl of the waters a burdened horse staggered fiercely up the sinking decline, and they saw that it bore a man and a woman.

In a second of time, while her horse was slipping downward, Fletcher had seized Bertha by her arm, and dragged her across his own beast, which struggled fearfully for a moment, then, with a fierce leap, hurled them both through the scattered crowd.

CHAPTER II.

GRATITUDE.

BERTHA was insensible. A deadly sickness seized upon her when she felt the horse slipping helplessly down to the roaring waters, that seemed to clamor like famished wild beasts for their lives. Even now she believed herself dead; for the first sound that struck her senses was the fierce howl of the flood as it rioted across the wrecked bridge, seizing old planks and timbers, and carrying them away piecemeal.

"Bertha, my poor Bertha, look up—stir! Do something that we may know you are alive!"

It was Fletcher, who forgot everything but the danger. The wild tenderness of his voice might have aroused the dead, but it did not reach Bertha.

"Oh, my God! she is dead—she is dead!" he cried, turning his white face to the crowd, as he held the senseless girl in his arms, with the despairing look of a man who prays to be contradicted. "Is she dead?"

The last words were uttered almost with a cry of rage.

"Make room; here comes the old people."

A little old woman, in garments of soft dove-color, and with a delicate Quaker cap on her head, came through the crowd, and, kneeling by the lifeless girl, kissed her on the forehead and on the white lips.

"Give her to me, young man, and thee go for a doctor," she said, gently untying the riding-hat, which she flung away, with its wet feather, leaving the pale face and rich disturbance of Bertha's hair all exposed.

Fletcher resigned the cold form to the gentle old woman, and turned to obey, but some one had been before him. That moment a doctor came bustling through the crowd, covered with mud, and carrying a whip in his hand.

"Dead—nothing of the kind!" he asserted, answering the intense expression of Fletcher's eyes, rather than the tearful questions of the two girls, who wrung their hands over their school-mate in bitter self-upbraiding. "Give me brandy, if any one has had the thought to bring it, and a warm shawl; you will find one in my buggy. Thank you, that is just the thing. Rub her hands while I pour some down her throat; there, that brings her to."

Bertha opened her eyes, and her lips moved.

"Fletcher—Fletcher—did he go down?"

Fletcher came forward, trembling with a strange thrill

of delight, but pale, almost as the young creature who asked for him. Kneeling down by her side, he whispered:

"You see I have not been so happy as to die for you!"

A terrible shudder passed over the young creature—tears broke through her quivering eyelashes. She reached out her arms as if for some one to save her. "But for you I should have gone down."

"No, no! but for me you would never have rushed into this awful danger!"

Mary Noel heard this, and hushed her sobs long enough to break in:

"Don't say that—pray don't! It was I who did it, with my miserable bravado. It was a great thing for me to show more courage than our Bertha, who is the bravest, sweetest darling on earth! Just take warning by me, Clara Anderson, and remember what it is to be a dangerous goose. I must pretend to be fearless—I, who trembled from my riding-cap to my boots when my horse touched the bridge, and galloped over like mad, from pure fright. I dragged the poor darling into it all, and shall hate myself forever and ever! Don't reach out your hand to me and try to smile, as if it were nothing to lead one's dearest school-mate on to death, Bertha! It only makes me feel worse!"

A one-horse wagon drove up to the bridge while Mary was speaking, and an old man, with a broad-brimmed hat on his head, got out.

"Is thee better, child?" he said, smoothing Bertha's hair with his hand. "I have brought up the wagon. Grandmother thought it would be best. Come, then—we will thank our neighbors some other time."

Bertha reached up her arms, wound them about the

old man's neck, and kissed him. Her heart swelled with the tenderness of unutterable gratitude. She longed to express it, but had only strength for broken speech.

"You are all so good to me; but, grandpapa, if it had not been for Mr. Fletcher—"

"I know, child," said the old man, "he is brave and strong. There, now, give him thy hand; he is younger than I, and will feel it no weight to lift thee into the wagon."

"But I can walk, grandfather. It will be enough if Mr. Fletcher gives me his arm."

Fletcher gave Bertha his arm, and placed her in the wagon.

"Come with me—they will expect you," she said, almost timidly; for she seemed to have wronged this man in not loving him when he had asked it of her.

Fletcher took a seat by Bertha, and drove down to the low-roofed old farm-house in silence, while she looked upon the great mass of waters, rolling down the valley, with a shudder. All at once she uttered a cry of surprise. There, swimming with the current, with his head just above water, was the poor horse, whose danger she had escaped. The desperate creature was fighting bravely for his life; but the torrent was impetuous, and his strength seemed almost exhausted.

"Poor thing! poor Jason!" cried the girl, bursting into tears. "No one thought of you—oh, see! his head turns this way! he sees us! The current is not so strong here—he swims bravely! Oh, Mr. Fletcher, I think he has found a foothold—look, and tell me if it is so!"

"Yes," said Fletcher; "the brave old fellow will save himself!"

"Oh, how thankful I am! I did not know how

sweet life was before. But you are grave, you look sad, while I am so happy only to live!"

The girl who had been rescued from the very jaws of death, so recently, had a feeling almost of adoration for the man who had saved her. It seemed as if she had never loved herself so fondly. They had drawn the wet gloves from her hands—she looked at them, rubbed them together, and kissed them with new interest. The old terror lingered about her yet; she felt her arms, and put back her hair, as if to satisfy herself that it was real life that beat in her bosom.

When that sickening sensation of falling came upon her, it had seemed like death itself; even the thought of that awful feeling made her faint. Now her sympathy was all for the struggling horse. To her he seemed capable of human suffering—of feeling all the awful shudders that had almost rent her soul from her body, when the bridge went down from under her.

"Look! look! he conquers the torrent! You can see his shoulders and the horns of my saddle! How he toils! Oh, his poor feet are slipping—now—now!"

Bertha and her lover stood now on the door-step of the farm-house, looking out upon the flood. Though cold, trembling, and wet, she had no heart to go in while that poor beast was fighting for the life that had so bravely been given back to her. Great tears rolled down her cheeks, her hands clasped themselves, she uttered faint cries whenever the current seized upon him and dragged him into deep waters again.

"Oh, here he is! Thank God, he has reached the shallow water! See how he reels and staggers! He sees us—it gives him life! Ho, Jason! dear old fellow; ho, Jason, ho!"

The horse waded girth-deep in water yet, but he lifted his head and erected his ears at the sound of Bertha's voice. Then he struggled out of the depths, and came toward her, breaking into a feeble trot—shaking the water from his nostrils, and whinnying as if he understood her sympathy.

"You are wet and trembling, go in—go in," said Fletcher. "The horse is safe now."

"But you! Ah, Mr. Fletcher, if I could take those words back."

"Not now. This is gratitude for nothing. I cannot take it."

Fletcher wrung her hand, and turned back to the old bridge, where his horse was waiting.

Bertha sat down on the door-sill, covered her face with both hands, and began to cry. She was disturbed by a noise and something touching her shoulder. The hands dropped from her eyes, and, looking up, she saw her horse, which had made its way through the open gate, and stood, dripping wet, before her, with his head bent to her shoulder, as if craving some notice, after his terrible disaster.

"Poor old Jason! dear old fellow! we have been nearly lost together—you and I. What can I give you? What shall I do for you? How he quivers!"

Bertha threw her arms around the faithful creature's neck, and, when her friends came, they thought she was weeping over the poor animal, who, like herself, had been saved almost by a miracle.

"Come in, child," said the old friend, touching her shoulder. "Thy mother's windows look away from the bridge. She does not know that it is gone; but she hears the roar of the flood and feels the danger. Look,

the timbers are floating down. She will see them and die of the shock. Get up, Bertha, and let her know that her child is safe."

Bertha sprang to her feet at once; for the hurried manner of the old lady frightened her. Up-stairs she ran, spite of the heavy garments that dragged her backward, and entered a chamber in which a woman knelt among the shadows, with her hands clasped, and her face uplifted in the ghostly whiteness of a dumb prayer.

"Mother, dear mother, I am here. No harm has befallen me," cried Bertha, throwing herself down by the kneeling woman.

A faint cry, a gasp for breath, and the woman fell into her daughter's arms sobbing like a child.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER THE STORM.

ALL night long the rush and roar of heaving waters filled that old farm-house. The two young girls, who were guests for the time, awoke now and then with a thrill of remembrance, and clung to each other for a while, then whispering that all was safe, dropped to sleep again.

Bertha scarcely closed her eyes. Her body was shaken in every nerve by the peril she had escaped, in a miracle of bravery. Her soul also was in tumults. The refusal with which she had so positively repulsed Fletcher haunted her like a crime; when she thought of it a

chill of self-loathing swept through her. Why had she repulsed him so cruelly? How had she dared to wound the man, who, an hour after her cold rebuff, had plunged into the depths of that flood to save her life? Had she parted with him ungratefully at last? Was it her fault that he went away, dripping wet as he was, never once looking back as she sat shuddering with cold on the door-step, giving more pity to the beast that was hurled from under her into the flood than she had bestowed on the man?

Notwithstanding those shoots of vivid sunshine that had heralded the party on to its awful peril, the storm was not over, but raged deep into the night. Little rain fell, but the wind was furious, and with that came the dull hoarse roar of the mustering waters that grew louder and louder as the stillness of night deepened, while the great trees that sheltered that old house writhed and groaned, and beat their gnarled limbs on the roof, as if denouncing her miserable ingratitude. Not a moment of sleep softened the agony of that night's loneliness. If the storm seemed to hush itself, and give her a moment's breathing time, before her eyelids closed it would swoop down upon the old house again, and shake it from stepping-stone to chimney, as if a troop of fiends were trying to reach her, and battled furiously with the old trees for guarding her so well. Daybreak found the girl pale as a drenched lily, with all the redness quenched on her lips, and her large eyes looking out from the dusky shadows that had crept around them in the night.

Is it strange that this young girl clasped her hands as the dull light came through the windows, and that tears filled her eyes? True, the storm was hushed, but the

trees still moaned over the old house, and black clouds, broken away from the retreating storm, curtained her windows with gloom.

Bertha slept a few minutes after this, but her sweet face was troubled even in that brief slumber, and when the door opened and a little old woman, in a dove-colored dress, and wearing a cap of soft lise without frill or lace, came softly in, she seemed a little disturbed even by the light footfall which fell like snow on the floor.

"Is thee awake, Bertha? Has sleep done thee good?"

Bertha awoke with a start, and held out her hands.

"Grandmother!"

"Thee trembles, child. Thy hands are cold."

"Yes, grandmother, I am a little cold. I could not sleep. The storm raged so and that gulf of waters seemed opening under me all night."

"Yes, yes, that was enough to frighten thee, poor child; but it is over now. Hear how the girls are laughing in their room."

"They were not so near death," said Bertha. "They have done nothing to be sorry for."

"Thee has done nothing, either," said the old lady, kissing Bertha on the forehead; "but thee is worn out and must have more sleep. I will bring up some breakfast."

"No, no, grandmother. I am well, nothing is the matter. Besides, I have something which must be done."

"Well, it is early yet. Sleep a little. By-and-by I will come again."

There was something so soft and caressing in the old lady's voice that it almost induced sleep in itself.

Bertha closed her eyes, and a faint smile stole across her lips.

"Yes, grandmother, I will sleep."

The old lady stole out of the room, and knocked softly at the chamber door, through which pleasant laughter still came, and, with a finger on her lips, said to the young girls who answered the knock,

"Bertha has not slept well. It is very early. Let her rest."

After that the house was still as a deserted bird's nest, for the old people were in the far off kitchen, and the girls up-stairs talked in whispers and laughed under their breath.

A thin partition only separated them from the room in which that suffering mother slept; they knew that the old lady had gone in there, and, with her gentle voice, was soothing the nervous wakefulness that had arisen almost to frenzy while the flood was roaring and the storm raging around her.

After a while they heard Bertha come softly from her room and enter that from which the grandmother had just withdrawn. Her voice was louder and more cheerful than the soothing tones of the sweet old friend.

"Look up, mother," she said, "all the danger is over. The old bridge has gone, but what of that? They will soon build a new one. See how brightly the sun is shining."

A faint voice answered this cheery greeting; then Bertha spoke again:

"But the storm is over and the flood is going down. Grandmother has got our breakfast ready. Will you not come? See how the rain-drops twinkle and gleam at the window. It shines like silver among the wet leaves.

See, I am filling your room with the sweet, fresh air. So you must join us; besides, Clara Anderson is going away."

Again the faint voice seemed to protest.

After a little, Bertha came out of her mother's room, threw off her forced cheerfulness, and turned to the girls, that were waiting for her, with tears in her eyes.

"Poor mamma. The terror of this flood has nearly killed her," she said. "She does not seem to feel that we are all safe yet. She trembles like a leaf, and will not even look out of doors."

"Oh, this glorious day will soon bring her round," said Mary Noel. "Come now, let us see what havoc the tempest has made."

Bertha met this proposal with cheerfulness, and went with her guests to the front door.

Around the old homestead the storm had torn and swept away many dear, familiar things that the girl's heart yearned over. In the front yard a peach tree, torn up by the roots, lay quivering in all its wet leaves and tender twigs. Across the street a spring of crystalline waters, gurgling through moss and whispering rushes only the day before, had become a turbulent whirl of waters, pouring itself across the highway. The dogwood trees that had sheltered it were twisted off at the stem. Vines that had flung a torrent of foliage down the rock were swept away; a few broken stems alone clung to the rock, where they had basked in the sunshine and trembled in the wind.

Above all this, the storm-clouds rolled back in glorious embankments, softer and more luminous than snow, and, underneath them, all this ruin and waste grew beautiful as paradise.

"How grandly the old mill has withstood the flood!" said Clara Anderson, pointing with her riding-whip to the stone fabric, from whose windows and doors the water was pouring. "I almost feel as if it were human and proud of its victory. Ah, here comes Mr. Fletcher, and I have my breakfast to eat."

Bertha's heart gave a great leap as she followed the direction of Clara's hand, and saw the man who had saved her life approaching. She had a vague knowledge that Clara Anderson had gone down the hall, and that Mary Noel had followed, sending a little ripple of mischievous laughter behind her as she escaped.

No matter what they did, she would remain to receive the man who had saved her from that awful death. Her heart beat loudly, a glow of grateful warmth, such as she had never felt before, pervaded her whole being.

"Surely, surely, this is love," she thought, with a strange thrill of pleasure. "Yes, yes, this must be love."

This thought gave bloom to her cheeks, and flooded her eyes with tender light. She stood impatiently while Fletcher fastened his horse and came through the gate. Then she left the door-stone and, with her hands extended, met the young man half way.

A less sensitive man might have taken hope from this, but Fletcher remembered her words, uttered with such earnestness the day before, and refused to deceive himself. Still his hand trembled as it accepted hers, and a grave, sweet smile stole over his mouth.

"I was almost afraid to come," he said. "It seemed impossible that I should find you able to see any one."

"I must be ill indeed, not to see you," said Bertha, with a soft tremor of the voice. "Oh, Mr. Fletcher, how can I ever thank you enough!"

"Thank me for permitting you to run into such awful danger! Why, Miss Canfield, I have spent the night praying God to forgive me for it."

"And I have prayed him to bless you for it," said Bertha. "Prayed him to make me worthy of the words you said to me yesterday on the hill road."

The girl trembled violently now, and intense feeling drove the color from her face. He did not speak, but stood with his eyes bent on her with a strange, wistful expression, while his grasp tightened nervously on her hands.

"Mr. Fletcher," she said, gratefully, and with gentle firmness that went to his heart, "you have saved my life. It may not be worth much. Will you accept it? Living or dying, I can never do enough to make myself worthy of your love."

The hands which held hers shook, and the thrill that stirred it reached her heart. For one moment a glow of exquisite hope flooded his fine eyes. Then he slowly dropped her hands and turned his head away.

"You have saved me—you love me!" Bertha exclaimed, clasping the hands he had relinquished.

The young man turned his face full upon her. It was pale as marble.

"I love you better than my life—better than man ever loved woman! But, Bertha Canfield, do you love me?"

His voice shook—she knew that he trembled all over.

"Not twenty-four hours ago," he continued, more firmly, "you told me that it was impossible."

"Hours!" repeated Bertha. "It seems like years. That great gulf has been passed since then."

"Do hearts change so suddenly?"

Bertha cast down her eyes. The earnest question in his made her tremble.

"I see you are grateful for an act which simply proves that I am not quite a coward. You would reward me with a hand that I would give my life to possess a free gift, but will not take as a reward."

A glow of light flashed over Bertha's face, her eyes shone with tears. She again laid her hand in the clasp which had dropped it with such pain.

"Are such feelings as these to be rejected," she said, "because they do not answer the fulness of your desires? I did not know what love was then—now, I could lay my life at your feet!"

"Do not tempt me so—in mercy, do not! It opens a glimpse of happiness that I am almost craven enough to seize upon! But you have mistaken thankfulness for a passion which must last forever, or become worthless."

Bertha allowed her hand to fall from his clasp a second time. How could she tell, with all the inexperience of untried feelings, that he had not read the emotions of her heart aright? She was only sure of one thing: if that was gratitude, she would ask nothing better than thankfulness all her life.

She said this with a sweet modesty that almost disarmed the man; but he loved that young creature supremely, and, knowing it, would take nothing less than her entire love in return.

"I must not stay here," he said, with deep feeling. "It were dishonor to accept happiness at the price of yours. Only tell me one thing: has any other person—"

"Do not finish the question," she replied, quickly; "I have already answered it. No other person has ever spoken to me seriously of love. Remember how recently I left school—how little I have seen."

"I do remember, and this gives me a little honest hope. But you must not be troubled by the presence of a man who will adore you through all his life. To-night I shall leave this place."

"You leave us to-night!" said Bertha, reproachfully.

"It is better so; out of your presence I can command myself. Left in this sweet solitude, you will understand your own heart. By-and-by we shall meet again; then I will take my fate. Till then, farewell!"

Before Bertha could answer, Clara Anderson came into the hall with the bloom of fresh country air in her face, and the stately grace of a queen in her bearing; for the long skirt of her habit trailing over the floor gave her an air of courtly dignity that another dress might have lacked.

Bertha breathed quickly, and her face grew anxious.

"This is not a farewell," she said; "I shall see you again."

"After you have had time for thought, and I to make myself more worthy," was the low answer.

Then a single grasp of the hand followed; Clara had drawn close to them, and Fletcher was to escort her home. Directly Mary Noel came from the breakfast-room, and tenderly kissing Clara good-by, stood with Bertha on the door-step till the young people rode away, taking their course down the valley, toward a lower bridge which the flood had spared.

The two girls thus left upon the door-step stood there with clasped hands like sisters that had just parted from

a dear friend—which was true; for these three had been intimate beyond all others in their school days, and fate had dealt hardly with Clara Anderson since then—so hardly that those friends gazed after her, as she rode away, with tears in their eyes.

As she disappeared beyond the old mill, Bertha turned to Mary Noel with a sad smile.

"There she goes back to her toil—which will be all the harder after these few days with us. I never felt so sorry for any one as I do for her. It seems as if some new trouble were about to fall on her!"

Mary Noel was serious for once, as she answered:

"What greater evil than to work for her own living can come to a girl like her? It is a hard, hard lot. I sometimes think it is a pity her father lived to educate her so much above her chances in life."

"He was a finely-educated man himself," said Bertha, "and had every prospect of improving her position. It was a great misfortune when he died."

Mary Noel shook her head.

"I remember it well. She seemed heart-broken when they took her away from school; and well she might, for I am told that she absolutely works with her own hands."

The patrician young lady shuddered faintly as she spoke.

"At her home in the South she had a hundred slaves to anticipate her wishes, and, in her estimation, work, which is the greatest blessing God ever gave to mankind, was absolute disgrace."

"She might have gone out as a governess," answered Bertha, without heeding the shudder; "or have kept school here in the country, but she could not be persuaded.

to leave her grandmother; so, as you have heard, works night and day with her own hands."

"Why didn't she accept that young student from her own town, who was so wildly in love with her, I wonder?" said Mary.

Bertha shook her head.

"She will never marry him; if she wished it, Lane's family would interfere."

"Proud, are they? Well, Clara can match them in that; for she was haughty as a duchess at school. Poor girl! It is a cruel lot."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUNTRY TAVERN.

ABOUT half-way between the old mill and the village in which Clara Anderson lived, stood an old-fashioned stone tavern, with a square stoop in front, a heavy stone chimney on the roof, and an orchard of patriarchal apple trees in the rear. Of course, this house stood directly on the highway, which was so narrow that a huge old willow that grew on the opposite side flung its pendent branches over the stoop and whipped the roof unmercifully when the winter storms began to toss and torture its drooping boughs. On one of the oldest of these branches swung a ponderous sign, on which a rampant lion had almost raved itself out of paint, and by the huge trunk a wooden horse-trough, separated into departments, gave the crowning proof that men and horses were alike welcome at the stone tavern.

Plenty of custom the old tavern had secured to itself in those good old days, when railroads were unknown, and men of all degrees travelled with their own horses and put up at night like Christians, saying their prayers before they went to bed, and asking grace decorously at breakfast, before they started on a momentous day's journey of forty miles or so.

At the time of our story, revolutionary improvements had never come nearer than ten miles of the old tavern, which was within the distance of a dashing ride from New Haven, when the sleighing was good, and would be reached in another direction by travelling five miles from a village on the Housatonic, where Clara Anderson resided.

You can imagine that the stone tavern was a grand resort for the students of Yale College whenever they could break from their studies and steal off to make a night of it.

Of course the faculty set its face against these excursions, but almost every night, when the sleighing was good, parties would start for the old place in reckless defiance, amid a storm of sleigh-bells, the cracking of whips, and wild shouts of laughter, which grew loud and reckless, as the wind charged across the farms from the open country. On such nights there would be a tumult of bells and horses under that vast willow. The old tavern would blaze out in all its windows, and the enticing sounds of a violin would send joyous gushes of music through the noise of stamping feet and clamorous gayety that warmed the old building with jovial mirth.

At the time of the great freshet, this house was in the very flush of its popularity; scarcely an evening passed that its walls did not ring to the merriment of reckless

voices, and the host must have acquired a habit of taking sleep for granted, as he seldom had an opportunity of getting an entire night's quiet. But he was a good-natured specimen of a Boniface, and liked to see the young fellows enjoy themselves. They paid him well, and he bothered his round head very little about the condemnation bestowed upon him by the college faculty, or the staid and better order of his own townspeople.

The students did not always confine their visits to the stone tavern to sleighing time.

At all seasons of the year it was a favorite resort. No pleasanter boarding-place could be found for young gentlemen enduring the sentence of a short rustication, and in the summer time students ambitious to pursue their studies out of college found the old house sufficiently quiet for that purpose.

Thus it happened that the stone tavern was seldom without guests of more than ordinary position and intelligence. It was here that young Fletcher had taken up his quarters during his stay in the neighborhood, and here also a party of students, composed of the most rebellious spirits that ever defied the faculty of a college, had been kept over night by the flood and storm.

The next morning was brightly pleasant, but the flood was high, and these young men still chose to consider themselves weather-bound, and resolved to carry the revel of the last night deep into the beautiful day.

So the punch-bowl, which had been thrice emptied during the night, was replenished, and placed upon the table, about which several young men gathered noisily.

The leader of the revel was a young man of perhaps twenty-two, strikingly handsome, but with a reckless, dissipated expression about his face, which, in a measure,

destroyed its charm. Of all these young men, his jests were the most frequent and careless. His companions seemed to regard him with that respect which reckless persons are apt to give the one among their number who is the most daring and readiest for frolic and misdoing.

Still, an acute observer would have perceived through all his gayety an illy subdued impatience which gave token of more sombre reflections than he would have been willing to betray, and which he strove in vain to silence.

He had drunk deeply, but seemed little affected by his potations—even the punch, which had proved somewhat too strong for the stoutest heads after all the wine taken during the night, appeared only to make him more reckless and excited.

"I say, Lane," called out a young man, who had been for the last five minutes trying hard to light a cigar at an empty candlestick, and still persisted in his efforts in spite of his ill success; "I say, what are you g—going to do with yourself now?"

"Watch you struggle with that cigar," replied the other, setting down his empty glass, and pointing the preoccupied youth out to his companions.

A shout went up that fairly shook the room, in which the subject of the jest joined heartily.

"Thought it was queer," he said, throwing aside the cigar; "you see, old Hodgson keeps his brass polished so well, I mistook it for flame."

Some one gave him a match here, and he subsided into silence.

"I think you are lucky to be rusticated just now, Lane," said another student, renewing the conversation this ridiculous episode had broken off.

"I think so too," answered Lane, "and mean to send back a vote of thanks to the faculty."

"Ask them to extend the kindness," said Morgan.

"Oh, you don't need my help. No one has a fairer chance," was the sharp reply.

"Just so," faltered the young man, dropping the ladle, from which he had been making efforts to fill his glass. "Here, fill up for me, that's a good fellow; my hand's awful shaky."

"I should think so; you have spilled any amount of punch, and scalded my hand."

"Nothing of the kind," answered the other, shaking his head solemnly. "Sting of remorse."

"Don't know the sensation. But what's the matter with Waldon? Don't drink? Take a glass, old fellow."

Walking cautiously forward, as if treading on very uneven ground, the young man went toward a person sitting by the window, who seemed to be amusing himself by a comparison between the beautiful freshness of the morning and the reprehensible scene within doors.

He was an older man by some years than any of the revellers; and, though he seemed to know them all, kept scornfully aloof from their sources of enjoyment.

"I never drink in the morning. You ought to know that," he said, waving the glass scornfully away.

"Don't bother Waldon, he's deep in a new poem. Never drinks when he's inspired," said Morgan.

"If you never drink only when inspired, that would be your last glass," muttered Waldon, feeling too much contempt for a direct retort.

"There—there, don't interfere. That man graduated when I was a freshman. He's made a figure in the world since then, and looks down on us common fel-

lows," whispered Lane. "There's no use trying to rope him in for a spree."

"Lucky fellow; does what he pleases and accounts to nobody."

"No cross governor to interfere, as some others have, eh, Lane?" returned Morgan.

"Oh, I've no fault to find with mine," replied Lane. "He may bluster a little, but when he sees it is of no use, he'll settle down as quiet as a kitten."

"Are you going away from here?"

"Of course I am; you don't think I mean to stay in this stupid hole when I can get out! I am off to-morrow morning, if we finish the punch before then. I shall run down to New York for a few weeks."

"Then you are not going home?"

"Not at present, any way."

"Home's a delusion," said Morgan.

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home," sang the young man who had distinguished himself by his exploit with the cigar a few moments before.

"You've got a sweet voice," said Lane, with a scornful laugh.

"Always been told so," hiccuped the scapegrace, leaning heavily on the table.

"Did you ever hear me s-sing, 'Oh, no, we n-never mention her?'"

"Don't mention her now," said Morgan.

"Sing it by all means," cried the rest. "Don't you be put down by Morgan."

"I shant," replied the young man valorously; "I'm not to be put down by anybody. I shall sing or I shall not sing, just as I see fit."

The young man leaned back in his chair, and, for-

getting his original idea, broke into "Captain Jenks of the Light Dragoons," which was ended ignominiously with the first verse.

By this time the punch-bowl was empty, and the party dispersed—some going to their rooms to sleep, others gathering in the bar-room below.

CHAPTER V.

THE DANGEROUS CONFIDANT.

WALDON kept his seat by the window for some time after the young rioters withdrew.

Lane also sat despondently by a table. His share in the night's revel had fallen short of oblivion, and he still felt keenly. He had thrown off his assumed gayety the moment his companions disappeared, and sat, leaning his head upon his hand, gazing moodily on the floor.

"You are not in as good spirits as you pretend," said Waldon, watching him closely.

"If Morgan were here, he would say that I have had plenty of good spirits," he answered, with a harsh laugh.

"Are you really annoyed at having been suspended?"

"I am past caring for anything of the sort, I assure you."

"I suppose your father will feel it very much."

"I hope so; he may thank himself for half that I have done! Father, or no father, he must be careful what he says to me now; I will not be blamed or lectured."

"You are not going home, you say?"

"No; why should I? My last visit was one continued scene of annoyance and trouble—you know what I mean."

"In reference to some young lady? Yes, I have heard of it. The name I forget."

"You have? I never spoke her name; upon my word, I believe I lacked the courage."

"Is she a girl to take this rustication to heart?" inquired Waldon, who seemed rather to endure than sympathize with the young man.

"That's just what she is. Her pride is equal to my father's. That's where the trouble lies. She knows they look down on her, and resents it. Who wouldn't?"

Waldon made no answer. He was getting tired of the subject, and leaned out of the window, attracted by the sound of hoofs coming down the road.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "What a splendid woman! Come here, Lane, and tell me if you know her. I think that is Fletcher riding by her."

"Very likely," answered Lane, rising languidly. "He wouldn't join in with us—got wet through or something—and went off on horseback after breakfast. Yes, it is Fletcher; and good Heavens, Waldon! Clara Anderson with him."

"That girl Clara Anderson?" exclaimed Waldon, flushing with excitement. "That girl on the horse the one you were talking of?"

"She doesn't know that I am here. Oh, if I could speak one word to her! If he were not with her, I would leap from the window and head off her horse."

"A man might be excused for any folly, when a girl like that is in the question," said Waldon, completely

aroused. "She will not give you a chance though, but puts her horse to his speed."

"She saw me. Did you not see her lift her eyes? Which is it, Waldon—does she fear, love, or hate me?"

"How can I tell?" answered Waldon, with a gesture of impatience. "The girl may be a coquette, for anything I know."

"No, she's not that. Proud as Lucifer, but no coquette. If she would not stoop to take me when I had nothing to be ashamed of, do you think she would lead me on now?" said Lane, with great bitterness.

"Then she has refused you?"

"Yes, she has; I need not be ashamed to own it, but it was all my father's fault."

"No doubt your father expects you to marry some girl of better family and expectations. This young lady has nothing of that sort, I take it."

"No; have not I told you she earns her own living?"

"Very poor, then?"

"Not poor enough to marry me!"

Waldon asked these leading questions with keen interest. All his indifference was gone since he had seen that girl on horseback.

"Better family!" exclaimed Lee, breaking out bitterly after a long silence. "When my family heard that I was in earnest, they flew at me, and there was nothing bad enough to say of her. She heard of it, and forbade me ever to enter her presence again. The old man had done it all, but I have paid him off. This rustication will cut his pride up root and branch."

"But the young lady?"

"She must think what she pleases, do what she likes;

she cannot treat me any more heartlessly than she has already done!"

In a passion of distress the young man sprang up, dashed his clenched hand against the punch-bowl, and shivered it to atoms. Then he rushed down-stairs, and walked swiftly down the road, as if possessed of a wild idea that he would overtake the horse that had carried Clara Anderson away.

All that afternoon the young man spent in walking up and down the damp highway, regardless of water or mud, or wandering off into the woods where rain-drops that the leaves had hoarded drenched him like a storm.

Long after dark he lingered in sight of the tavern, dreading to enter it; for the sight of Clara Anderson had sobered him, and in his despondency he fairly loathed the people with whom he had spent the previous night.

Late in the evening the young man entered the tavern stealthily, for he shrank from meeting any of his college friends, and hoped to reach his chamber unnoticed, but the door of Waldon's room was open as he passed it, and struck with a sudden idea he went in.

"Is it you?" said Waldon, looking up from the volume he was reading. "White as a ghost too. I say, young man, this sort of life will soon use you up."

"Let it," answered Lee. "I have been growing desperate for months; now I don't care what becomes of me."

"That only proves how young you are," said Waldon. "Why, man, if I wanted a girl, I would have her; but then I have seen something of the world. You are hardly outside of the college walls."

Lee suddenly lifted himself upright, and held out his hand.

"Waldon," he said, "you are a prime fellow; all the boys say that you are ready to help anybody out of a scrape. Will you help me?"

"Help you—how?"

"You are a gentleman, a scholar, and more than that, a first-class writer, besides a power of speech that would win an angel out of Heaven. See what you can do with mine! Go to Clara Anderson and try to make her think more kindly of me."

Waldon started, and a strange hot flush swept his face.

"What I can do with Miss Anderson—is that what you mean?"

"Just that. If she will not listen to you, there is no hope."

Waldon arose and took the hand Lane had extended. The quick light of some inward purpose, noble or selfish, kindled his gray eyes.

"Yes," he said, "I will see this girl."

Lane wrung the hand in his.

"There, there," said Waldon, releasing his hand with a smile. "Get some sleep if you can. To-morrow you shall tell me everything about this young lady, and I will do my best for you."

"That is kind. Waldon, you are a princely fellow. Perhaps you might break this college business to the governor while you are about it. The thing has got to be done, I suppose, and it had better be a friend than an enemy who tells him. He's a great reader and will know all about you."

"Very well," answered Waldon. "Say good-night, and I'll do my best for you."

Lane turned to go, then came back again, leaning his hand heavily on the table.

"You can promise her everything, Waldon. I will reform entirely; never go on another bender in my life. I'll settle right down in that village, study law, and bluff the old man on his own bench. Don't hesitate to promise. I'll be sure to back you up."

A mocking smile was on Waldon's lip as he answered:

"Well, well, I will go as far in that direction as the case will permit. Now, good-night!"

"Good-night!"

CHAPTER VI.

BACK TO HER WORK.

CLARA ANDERSON, with Fletcher by her side, rode up to the old house which was her home with a clouded face. It was like the return of a bird, that had broken loose for a time, to its cage again. For the first time since she had taken up the burden of her grandmother's support, three entire days had been spent in the company of her school-mates, who had come dashing through the village with Fletcher for an escort, in order to make her a visit. Once in the old house they were detained under its roof by one of the heaviest storms that had drenched that part of the country for years.

To Clara this visit was a pleasure which amounted to pain, a humiliation and a triumph. It was something that these dear friends refused to give her up, though fortune had separated them so widely; but, with that thought, came a sense of poverty exposed and of time lost. Still there remained some evidences of former

prosperity in the house, and where they fell short, Clara's fine taste gave an air of elegance to poverty that took away its bleakness.

Thus, with an underlying sense of pain, she had thrown everything aside, and given herself up to the entertainment of her guests.

On the afternoon of the second day a promising break in the clouds inspired her guests to mount their horses and start for home; but this impulse was accompanied with pathetic entreaties that Clara would go with them, if it were only for a night.

All this seemed like a hospitable caprice of the moment, but it had been planned between the two girls from the beginning that Clara should be forced to take a little recreation, and, to this end, a maiden who made her home with the old Friend and his wife had been sent over in advance to advise Clara of their advent, and to take care of the old grandmother, should their intention be carried into effect.

When the isolated young creature found that it was possible to enjoy a few hours in the open air, without a great sacrifice of duty, she gave into the plan with all the vivid enjoyment of a nature held in perpetual suppression. Upon the seven acres of land that lay around the old house in which her grandmother was born and now lived she kept a horse which had once belonged to her father. A riding-habit and hat, long out of use, was in a closet up-stairs, and in the garret above, her side-saddle hung against the rafters.

All these advantages flashed across her mind in a moment. She had the means of joining her friends like a lady; why should she fling aside so much happiness? It was only to work deep into the night for a week or

two, and this sunny break in the monotony of her life would be atoned for.

Clara felt and thought vividly at all times. Now she signalized a boy from the street, who always seemed to be within hail when she wanted him, gave directions about her horse, and, after holding a conference with Lydia, who was left in full charge of the house, and her grandmother, who never gave consent to anything without a feeling of martyrdom, astonished the whole village as she galloped through its muddy streets with her guests.

There was equal curiosity when this girl came back with Fletcher, riding slowly down the street, and setting her horse with a dejected air.

"Who was this man? Where did that girl get her stylish habit and hat? What did it all mean?"

Clara saw eager faces that she knew crowding to the windows, and smiled bitterly to herself. She felt that her brief opportunity of enjoyment was over; that she was returning to isolation and toil which this one gleam of pleasure would make more irksome. Just then she was in sharp rebellion with her fate.

Clara drew a deep breath when she came in sight of her home, and thought of the querulous greeting that she might perhaps expect from its inmate, who, like the house, was falling into decay, so gradual that she alone failed to observe it. Both were old and full of discomfort; but the aged woman would admit of no change or deficiency either in herself or the house she was born in.

Fletcher looked at the old building with great curiosity, for the storm had prevented him observing it before. Never, he thought, with the feeling of an artist, was

there such a blending of the common-place and the picturesque in one building. It had once, years on years before, been a dwelling of some consequence among the primitive farm-houses of the district. Even then the front gave promise of light and roominess, but this was cut off behind the chimney by a roof that sloped downward so gradually that a courageous boy might have coasted down it with his sled, and landed among the plaintain leaves growing in the back-yard, without much more shock than a first-class jumper would have given. Still, from the small front-windows to the rugged stone chimney in front, there certainly was an air of antique pretension about the old building. The lombardy poplars that stood, four deep, down the front-yard had been stately trees in their time; but now, each one was gray-headed and bristling with dry branches like veteran sentinels that had grown ashen, in crown and beard, while standing at their post.

Dead twigs also gave an ashen hue to the cinnamon rose-bushes that spread along the clapboards between the windows, and the white lilac-trees that towered to the second story were rough in the bark, and twisted in the branches and sparse of blossoms, but still in harmony with the weather-beaten front, from which the paint had almost entirely disappeared. The stone chimney had a rugged look of age that would have been dreary enough but for a great sycamore that towered up at one end of the house, and spread its gaunt limbs over the roof.

Bleak, neglected, absolutely poverty-stricken the old house looked, yet nature had refused to give it up. Clustering house-leeks and soft, velvety moss lay in cushions and ridges among the black decay of the shingles. Low running red roses twined in the long grass

under the windows, and white clover started up in patches along the walk, while the turf that clothed the roots of the poplars was blue with wild violets.

As Fletcher took in this picture, it was beautiful; for the rain had given trees, moss and grass a splendid vividness of green. The martins and wrens were holding a carnival in the sycamore, and bright lush-grasses were growing out everywhere through the broken picket fence, when the young people rode up to it.

Before Clara could dismount, the door opened, and the small quaint figure of a very young girl came running down between the poplars.

"I knew you would be coming. *She* grumbled, and said you wouldn't; but I was certain sure of it. That's the time o' day, Mr. Gentleman, help her off, and I'll turn out the horse."

The girl was tearing away at the gate as these last words escaped her; but it dragged deep into the earth, and left a half moon under her feet, when forced by main strength out of position.

"Ah, is it you, Lydia?" said Fletcher, looking kindly on the girl—who seemed to address both himself and Clara at once; for her vision crossed under the sparse fall of hair that had seemed sunburned in the cradle, giving her sharp features a glint of comical shrewdness that made even strangers smile when they looked upon her.

"Me? I should think it was. No two horses that I ever heard of can come up to this gate when I'm a listening, without bringing me out of doors. Just step your foot on this stone, Miss Clara, and skip over to that board. I laid it down a purpose. That's the time o' day; couldn't have given a longer hop myself! How-

is grandma, did you say? Been grumbling like a coffee-mill ever since you went away; but never mind. You needn't tie her horse, Mr. what's-your-name? I'll take care of him. No, you don't!"

This curt prohibition was given as Fletcher was about to go through the gate. He could not be angry with the strange creature who attempted to shut him out, but turned upon her with a smile.

"And why not, Lydia?"

"Because there can't be no mixing up of beaux when I'm about. Just you get on to that horse, and ride back to Miss Bertha, where you naturally belong. I happen to know what's what; so get on and go!"

Fletcher pushed the gate open in spite of this protest, and passed on, laughing.

"You will let me go in for ten minutes," he said.

Lydia quitted the gate, and dashed after him.

"Honor bright, you don't mean anything particular?"

"No, no!"

"And you'll tell Miss Bertha all about it your ownself? Any how, did she know that you was coming all alone with that other one?"

"Yes, Lydia. It was to oblige your young mistress that I came out of the way."

Lydia put a finger to her lip, reflected an instant, and then stepped out of the path.

"Well, ten minutes. You'll be sure to find me about by that time."

Having given this significant admonition, the girl allowed Fletcher to pass, and started through the gate after Clara's horse, which was trailing his bridle in the mud.

Directly her head was under the flap of the saddle, and she was tugging away at the girth-buckles with

both hands, which soon brought the saddle down upon her. She dragged it to the fence, and flung it across the pickets. Then hooking her arm into the bridle, she swung herself to its level, chirped the horse up close, seated herself on his back, and dashed off toward the wet pasture, scattering a shower of mud after her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN OF DESTINY.

THE few pleasant days that Clara Anderson had spent with her schoolmates would have brightened her isolated life a little, but for the reflection that such days would seldom, if ever, come again. It could not be long before Mary Noel would be going to her home in Virginia—probably never to return into that neighborhood, and Bertha Canfield seldom remained at her grandfather's after the autumn set in.

The next day after her return from the vicinity of the old mill, the restless girl sat alone by one of the front windows of her home sewing industriously, but with a feeling of revolt against the toil which seemed all the more monotonous after that one dash of pleasure.

It was a bright morning, still fresh from the cool washing of the storm; birds were singing in the great sycamore, and the scent of old-fashioned roses stole in upon her through the open window. But of all this Clara seemed unconscious—her thoughts were far away from these bright objects, and from the interminable

seam that grew so rapidly under her slender fingers. She sewed mechanically, probably almost unconscious of her task; and the thoughts in her mind were so absorbing that the cheerful notes of the robins were completely drowned.

She looked both proud and passionate as she sat there, working with swift unconsciousness, as if she were at war with her destiny, and would struggle furiously rather than settle into the monotonous quiet which it offered.

Poor girl, she was fighting against fate, but possessed neither the nerve nor the steady will necessary for the strife!

Up to this time her history had been nothing very remarkable, but hard to bear. While her education in the school—from which Mary Noel and Bertha had just graduated—was incomplete, she had been summoned home to her father's funeral, to find that all the property left for the support of herself and his aged mother was that old gray house and seven acres of land, on which a single cow and his riding-horse had been left.

Beyond these things, which, excepting the horse, belonged to the grandmother, Clara had no means of support beyond her own frail, untried hands. It was a dreary outlook, from which the poor girl shrunk at first with trembling, but she was brave at heart and sensitively conscientious. The fretful old woman in that house was left her as a sacred legacy by the father who was dead. She accepted it, and with it the duties of a servant and the toil of a seamstress, that no care or comfort might be wanting to her father's mother.

Those who know the world will understand that difficulties harder than toil and more bitter than the servitude of affection stood in this poor girl's path. The

very beauty and grace which made her lovely as a woman stood in her way. The daughters of such country magnates as formed the village aristocracy are seldom disposed to forgive any superiority in one they deem an inferior. Among the persons of this class that found deep cause of offence against the proud, helpless girl were the daughters of Judge Lane, a pompous, purse-proud man, of great wealth compared to that of his neighbors, and uplifted beyond endurance by his seat on the bench.

This man had two daughters, arrogant as himself, and a son, who had spent his vacation at home the summer Clara came from school; and, in spite of his sisters, had fallen desperately in love with the unfortunate girl.

This young man, impetuous and warm-hearted, broke into open rebellion when this grand passion became the subject of criticism and sneers in his family. His father, who had fostered all his faults by alternate indulgence and ill-timed severity, was exasperated beyond reason; while the sister, yet unmarried, spared neither falsehood nor invective in her condemnation of the poor sewing girl as a flirt and an adventuress.

This cruel injustice did not fail to reach its object, and with haughty indignation Clara Anderson had forbidden the young man to enter her presence again.

Since then a long dreary winter had passed. Most of the time old Mrs. Anderson had been confined to her bed, and the poor girl was often compelled to watch all night, and pass the next day in unremitting toil.

Work was not so plenty as she could have wished; the amount gained was barely sufficient for comfort, in addition, she was forced to endure all manner of slights and covert insults from the people she had so

innocently offended. During the winter she had sometimes heard news of the young man, but the tidings only gave her pain; they told of his recklessness, his bad habits, and when, in spite of her prohibition, he wrote to her, his letters nearly drove her mad with their entreaties and bitter reproach.

Clara was thinking of these painful themes as she sat at work that day; but she was not permitted to depress herself with them long.

All at once the girl, Lydia, came in from the garden with a bunch of radishes, on which the moist earth was clinging, in her hand.

"Miss Clara, just run to the glass and see if all's right. There's such a gentleman hitching his horse at the gate. Grand-looking like that."

Here Lydia drew up her angular little figure, and shot deceptive cross glances through the window, and at the startled girl.

"A stranger, Lydia?"

"Yes; proud as a Christmas turkey. There, he is knocking at the door."

Away flew the girl into the front entry, and directly Waldon followed her into the room.

Clara arose, thrust her work out of sight, and received him with deep blushes.

Lydia's description had done no more than justice to this man. He was indeed a person of noble presence, the very embodiment of mental and physical power.

Clara, usually self-reliant, received him with embarrassment. He was altogether a stranger, but the sensation he inspired came from something deeper than that.

"Will you be seated?" she said at last, returning his salutation

He complied with her invitation, watching her carefully all the time.

"You will not, I trust, think me intrusive, Miss Anderson, when I tell you that nothing but the truest friendship for a person who fears to lose your good opinion has induced me to come."

The blood rushed into Clara's face. She glanced quickly up, but no word escaped her lips.

"This friend is in great trouble," said Waldon.

"Trouble! What trouble?" questioned the girl, shrinking under the gaze of those keen gray eyes.

"He has been wild. All young men are apt to be so sooner or later; but some have the power of redemption."

Clara did not speak. She understood his meaning, but could not force herself to confess it.

The man was regarding her keenly. Her evident agitation disturbed him.

"I am afraid this young man has little power in himself. It rests with you, Miss Anderson, to bring him right."

"With me!" exclaimed the girl, flushing redly. "I have no such power. Mr. Lane, I suppose it is Mr. Lane you speak of, possesses all the strength, all the manhood necessary to his own redemption, if he has indeed done wrong. Where is he now?"

"Gone to New York; he would not come home. One cannot blame him for not wanting to show himself until the first stains of his disgrace have died out."

"Disgrace!" exclaimed Clara, passionately. "Is mere boyish folly to be exaggerated into a crime?"

"I was wrong, perhaps, to give his fault the name it is sure to receive from others," said Waldon, deferentially.

"What has Mr. Lane done that even his friends censure him?" inquired Clara.

"It would be easier to say what he has not done," answered Waldon. "The last offence was insulting a tutor, when—"

"Go on; why do you stop?"

"I would rather not be the one to tell you."

She made an impatient gesture and repeated his last word—

"When?"

"He had been drinking too much, and was not quite accountable for everything he did."

Clara breathed hard.

"And they have suspended him?"

"Yes; he was lucky that it was not expulsion. His father is furious; I have just seen him in behalf of the young man. It is very fortunate that Edward was not here during the first storm of anger, it would have separated them forever."

"His father is more to blame than he," cried Clara, giving utterance to her thoughts without reflection.

"The Judge blames you, Miss Anderson, I am sure, without reason," replied Waldon, feeling a sort of enjoyment in her pain.

"I know of no right that he has to take my name upon his lips," exclaimed Clara, indignantly.

"He thinks that, except for his unfortunate attachment, the young gentleman would never have been led into these bad habits."

"Oh," she cried, vehemently, "had my father lived, Judge Lane would never have dared to speak of me thus!"

"You will find the son greatly changed," he continued, making no answer to her passionate outburst.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"I hardly know how to answer; I am afraid you will think me impertinent."

"I am accustomed to that," she said, bitterly.

"Not from any one that I shall ever meet, let me hope," answered Waldon, with kindling eyes. "Not from Edward Lane!"

"No—no. How could you think it possible?"

"All things are possible to a man who can forget himself," was the answer, given with seeming hesitation. "But I do not imagine anything so base of Lane. He has made me his confidant from the beginning. Even now I come at his request."

"His confidant!" repeated Clara, biting her lips.

"Are you offended, Miss Anderson?"

"Offended? No. Mr. Lane has a right to select his own friends."

"He will never, I trust, find me unworthy of his confidence whatever his own deserts may be."

"He asked you to come. He is at variance with his father, away from all his friends. Oh, sir, I hope that you can reconcile them. He should return home before it is too late."

"You wish this?"

"Ah, so much," exclaimed the girl, clasping her hands. A cloud came over Waldon's face, darkening its splendid expression.

"If my errand had been as easily accomplished at the great house as it is here, Lane might congratulate himself, I see."

"You are unjust, sir. You do not understand my interest in this matter."

"I think it is you who misunderstand yourself, young lady," said Waldon.

Clara pressed her hands hard together till a burning red was left in the delicate surface, but her haughty spirit kept back the hot tears which struggled to her eyes.

Waldon saw this and relented.

"I am sorry to have offended or given you pain," he said.

"Oh, what matters a little more or less?" answered the girl, passionately; "but you were telling me about this young man. In what state did you leave him?"

"He was very bitter—bitter and reckless."

"Toward whom?"

"Every one; his father and—"

"Myself; do not hesitate."

"You, most of all."

"And why—what have I done that he should blame me in his misfortune?"

"Nevertheless, he does blame you very much. He says you drove him into dissipation by your coldness and your pride—that you, as well as his father, must take the consequences."

Those harsh words restored Clara's strength; she unclasped her hands, drew her form proudly up, saying:

"So be it then. What are the consequences to me?"

Waldon was silent for several moments, then he said:

"Shall you write to him?"

Clara looked for an instant as if she could have annihilated him for the insolence of this question, but, restraining herself, answered:

"No; I have never written to Mr. Lane. It would do no good now."

Waldon left his seat, and walked up and down the room, looking at the troubled and most beautiful face of the girl now and then with admiring glances.

"I have been so unfortunate as to offend you," he said, drawing close to her, and speaking with tender humility.

"No; I am over sensitive on this subject. It has troubled me so much."

"You feel deeply for this young man? His disgrace wounds you?"

"Yes, I do feel for him."

"Does that feeling amount to love?"

Waldon bent over the girl as he spoke—his fine eyes dwelt upon her face with an expression that sent a thrill through her frame. His voice, sweet and earnest, had no tone of audacity in it. His very soul seemed to await her answer.

Clara lifted her eyes, but instantly the white lids fell again. This man had asked an unwarrantable question, but she did not feel it as such. Why did he ask it? Why did he wish to know?

"You cannot answer me."

There was intense disappointment in the man's voice when he said this.

Clara looked up fearlessly now, and met his glance with a smile.

"Yes, I can answer; though you have no right to ask."

Waldon drew a deep breath. Her smile reassured him.

"He was kind to me, very; his society was pleasant, and I liked him; but love, oh no, that is a thing apart!"

"You are heart-free then. The disgrace of this young man will not reach you. I knew it. I felt it."

The warmth of Waldon's manner, the sweet force of his words, brought the rich, warm blood into Clara's face. There was an imperceptible homage in all this

that touched the latent vanity, which was thrown out, like foam, from the deep waters of her pride. Such homage was rare to her now, and she felt it all the more keenly.

"My errand is but half done," said Waldon. "I was commissioned by this unhappy young man to entreat your forgiveness—to plead with you for the future; but now, that I have seen you, the task is too much."

"Tell Mr. Lane that I have nothing to forgive—that his errors have injured no one so much as himself. That even greater faults will never induce me to forget his kindness, or regard him as less than a friend."

"And this is all?"

"This is all. Only, if you are his friend, entreat him—beseech him—force him into a more noble course of life."

"That he may become more worthy of you?"

"That he may become more worthy of himself, and of the honest friendship I bear him."

"You are asking me to undertake a hopeless task, Miss Anderson; but I will not neglect anything that promises to carry out your wishes. From what I have seen of the old potentate up yonder, Lane will have little help in that direction. The Judge does not even wish him to come home."

"Still, you will do your best, Mr. —? I beg pardon, but your announcement was so singular that I did not hear the name."

Waldon took a card from his pocket, and gave it to her.

Clara glanced at it, and lifted her face with a look of surprise to his.

"Waldon, Waldon, surely I have seen that name!"

"I fancy you will find it yonder," answered the man, pointing to a volume, in red and gold, that lay on the old-fashioned candle-stand in a corner of the room.

Clara started from her chair, took up the volume and cast a swift glance over the title-page. Then, turning to her visitor all smiles and animation, she reached forth her hand.

"Ah, how well I know you—how happy, how proud I shall be that I have been introduced to you under my grandmother's roof. Now I can understand the generous friendship of this visit."

"Can you go a step further, and invite me to repeat it? I am staying some few miles from here, and in my rides have no object better than exercise. If I should drop into this village again, will you turn me out of doors?"

"Turn you out of doors?" answered Clara, with graceful enthusiasm. "Do we turn singing birds from our trees, or roses from our windows?"

Waldon took her hand, bent over it with the subtle reverence he might have bestowed on a princess, and took his leave.

At another time the news she had heard regarding young Lane would have filled Clara's heart with sorrow. Now she scarcely thought of him, but sat down, folded both hands in her lap, and unconsciously allowed a succession of delicious sighs to flutter through her parted lips.

"How strange—how wonderfully strange that he, of all men living, should have sought me in this house. He whose ideas have haunted me at my work with such startling power. Oh, this is happiness!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A BITTER CONTEST.

CLARA ANDERSON was aroused from the pleasant reverie into which she had fallen by the slow clatter of her grandmother's cane on the floor. Hurriedly snatching up her work, she bent over it, reproaching herself for so much lost time.

Old Mrs. Anderson entered with the feeble step of an octogenarian, and seated herself in the one rocking-chair which the room afforded.

"I have had a good long sleep," she said.

"Do you feel better after it?" Clara asked, feeling that it was necessary to speak, yet uttering the simple words with an effort, for they broke harshly into her first love-dream.

"Yes, I think so; I did not rest at all last night. Ain't you almost through with your work?"

"Very nearly now."

"You look tired and pale; that is, you did look pale last night; now your cheeks are red as fire."

"My head ached, then."

"Give me your sewing; it is time to get dinner—I think I can do that."

"No, no; you must not try. I will go in a moment."

"You had better take a walk afterwards," the old lady said; "I don't like so much color in your face."

"I don't care to go anywhere."

"Well, take a walk, any way; you'll kill yourself with this constant work and no exercise."

Clara could not understand the extraordinary solicitude

in her aged relative. It seemed as if the gloom of her indoor life were drifting away, and giving place to little gleams of sunshine.

She went into the kitchen, where Lydia was hard at work by the cooking-stove. She had put the tea to drawing, and was now holding a slice of bread to the fire. The girl turned her head over one shoulder, revealing her thin fire-burnt features against the glow of the coals.

"I know all about it. The old woman has come down and wants her breakfast, dinner or tea, just which she's a mind to call it. Well, ain't I on hand, buttered toast, tea, and plum preserves? Just go back to your work, Miss Clara, or take a sniff of fresh air in the yard. You're not wanted in these premises; and not being wanted, why the next thing is 'clear out.'"

"Is there nothing that I can do to help you, Lydia?"

"Well, yes, if you want to so much, just spread a cloth on the round stand, and haul it up by the old woman; or she'll be crutching herself out here, if it's only for the fun of finding fault."

Clara went back into the sitting-room, removed the red and gold book from the stand, and, while her back was turned, pressed it to her lips. Then she spread a white cloth over the stand, placed a cup and saucer of old, old china upon it, and stood smiling, while Lydia came in with a plate of toast in one hand and a comical little black tea-pot in the other.

"Why don't you bring another cup?" said the old woman, surveying the little table through her spectacles with sour criticism.

"Because Miss Clara and I eat our breakfasts so long ago that we can't remember the time," answered Lydia;

"so just put your old foot on this cricket, and drink your tea quick before the milk curdles in it."

The old woman had been so long accustomed to submission when her crossdest whims were concerned, that Lydia's sharp retorts fairly astonished her into silence. So she dropped sugar into her tea from a pair of tiny silver tongs, nibbled at the toast, and grumbled under her breath, while Clara took up her work again, and fell into dreamy thoughts, in which the delinquencies of young Lane and the conversation she had held with Waldon were mingled with bitter sweetness. Under the work in her lap that book was hidden away open, and from time to time she paused in her task and drew some bright thought into her mind from its pages—all the more entrancing because of the secrecy with which it was stolen.

It seemed as if the monotony of Clara Anderson's life was to be entirely broken up that week.

The next morning after Waldon's visit, she was sitting at her work in the usual place when a rather peremptory knock was heard at the front door. Lydia was away in the kitchen, so Clara gathered up her work, and with it in her arms went to admit the visitor.

A rather tall, stout man, pompous in look and movement, stood on the door-step.

Clara gave a start, her face grew white as the cloud of muslin she still held in her hand. He did not seem ready to speak, so she drew herself up and remained looking at him with as much pride and coldness as his own glance betrayed.

"Miss Clara Anderson, I believe?" he said, in a tone which rendered the simple words fairly insulting.

Clara bent her head.

"I wished to speak a few words with you. Can I walk in?" he added, as if doing the humble roof immeasurable honor by his condescension.

"Certainly," she said, opening the sitting-room door. "Walk in."

The gentleman strode into the room, set his gold-headed cane into a corner, took off his hat, which he held between his hands, and seated himself with magisterial dignity.

"My name is Lane—Judge Lane, of the Supreme Court," he said, after a minute survey of the room.

"I am aware of it," Clara replied. "I have several times been introduced to you."

"Possibly; I don't remember anything of that kind, but I think you have done sewing for my daughters?"

"I never did, sir."

"Ah, I was mistaken—but your business is that of a seamstress or something of that sort, isn't it?"

"It is, but I am able to choose my employers."

"Certainly, certainly, that is not my errand here."

Clara stood before him, pale and haughty; he shrank a little from the indignant fire in her eyes.

The Judge removed his position to a chair near the window. Clara mechanically sat down near him, never once moving her gaze from his face or in the least restraining the cold contempt which it expressed.

"I have called upon a somewhat unpleasant affair," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

No answer—Clara would not aid him in this evident dilemma, he must extricate himself.

"I felt it my duty to come here," he began again, as if dissatisfied with the other opening.

Still no response from the pale girl opposite, not a

movement or a sign; the eyes flashed out at him bright and rebellious as before. But for this she might have been a statue sitting there in the shadow.

"You are probably surprised to see me," he observed, trying another method of entering upon the subject which had brought him to the house.

"I certainly am," she replied, quietly.

"It is disagreeable; I would have preferred not coming. I would have written, only letters are such unfortunate things, and my daughter agreed with me in thinking that it was my duty—"

"Any advice that your daughter can have given you must be worthy of regard," said Clara, with cold irony, when he broke down in his speech.

"I might have expected impertinence," he exclaimed, turning crimson with anger. "I did expect it, but it only makes my task an easier one."

"A distasteful errand is not easily rendered agreeable. Still there are forms of politeness that gentlemen usually recognize in the society of ladies," said Clara.

The Judge sat uneasily in his chair. His hat dropped, and it hurt his dignity to stoop and pick it up. This was done at last, and he prepared to speak again.

"I was preoccupied," he said. "You are right: a regard to forms is due to all women, no matter what their station may be."

"Fortunately that which I occupy is one you can regard with peculiar respect, if it is only in honor of your own most excellent mother," answered Clara, very quietly.

The Judge lost his vehement crimson, and turned white with rage.

"My mother—my mother!"

"Was too honorable for dependence, when she had

the power to work. Of all your family, sir, I reverence her the most."

Arrogant as the Judge was, this quiet allusion took him completely aback. He had not expected to encounter pride so much more independent than his own. Nor was he aware that any one in that neighborhood was so well acquainted with his early history. His mother's struggles in life were facts that he never dwelt upon. Even his own children were ignorant that her toil had given the first start in his prosperous life, and to find that girl in possession of his secret was bitter indeed.

As the lofty man sat swelling with indignant shame, Clara spoke, drawing his attention with her clear, cold voice.

"This interview is unpleasant, sir. If you have business with me, I am ready to listen."

"Certainly, certainly. You know my son—"

"I knew him once."

"It amounts to the same thing," the baffled potentate replied, catching his breath, and trying to recall the dignity which had almost deserted him.

"It may be so. I certainly have been acquainted with your son. Is it of him you wish to speak?"

"I don't wish to offend you," said the Judge, dashing into the matter at once. "I have no desire to hurt your feelings."

"Pray let no such amiable considerations restrain you," interrupted Clara, with a grave bend of the head.

The Judge grew crimson again, pulled out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He had never encountered any one who met him in precisely that manner. He had expected his very presence to overwhelm the audacious girl, and to be treated in that lofty way, as if

she were not only his equal, but as much beyond him as a queen on her throne, threw the judicial mind into a chaotic state.

He had no precedent upon which to act and his faculties were not of that active order which could suggest a new course upon the instant. He had arranged a programme before his arrival. Miss Anderson rendered it useless from the first, but it was so firmly impressed upon his memory, that he could only cling hopelessly to its remnants, growing more and more confused.

The quiet self-poise so visible in her face irritated him beyond belief. He was accustomed to respect from all men, and to have a mere girl meet him after that imperial fashion was an affront unparalleled in his remembrance of the bench or society.

But he must speak. Passion at last gave him words, and he said, almost rudely,

"You are quite aware that the acquaintance between yourself and my son was from the first exceedingly unpleasant to myself and the rest of his family."

He paused as if expecting some response, but he might have remained there until the sun set and rose again before Clara would have opened her lips.

"It has been much talked of in the neighborhood—disagreeably so; we, that is, I and his sisters, wish it stopped—put an end to."

"I wonder that you have aided this unpleasant gossip regarding a person who has never justly offended any of you."

"I did not come here for advice," said the Judge, choking down his wrath. "I am not accustomed to receiving it, especially in that objectionable tone."

Clara smiled; this irony did not give the expression

most becoming to her face, but it was wonderfully irritating, as the Judge felt keenly.

"I have every reason to believe," pursued the Judge, warming to his work, "that the associations my son has formed here have been in many ways detrimental to him. No doubt you have heard how wild he has been during the past year—I ascribe it to the fact that he is displeased with himself for keeping up an intimacy which he knows distasteful to me, although he has not exactly the courage to break it off."

That was a beautiful sentence and well delivered; the Judge felt that it ought to have its due effect. He glanced toward Clara with solemn self-complacency.

The girl had taken up her sewing; her fingers were moving rapidly along the hem. Her head was slightly averted, so that he could not see the expression of her face. She seemed to take the matter coolly, that was one comfort. Possibly she was a more sensible girl than his daughters believed, and once crushed into her proper position, made duly sensible of the vast distinction between herself and his family, would retain her place without further struggle.

Without looking up, or even making an instant's pause in her task, Clara spoke, in a voice so unlike her usual one that her own mother, had she heard, would never have recognized the tones—

"What then? Why do you come to me with such language as this?"

"Because it is my right," replied the Judge, haughtily; "because I will not sit by and see my son inveigled into an affair of the heart so deeply that he cannot extricate himself with honor."

Clara dropped her work. The indomitable pride of

her nature revolted at the tone and words of her visitor. But even in the insanity of passion and the whirl of outraged pride, she could in a measure control herself.

"You are safe in insulting the helplessness of a friendless girl," she said, retaining even then the bitter power of repartee which made one of her greatest faults, "this language is noble and manly—go on, sir—repeat it if you can find the heart."

CHAPTER IX.

BEYOND ENDURANCE.

THE Judge looked at Clara aghast. He had only been upholding the dignity of his family; he had not meant to wound her more than was necessary to impress the social fact upon her that in comparison with his race she was very common dust indeed. That she should turn upon him in this haughty way was incomprehensible assurance.

"You have strangely misunderstood—" he began, but she interrupted him with burning impatience.

"Not in the least, sir. I have understood every word, felt every word; pray go on."

"I want to leave the matter to your judgment and good sense and delicacy," he said, considering his remark very adroit and flattering. For the Judge prided himself upon his managing powers and thought himself as capable of carrying on a delicate intrigue as any diplomat of the French Court.

"Leave what to my judgment and good sense?" was

the question she returned, instead of the reply he had fully expected his lumbering flattery to bring forth. "What is the matter that you place in that light, sir?"

The Judge was all adrift again! His passion rose once more. The purple grew deeper in his face. He loosened his neckcloth, feeling nearer an apoplectic fit than was agreeable.

"You know. Surely, you know," he said.

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Clara, her fingers still going on with her work, her face averted as before.

The haughty girl had a strange delight in forcing that man to insult her; she was working herself up to a mood in which she would sooner have torn her heart out and trampled it underfoot than have made a movement toward reconciliation with the family of Edward Lane.

"No idea?" he repeated, quite bewildered, "no idea?"

"You have not made yourself clear, Judge Lane. Pray explain what it is that you believe or imagine, that you wish or demand; then I shall know how to frame my answer."

The Judge gave another tug at his necktie, took hold of the arm of his chair for support and made a vigorous effort to assume the manner which had overwhelmed contestants, when seated upon his court bench.

"I will explain," he said; "you shall have no reason to say that you misunderstood or that I did not make my meaning perfectly clear."

"I am waiting, sir."

She spoke like a Russian Empress kept in suspense by a serf, if one could suppose the thing possible, and increased the proud man's irritation and unhealthy

bloom to the highest degree either was capable of assuming without positive physical danger to himself.

"When my son came home a year ago," he continued, still striving to believe himself on his judicial bench, expounding some knotty question of law or equity to a group of legal admirers, "the young man made your acquaintance—people whisper that you put yourself in his way, I don't pretend to know how that was, but you became acquainted."

Clara's eyes flashed fire beneath their drooping lashes. The needle shook in her hand, but she did not care to speak until the insult was complete. So the Judge went on.

"The boy chose to think himself in love. He came here constantly. I could not believe the thing possible, but he confessed it with his own lips. Of course, I rebuked him—forbade him ever to enter this house again, but he was lured on to disobey me, and I found it my duty to be more severe. He went back to college. In that lay some hope of safety for him, I thought, but since then his conduct has been that of a crazy man. He has been driven to drink and gambling. He has been reprimanded and at last suspended."

"And how am I to blame for this?" questioned Clara.

"How! Why you have led him on to ruin, fascinated, bewitched him with your beauty—for you are beautiful, no one can deny that. Still you are no match for my son. He has a right to look higher for a wife, if you presume to expect that. I want you to save my son, instead of being his ruin—I want you to break this affair off. I am ready to make any sacrifice—if you will name the amount that could help to spare your feelings I will furnish it with pleasure; only speak and

let me know that you have decided never to see the young man again; on that condition I will send for him home and give him another chance."

"Have you anything more to say?" questioned the girl, now white and still with intense passion.

"Yes, one thing. I want you to make all sure by quitting the neighborhood. Of course your grandmother would be glad to sell this shaky old building for anything she can get, but I will give her a fancy price for it."

"She was born here. She has lived here all her life," said Clara, in a low, cold voice.

"That is nothing. It will fall down over her head if she insists on living here much longer. I am offering her a chance to save herself. There now, I am ready to close in with any condition you may make."

CHAPTER X.

LOATHING HER VICTORY.

CLARA let her work fall as she rose slowly from her seat. Pride like iron kept her from betraying any physical weakness, although the room reeled around her and she clutched the back of her chair for support.

Her whole being was in tumult. She only wanted to wound herself in the bitterest, most fatal way possible, to overwhelm the coarse man with a sense of her scorn.

She turned and confronted the Judge, who fairly shrank from the whiteness of her face and the intolerable fire of her eyes.

"I have heard you through," she said, "now hear me."

The Judge glanced helplessly toward the door, ready to believe himself in the presence of a maniac. Perhaps physical courage was not the quality upon which he most strongly founded his sense of importance.

"Your son did make my acquaintance—I will not even answer the gross insult conveyed in the accusation you bring against me. He loved me, he told me so! What my feelings were he does not yet know nor shall you. As your son, as the brother of your daughters, I have only pity for him now. After he had gone away I heard the reports which you and your family spread abroad regarding me—the insults you have offered me now were intensified into slander then. Had I possessed a father or a brother, you would never have dared to speak against me! Your cowardice is safe—I am a defenceless woman! But from the depths of my soul I loathe the slanderers, high or low, who have been base enough to malign me."

The Judge lifted his hand as if to ward off these thrilling words, but he was beyond the power of speech, and Clara went on:

"When your son came back I told him of these things. He had lost nothing of his original manliness and considered an insult to me an outrage to himself. I told him that I could never marry him—"

"Was he mad enough for that?" broke in Mr. Lane, so bewildered that he was unconscious of his words.

"Ah, you expected him to prove himself altogether your son. I know he would have been more worthy in your eyes had he insulted me as you are doing, but he is human. He begged me to marry him then; but

I refused. Judge Lane, had I loved that man better than Heaven itself, had my very existence depended upon it, I would have refused to become his wife. Every noble feeling of my nature revolted at the proposal. I felt and knew that the real disgrace would have been for me, for so matching myself."

Those last words roused her listener into some signs of life. He rose to his feet and stammered out—

"I have heard enough, young woman, quite enough; I shall know how to act."

Clara stepped between him and the door; he drew back his chair and stared at her.

She spoke low, now her anger had half spent itself in those scathing words.

"You have forced me to speak," she said; "you must hear all that I have to say."

The Judge fluttered his hands in a deprecating way and made faint contortions with his once handsome mouth, which, like that of many stout men, had grown too small for his face, but beyond that he could exhibit no signs of resistance. Her vehement eloquence had wrecked all his ideas.

"I know all the disgrace your son has brought upon himself—he has been suspended from college. Blame neither him nor me—but yourself—for you alone have been the cause."

Another sound from the Judge's throat, as if he were being strangled still tighter, but not a word.

"Your visit here, sir, was paid too late; you cannot even have the petty consolation of thinking that you broke off all acquaintance between your son and myself. It was done on my own behalf."

Another struggle from the Judge, but no words.

"Sir, I could not marry him—but your opposition would have been a feeble reason! I dared not trust myself to him—his faults—his vices—all prevent it—he was not worthy of himself."

She paused and leaned more heavily upon the chair; she had done her worst now both by herself and the man before her.

But the fearful tumult in her soul, made up of so many contending emotions that it would have been impossible to analyze them, had forced her to speak. She felt a fearful joy in the contempt she had hurled at the father, a terrible exultation in the fury which had moved her to fling back insult for insult!

The Judge had sunk into his chair again and was staring at her still with a blank, hopeless look. Then he made an effort and arose. The indignity thus hurled upon him made him faint.

He reached the door and turned to look upon the beautiful young creature whose best feelings he had come to insult. There was something imposing in her fierce anger that fascinated him.

She neither spoke nor looked at him, so he passed out, feeling a glow of cowardly relief when he found himself in the open air.

When the door closed, Clara's unnatural strength gave way, she tottered, stretched out her arms, and fell slowly forward upon her knees. She had not fainted, her eyes were open, full of anguish and shame.

The unworthy contest in which she had triumphed had tortured every delicate sense of womanhood in her nature. till the remembrance became torture.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIRD AND THE SERPENT.

IT may be the fashion to rave over the White Mountains, and that stupendous pass in the Alleghenies through which the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad runs like a skeleton's highway along the face of precipices a thousand feet from the depths. If you wish the very breath stolen from your lips with admiration and awe, take a tour east or west, and the most enthusiastic taste for sublimity will be satisfied. But if you have a fancy for pretty rural bits of scenery—hills instead of mountains, mossy ledges instead of precipices, shady nooks and villages that remind you of a quiet corner in paradise—seek for them along the banks of the Housatonic and the Naugatuck, which unite a few miles from the sound that engulfs them both, and formed a boundary for the original Woodbury district before it was cut up into a dozen beautiful towns.

A little back from the Housatonic lay the village in which Clara Anderson made her home.

This village lies in the heart of a luxuriant valley, hedged in and almost overshadowed by a range of rocky and broken hills, piled up against the eastern and western horizon. These boundaries, cut up as they were into rocks, ravines and forest trees, seemed but a counterpart each of the other, as if one beautiful mountain had been cleft in twain and forced just far enough apart to admit sloping hill-sides, broad meadow flats, and a sweeping highway, cut up by cross-roads near the centre of the valley, where a cluster of dwellings, a store or two, with

a red school-house, and a white church, with its tapering spire in the centre, gave glimpses of worldly life.

At one end of the valley a small river came gliding drowsily round the shoulder of the eastern hill and ran up to the village. There it took a graceful curve, embracing a maple grove, some three hundred acres of wheat land, several apple orchards and a half dozen green meadows, all of which lay a mass of thrifty verdure in the bend of the beautiful stream which ran slowly as if made slumbrous by their tranquil beauty. After this it swept gently round, retraced its course by the base of the western hill and glided off through the mouth of the valley into the Housatonic, having visited the village as it were in a fit of caprice, only to refresh and beautify a spot so quiet and lovely.

At the opening of the valley, just where the stream began to course around the hill, a stage road crossed it by a wooden bridge. Nothing could be more delightful than a view from this arched bridge. The river rolled silently on, half in shadow and sparkling like wavelets of silver when the sunshine fell upon its waters. Hedges of wild honeysuckle, sweet brier, boxwood and blackberry bushes, now and then broken by a clump of elms or a line of slender poplars, fringed its banks.

Close by the end of the bridge, a line of magnificent willows bent over the bank, where the waters caught their fragile branches and rippled playfully among their delicate leaves. Just below, the stream widened and fell in a beautiful sheet over a ledge of sunken rocks and went sparkling onward toward these superb old elms that stood on the borders of the village. On either hand rose the majestic hills, swelling into verdant pastures, and crowned with noble forest trees towering grandly

upwards beyond the soft blue sky, which at twilight turned to a golden sunset burning among the leaves and the uneven knolls.

In pretty nooks, where the hills swelled boldly out, red and white farm-houses were scattered far up the valley, and on a gentle eminence just beyond the church a congregation of marble slabs gleamed mournfully amidst the long grass which grew rank and green in the shadows flung by a grove of gloomy yew trees and weeping-willows.

Of course a lovely spot like this held forth attractions that would have induced any man of artistic genius, either with the pen or pencil, to revisit it again and again, for it was full of poetic suggestions. This Waldon gave as an excuse for his second visit, which crowded so closely on the first, that even he felt some apology necessary to the young girl, who felt her heart leap and her cheeks burn, when she looked out from the window and saw him dismounting at the gate.

"Will you let me in?" he said, drawing close to the window where she sat, gazing with smiles upon her blushes, as an epicure drinks in the tints of old wine with his eyes, before he touches the glass to his lips. "Your valley is so beautiful that it has haunted me ever since I was here. I shall find it difficult to turn my horse any other way. He knew the house—or perhaps knew his master's wishes—and stopped of his own accord."

"He knew perhaps how welcome the master must be anywhere," answered Clara, in bright confusion, making an attempt to hide the book in her lap with the garment she was making.

He saw the attempt, and a flash of proud satisfaction kindled his face.

"May I gather some of your roses?" he said, turning his eyes away.

"A hundred, if you wish," answered Clara, leaning out to help him gather the roses.

He only took one, however, and held it to his lips, inhaling the perfume with the enjoyment of a man who was forever crowding the intellectual and sensuous into close companionship.

"But I am keeping you out of doors," said Clara, hastening into the entry and meeting him on the threshold, radiant with the glad surprise of his coming. As he entered the sitting-room that had seemed so meagrely furnished and bare of ornament on his first visit, the change struck him with pleasant surprise. Jars and glasses, crowded full of wild honeysuckles, white dogwood flowers and purple lilacs, stood on the hearth and the high mantle-piece, and filling the room with delicious fragrance. The brasses on the towering "chest of drawers" were bright as gold, and Clara's little store of books lay, in premeditated confusion, on the old-fashioned candle-stand. There also a small writing-desk, the gift of Mary Noel, lay ready for use, its lining of crimson-velvet glowing out richly among the well-worn books.

Waldon took in all this at a glance, and with it the centre figure of the picture, Clara herself. Had she expected him? hoped for his coming? Was that pure dress of some opaque white, and that azure ribbon, threading the rich waves of her hair like the snood of a Scottish maiden, put on for him? How did she know that such tasteful simplicity was sure to win his admiration?

A great splint-bottomed chair, rude in its simplicity, but easy as an old glove, stood near the window. To this Clara invited her guest with a look. He quietly

dropped into it and moved a little that he might feel the soft current of air that swept perfume in and out of the room; then Clara fluttered down to her own seat like a graceful white dove, as he thought, and pushed her work aside.

"No, no. If you let me interrupt you I shall never dare to come again," said Waldon, reaching out his hand for the book she had unconsciously exposed. "Go on with your needle-work, and I will read to you, but not from this, if you have anything better at hand."

"Anything better!" repeated the girl, lifting her kindling eyes to his. "How can you say that?"

"You really are pleased with my poor verses, then?" answered Waldon, opening the book. "Oh, I see that some one else has been good enough to give them a little consideration, 'BERTHA TO CLARA.' Pray tell me who this fair Bertha is."

"It's one of the best and loveliest friends I ever had. She was a school-mate of mine once, and we used to read the book together. It seemed beautiful then, but I never knew how more than beautiful it is till now." Waldon's face glowed. He opened the book at random, and read a few lines to himself.

"You almost make me in love with my own work," he said. "Let us see how it reads."

Clara took up her work and listened, with a happy smile growing brighter and brighter on her lips.

Waldon read splendidly. His voice was deep and rich, full of pathos, and sometimes clarion-toned, when a grand idea inspired it. Clara was entranced; she forgot her work and sat minutes together with the needle in her fingers, motionless as marble, if marble could ever be warmed with the exquisite rosiness of life.

Now and then Waldon looked away from the volume in his hand, reading the delight that shone in her eyes with craving vanity, that seemed to her a noble thirst for appreciation.

Thus, hour after hour went by, so full of dangerous fascination, that the girl had better have been asleep under a upas tree, than sitting there with her bent head, drinking in the subtle poison of that man's brain and voice. She scarcely knew when he cast aside the book and began to talk, but when the door opened and Lydia cast a battery of oblique glances into the room, it seemed as if a harp had been jarred when all its strings were whispering music.

"Ben wants to know if this gentleman wants his horse put out," said Lydia.

Clara turned her scarlet face upon the girl in swift anger, but Waldon arose smiling, and took his hat from the table.

"You have made me forget time and everything else," he said, taking her hand.

"The valley is yet to be explored. Is it impossible that you will some day ride with me to its finest points? I have seen you on horseback, remember."

"Seen me? that is hardly probable."

"I was sitting in the Stone Tavern, when you and Fletcher rode by on the day of the flood. To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day about sunset, we will take our first ride. Till then I shall be content to dream."

Clara shook her head. She knew how swiftly the arrows of village scandal would follow the great joy he proposed.

"You refuse," said Waldon, "but that does not forbid me to explore the scenery on my own account."

Clara answered with a smile.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STAGE-COACH.

OLD Mrs. Anderson's house stood on the outskirts of the village, half a mile or so before you come to the bridge. Waldon was riding leisurely along the road, resolved to pass through the village on his way home, when the stage-coach that carried passengers from the railway, some miles distant, came lumbering by, and forced him to draw a little on one side that it might have a free swing up the road.

As it passed on its way through the principal street a pair of young girls just released from the thralldom of boarding-school were eagerly looking through the windows, radiant with the happiness of home-coming. Waldon was attracted by these bright young faces, and held in his horse that they might be kept in sight, when another face appeared at the window that fairly startled him. It was that of a lady he knew well, and recognized by a respectful lift of the hat. The lady beckoned to him hurriedly through the window. It was the married daughter of Judge Lane, whom he had met frequently in high social circles in New York, and with whom he had been on terms of friendship ever since her marriage. Waldon rode close enough to the coach to hear a hurried request that he would go forward to her father's house, where she had something of importance to say. He managed to understand this request with some difficulty, for the school girls were full of exhilarating excitement, and broke in upon the lady's effort to explain her wishes with exclamations of delight.

How eagerly they leaned from the windows of the coach with glad recognition, as each remembered tree and bush presented itself! At the first sight of the village, they threw their arms about each other, and fairly laughed with delight.

Ah, life has few pleasures so exquisite as that of "a young girl" when she leaves boarding-school for good, and sees the old homestead heave in sight.

Onward they went across the bridge, and along the high road.

There the prying head of some gossip was thrust from a window to watch the passing stage, and look after her unruly boys at the same time. There was the miller locking his mill for the night. The milliner ran to her shop door with a half-trimmed bonnet in her hand, and a world of curiosity in her face.

"It is the Scott girls coming home," she said, "and, oh, goodness gracious! if that is not Mrs. Forbes in the back seat! What can have brought her home all at once? Something new about Ned Lane and that Anderson girl, I dare say. Who on earth is that gentleman on horseback? Oh, the Scott girls are bowing."

Here the milliner waved her half-trimmed bonnet as a signal of welcome and retreated to her work-room, where she informed her sister that the most splendid man she had ever seen in her life was that minute riding up street, just ahead of the stage.

Before the sister could reach a post of observation, the stage had gone out of sight at a swinging rate, leaving a cloud of dust behind it. After heralding his approach with a furious crack of the whip, the driver brought his huge vehicle up with a lurch, before a house

which seemed to have emptied all its inmates on the door-step, swung himself down over the front wheel and opened the door.

Out sprang the two girls, who were instantly seized by outstretched hands and hurried into the house, under a storm of welcoming words and kisses.

Then the driver mounted to his seat again, gave his whip another loud crack, and made a noisy plunge for the great house of the village where Mrs. Forbes was to be set down.

In front of this great white building, cut in twain by a broad hall, and elevated from the street by a terrace, Waldon stood ready to help the lady down the lumbering steps of the stage, and gave her his arm as she mounted to the terrace where the Judge stood ready to receive her.

After a brief and rather careless response to her father's welcome, Mrs. Forbes, without waiting for the pompous hospitality with which he greeted Waldon, hurried into the house, heartily tired by her journey and eager to talk over the occasion that had brought her into the village, which to her was the dullest place on earth. She threw off her ample linen duster, with the slate-colored veil that enveloped her hat and face, gave a little fluff to her deranged hair with both hands, and, motioning Waldon to a sofa, sat down by his side the moment he came in.

"Of course, you know what has brought me here. That affair about Edward. He came directly to my house, in an awful way—scoffing at the faculty of the college, and raving about that Anderson girl, whom I think he will marry yet in spite of us. I am so glad to find you here. Now tell me, what can be done? I got

papa's letter and came off at once. It seems as if nothing would cure the fellow of his infatuation."

Waldon smiled.

"The course you are all taking certainly never will."

"But what can we do?"

"Let the young fellow alone. Such maladies are seldom dangerous unless the contagion spreads."

"What do you mean?"

"That your brother's case can safely be left with the young lady."

"Young lady—you mean Clara Anderson?"

"Yes, I mean Clara Anderson, who has already rejected your brother."

"Oh, yes, only to lead him on. I understand that."

"I do not think you understand this girl at all."

Mrs. Forbes opened her fine eyes in astonishment.

"How can you possibly know that?"

"At your brother's request I have been cultivating her acquaintance."

"You!"

"He empowered me to plead his cause with her."

Mrs. Forbes gathered the folds of her black silk dress about her, and drew back to the far end of the sofa, horrified.

"And you did that!"

"According to my best judgment, and my fealty to you," was the smiling reply.

The lady drew a deep breath and held out her hand.

"Oh, I begin to comprehend."

"The task was not unpleasant. This Clara Anderson is a splendid girl."

Mrs. Forbes read the expression of Waldon's face, and a smile of quick intelligence spread over her own.

"She has already refused our young scape-grace in good faith," he said.

"I do not believe it."

"Well, I will not contest the matter."

"He will come back to her, and she will marry him, if it is only to spite my sister, who has been imprudently hard upon her."

"I can imagine that such considerations might induce most girls to take revenge; but this one is an exception."

"But think what a match it is for her, the richest in this or the next county."

"Still my impression is, that if Edward Lane were to kneel at her feet to-morrow, she would refuse him. Leave the whole matter in my hands for a week or two, my fair friend, and the result is certain."

"If Edward only had proofs that she encouraged another," said the lady, thoughtfully.

"Exactly."

"Or could be brought to flirt with any one else."

Waldon smiled.

"She is self-willed, and knows the value of her conquest too well for that. My father would have bought her off at any price, but she was absolutely insolent in her refusal."

"I can imagine that."

"Papa is no diplomat. He does not comprehend the force of a little flattery, so the whole negotiation must have been badly managed. I come for the purpose of taking the matter in my own hands."

Waldon bent toward the fair speaker, and replied in looks more impressive than his words.

"But you will take advice and return at once."

"I am sure nothing would please me better. We

were ready for Saratoga when the young madman came to break up our plans."

"That is the best thing you can do. Go to Saratoga, and take him with you."

"But he will not go. I understand it all now, he is waiting for your report; but I warn you, he will believe nothing that does not come directly from the girl herself."

"I accept the warning. Be content that this whole matter shall end to your satisfaction. Now adieu, for I take it you return to-morrow."

"I would go to-night, if that were possible; for papa is never pleasant when his sense of dignity has been disturbed. Then once more adieu."

Mrs. Forbes stood by the window, and watched Waldon mount his horse and ride away.

"What a splendid creature he is!" she thought. "I have never seen a man of finer presence anywhere. If he condescends to break this thing up with a little attention, it will be an act of friendship I shall never forget. But Heaven help that girl!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LETTER WRITTEN.

OLD Mrs. Anderson was feeling her infirmities more than usual in those days, and kept her bed most of the time. She understood, in a vague way, that some gentleman who knew Edward Lane called at the house

very frequently, and read such books as Clara pined for, but had no time to peruse, while she worked; but this gave the old lady no real uneasiness. In her young days visits not made after dark, or on Sunday evenings, were never suspected of carrying an idea of love-making with them. Certainly the thought never entered that old Connecticut woman's mind. She was rather pleased with the improved cheerfulness of her granddaughter, and imputed it entirely to the hours of reading, which were indeed the only time in which the girl could be said to live; all the rest was given up to such dreams as turn earth into heaven.

Waldon never would have entered that old brown house but for the glimpse he had attained of Clara that day as she rode by the Stone Tavern. He had accepted the mission from young Lane, because it gave him an opportunity of seeing her more nearly.

Then his selfish impetuosity came out in full force. With one sweep of his will, he sought to take the life of this bright, beautiful being into his own—to possess the soul so capable of appreciating the drift of his mind and the greatness of his ambition.

What he was to render for these possessions—how long he was to keep them—were questions that never disturbed him in the first glow of a kindling passion. This girl was more than beautiful. In her nature lay capacities for worship that he craved. A worse man would have been far less dangerous. There is no guarding against a being who asks only for the worship you long to give and the thoughts you pine to share. It is your whole life that he seizes upon and sacrifices without remorse, because no legal or social wrong can fasten upon the theft of a soul. He had no wicked purpose in

his mind, no definite thought of the future. The excitement of a grand passion, while it lasted, was enough for him.

In truth, this man fancied that he was acting a friendly part by the young student who trusted him, but to whom success in love would prove ruinous to his after fortunes.

Thus, days that were lighted by a glow of paradise stole on. To that poor girl the hours of her toil seemed like the blooming of flowers. The joy of expectation possessed her before Waldon appeared; a sweet flutter of contentment settled down upon her when he came. At night she thought only of the morning, and haunting desires of expectation ran through all her dreams like silver threads in a woof of silk.

In short, Clara Anderson loved this man ardently, unreasoningly, fatally, perhaps.

Directly after Mrs. Forbes' visit, a letter had been sent to Edward Lane from the old brown house, bearing Clara Anderson's signature. No one had asked her to write it, or suggested the sending; yet Clara was conscious that Waldon desired the thing she was doing, and sought to end this semblance of an old love in a concise cold dismissal even of the friendship she had awarded him.

Edward Lane received this letter, and knowing of his married sister's visit to her father's house, believed that it was the result of some new indignity offered to the proud girl.

The letter made him desperate. A longing seized him to return home. He felt bitter and unforgiving toward his father; he was still furious with his sisters, but Clara he must and would see once more.

The unhappy young man could not believe in the truth or the reality of that letter; he must see her, must hear her own lips pronounce the words which would shut out all hope and leave him wrecked in the very outset of existence. She should decide his doom with her own lips, before he could believe it sealed.

With his usual impetuosity, he yielded at once to this desire. The very next morning found him on his way home, ready to meet his father's reproof with dogged indifference, his sister's tears and reproaches with harsh words, and to defy them all if Clara could be induced to relent.

Persistent opposition had kindled this young man's passion into obstinacy and mingled with it feelings of obstinacy, which would never have been brought out in force had the liking, which was, at first, but a fancy, been left to the natural course of events.

As it was, Lane had injured his reputation and destroyed his own self-respect to an extent that years might not atone for. The injudicious action of his family had cast him adrift, suffering from a sense of injury, impetuous in feeling, thwarted in his dearest hopes, and made to feel an alien in his own household.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUDDEN ENLIGHTENMENT.

IN those days Clara Anderson found her sweetest companionship with nature. Too delicate and sensitive for the confidences that most girls love, she carried

her happiness into the scenes that a first absorbing passion rendered beautiful beyond all the glories of nature.

Sometimes, when the blessed rest of a Sabbath was given her, she would take long and delightfully lone walks on the hills that sloped down almost to a level with her dwelling. One day she had followed one of these pretty streams which find their source in some crystal spring in the hills and, gathering up every silver thread in their way, rush in a bright torrent through some fissure in the rocks, and pour themselves through pasture lands and meadows till they leap into some noble river and are swept off to the ocean. In a nook of the broken hill-side, shaded with elms and great weeping willows, a mountain stream of this kind had worn a deep basin where it slept in mirror-like calmness, while the foliage above sent green shadows trembling over it, and the sunshine flickered through, touching it here and there with gold.

Clara was somewhat subdued by her long walk, and resting against the trunk of a willow, stood looking dreamily down upon the water, longing to disturb its cool waves with something of the sweet unrest that had come upon her.

"Clara!"

The girl started, turned suddenly, and stood face to face with Edward Lane.

For an instant neither spoke, but remained gazing at each other, overpowered by a whirl of memories and emotions which held them speechless.

At length he stepped forward and took her hand, which lay cold in his clasp.

"I saw you in the distance and followed," he said.

She did not answer; and his repressed passion broke forth vehemently.

"O Clara, how I have suffered! God forgive you, girl—how could you write me that letter?"

Clara was troubled, a rush of emotions swelled her heart, but instantly she recalled that conversation with his father, and the chill of unyielding pride settled upon her.

"Because it was my duty," she replied, in a voice so hard and cold that it made him start.

"Your duty!" he repeated angrily. "The common word for all sorts of cruelty and hard-heartedness."

Clara shut her lips close together; Edward's voice was like his father's, and the recollection of all the insulting words that stern man had spoken shot across her heart like flame.

"Why do you stand there like a statue?" he exclaimed, passionately. "Have you no feeling?"

"I hope not," she answered, with vehemence equal to his own, and startling, from its contrast with her former coldness; "the less feeling a woman has the better, when she finds herself an object of such bitter contention."

"And possessed of the power to torment others," returned Lane.

"Did you come here only to repeat your father's insults?" she asked.

"O Clara, be generous! I came because I was almost crazy with suffering," he replied; "because I could not endure this desolating anguish longer. I must know what you meant by that letter—what I am to depend upon. O Clara, Clara, for mercy's sake, change that face!"

"All that I have to say was expressed in that letter."

"And you really felt and intended what you said!"

Clara's forehead contracted, something in her throat seemed choking her, but she answered courageously—

"I did."

He looked at her with a sorrowful astonishment, which wounded her worse than reproaches would have done.

"I could not believe it," he said; "even that harsh letter failed to convince me. But you repeat it. Clara, you cannot mean this, you will not give me up; speak to me, say that you were not in earnest."

"I was in earnest then," she answered slowly; "I am in earnest now. I meant every word."

The young man staggered, as if reeling under a sudden blow, but a burst of indignant feelings enabled him to recover himself.

"That is enough," he said; "I know now how far a woman's truth is to be depended upon! I will make no reproaches."

"You are generous," she exclaimed. "After your conduct during the past months, the insults of your family—"

"I am not answerable for them, Clara."

"No; but those who offered them are your nearest kin—that, of itself, would separate us had I loved you better than my own soul—but your own conduct—"

"Forgive it, forgive it!" cried Lane, impetuously. "I was mad—as for my people, why need we care; I would leave them all to-morrow for your sake—family, home, everything."

"We will not go back to these things," she replied. "All this is useless; we part now and for all time."

"Then the consequences rest with you. Whatever comes, you, and my family alone, will be to blame."

Clara did not speak. The anguish in the young man's face terrified her. Edward Lane looked on her with dumb entreaty a moment, then turned and hurried along the banks of the stream, reckless and despairing.

Clara watched him with deep commiseration in her heart. A pang of sympathy seized upon her, and she followed his swift descent down the hill with a feeling of keen self-reproach. She too loved.

That moment was one of thrilling enlightenment which broke upon her like a sunburst, fearful in its suddenness. The dream of past weeks was broken up, and she stood there amazed at her own transfiguration. The knowledge of this love filled her heart with infinite compassion for the man she had just driven from her with such harsh pride, and with this feeling came a pang of prophetic fear.

What if her love too should fail of a return, could she endure that and live?

Why had she driven that young man forth without one kind word to soften the keenness of his disappointment? It was heartless, bitterly, bitterly cruel. Need she blame him because his father was purse-proud and his sisters arrogant? Was love a sin, that she should trample it down so haughtily?

How dared she ask that question while her own heart was beating with such thrills of joy, such tremors of apprehension? Sin! no; such love was the very essence of worship, holy as an angel's prayer, sweet as honey-dew in lily cups.

The girl sprang forward and followed her rejected lover down the hill, calling out,

"Edward, Edward Lane," with piteous entreaty. He heard her voice, but refused to come back. She had wounded him too deeply.

Then she threw herself on a bed of buckhorn moss that crackled and broke under her as if she were bringing ruin to that also, and covering her face with both hands wept in sorrowful penitence.

"Oh, if it should come back to me, if it should recoil on my own heart! What could I do! what could I do!" she cried out in the depths of her self-abasement.

After a while the girl arose and walked toward home, self-tortured by the cruelty of ignorance under which she had been acting a cruelty which haunted her soul like a crime. But through all this shone a great and glowing joy. The woman's heart had discovered its capacity for loving.

CHAPTER XV.

LYDIA AND BEN.

LYDIA ROWE—the girl had a second name, though it was seldom used—was permitted to remain with the Andersons, because of the sympathy felt at the farm-house by the old mill, for Clara's toilsome life and the grandmother's helplessness.

This girl, slim, wiry, and irrepressible in her activity, would have rebelled against the loneliness of the old house, but for some friends that she managed to pick up in the neighborhood.

Within sight of the old poplars, a small house was

standing on the river's brink. With its gable end toward the street, and a sparse, weedy garden behind it, this dwelling looked more like a vast railroad car with a peaked roof than anything else.

Within this dwelling Lydia discovered materials for a friendship that occupied much of her spare time, and saved her from absolute homesickness—the widow who went out to days-work, took in washing, and occasionally sold spruce-beer to such customers as she could get, was the proud mother of two children, who helped her in a rough way, but found plenty of time to introduce a great deal of mischievous fun into their usefulness.

The eldest of these children—a tall, loose-jointed lad, with curving legs and arms like flails—was errand-boy and horse-catcher for the whole neighborhood.

Ben was always hard at work or hard at play, which sometimes produced the effect of work. In the winter he set rabbit-traps in the woods and his baits of sweet apples were more successful than those of any other boy. Out of this fun came delicious little stews for his mother's table, and skins to sell at the stores. Ben knew all the musk-rat holes along the beautiful water-course that flowed back of his mother's house, and made no inconsiderable money by the fur secured in his traps. He could use carpenter's tools in a rough way, and made sleds for coasting down the long sloping hill behind the school-house, where he went as a scholar perhaps two half-days in a week, but not oftener if he could help it.

In the summer time, when the meadows were crimson with strawberries and fragrant with wild pinks, Ben commenced a season of berry-picking, which lasted till there were no more blackberries in the pastures, whortleberries on the hills, or wild grapes in the woods.

Beyond all these occupations, Ben had unusual resources of enjoyment. The canoe, or "dug-out," which lay rocking in the river behind the golden willow hedge, had been hollowed with his own hands, from the trunk of a fallen tree. The stilts with which he crossed the ford just below that great clump of elms were of his own devising.

Ben Vose was no beauty, but the good-natured expression of his uncomely face, the genial kindness of a Newfoundland dog in his eyes, and an honest desire to please, had made the boy a general favorite, and won for him many an odd job, that, to use his own phrase, helped the old woman along more than folks knew of.

The sister, a bright, mischief-loving girl, younger than Ben, seemed to have absorbed all the comeliness of the family in her own person. She was enough younger than Lydia to feel all the influence of that strange girl's sharp wit and abundant powers of usefulness or mischief. As for Ben, a rather shallow sense of strength and self-reliance kept him from being the abject slave that Lydia aspired to make him. He greatly admired her crossed vision and smart ways, but had a vague sense of male superiority that was constantly provoking contest and struggle between them, in which little Nancy invariably sided with Lydia.

One day when Waldon's horse had stood an hour or more in front of Mrs. Anderson's house, Lydia met Ben on his way to give the animal a feed of oats, in response to the confidential orders of the young lady.

"Look here, Ben," said the maiden, standing with folded arms and uplifted chin in the footpath that ran parallel with the road, "I want you to just go back home and let that highferluten feller's horse alone."

"What for?" questioned Ben. "You've been spiteful all along to the gentleman, but what on 'arth has sot you so agin the horse, that you 'grudge him a few oats? Do you want to starve the dumb cretur?"

"Yes, that's just what I do want, Ben."

"What for?"

"'Cause he brings the feller here almost every day of his life, and he stays later and later every time."

"Well, what if he does?"

"What if he does? why, Ben Vose, can't you see?"

"See what?"

"So long as he gets nice teas in the house and his horse is fed outside, he'll keep coming."

"Well, what if he does?"

"Oh, dear me, what fools do live in this world!" said Lydia, unfolding her arms and dropping them to her sides in despair.

"Jest so," answered Ben, with good-natured equanimity, "but who's the fool now?"

"Ben Vose, you put me out of patience!"

"Well, let me go along and I won't."

"Not to give that horse oats? I've set my foot down and you shan't do it nohow."

Ben laughed with a deep inward chuckle, took the girl up by the arms, planted her in the path behind him, and marched on.

"Ben Vose, you'll wish you hadn't done that, before you and I are good friends again."

"Mebby I will, and then agin mebbly I won't," answered Ben, looking over his shoulder with aggravating good humor.

"There he goes," said the girl, doubling her little brown hand into an impatient fist, "but I'll pay him for it, or my name isn't Lydia Rowe."

Lydia sat down on a loose stone near the fence, and gave way to a fit of angry despondency.

"I can't stop his coming that way anyhow. A girl that has lived a whole winter in York, and been with city people all her life, sees things that a fellow like Ben can't begin to understand. If I could only talk to some one now, a minister, or something of that kind; but there isn't a creature that I dare whimper a word to. Besides I've no business to say a word. Still that fellow shan't come here so much if I can help it, making her feel like a bird one day, and home-sick as death the next. There's something in his eyes I don't like; he seems to swallow up her face with them like our cat when it sees a plump little mouse peaking out of her hole."

Here Lydia shook her head at the shadow which followed all her movements, and seemed to find great relief in talking to it.

"I'm afraid, awfully afraid she's getting fond of him. The signs are strong enough. Luncheon in the middle of the day, Oolong tea, that no one but the old woman ever drank in this house before. The milk skimmed unbeknownst every morning, and no reason given to nobody till out it comes in the best china pitcher for his wild strawberries. Then the days he don't come it's enough to make one cry to see her face—so eager, so anxious, then so down-hearted.

"If he meant anything particular wouldn't he come Sunday nights as other people do and speak out like a man? Things are going wrong both here and at the Mill bridge, I am awfully afraid. Mr. Fletcher looked skittish when I spoke about Miss Bertha, and folks tell me he's gone away for good. I don't know as Bertha cared much about him anyhow. Since I've seen this other girl

with her beau it seems to me as if she didn't. I reckon she gave him the mitten: his face looked like it.

"Well, Miss Clara ain't likely to mitten her beau—but then is he her beau? and if he is, would I like to have him about?"

Here Lydia arose, nodded affectionately to her shadow, which saluted back from the grass, and walked homeward, dissatisfied with everything there, but most of all with Ben Vose, whose devotion she had calculated on with certainty.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVE.

COLD-BLOODED calculation was no portion of Waldon's character. In order to make him treacherous there must be some appeal to his passions. Full of poetic sentiment, he was void of actual magnanimity. All the grandeur of his ideas were the outgrowth of a vivid imagination. His intellect and his appetites went hand in hand, sharpening each other.

Under some impulses he was generous. Let those impulses die away, and a current of unbelievable meanness set in that seemed impossible to those who had read the man's thoughts, or listened to the splendor of his conversation. This was the man whose society had transfigured Clara Anderson's life. Life! the girl had not lived before. All the rest was a stale, unprofitable dream to her. Now it seemed as if love had made her immortal. Weeks had passed like hours to her. There by the window,

that had become distasteful from its associations with toil, she sat like some spirit in Heaven, listening to that voice, blushing under the glance of those eyes, happy in the mere consciousness of his presence. Up to this time no absolute word of love had been spoken between these two, but she had never felt the loss, and his readings had been full of application. When a burning passage left his lips its spirit was carried to hers with a glance or a smile more eloquent than words.

But this day, while Lydia was holding a conference with her own shadow by the roadside, the craving vanity of this man broke bounds. With epicurean patience he had scattered the seed and watched its sensitive growth. Now he was seized with a desire to drink the fragrance of the flowers.

He was leaning back in the great splint-bottomed easy chair close by the window, gazing with half-shut eyes on the bright face of the girl as she bent over her work dreamily, with the needle pointing idly from her fingers.

Such dreams came upon her often of late, and he loved to watch the changes of her countenance as they left light or shade upon its beauty.

All at once he leaned forward, laid one hand upon her shoulder, and bent his face to hers.

"Clara, do you love me?"

A swift thrill passed under his hand. The girl lifted her face and a glorious light broke through the brooding softness of her eyes.

"Love you!" she answered, radiant with light and color, "Oh heavens! what would life be to me if I did not?"

Waldon drew his face closer to hers and she felt a kiss touch her lips lightly, as if a red rose-leaf had fallen there—the first that had ever passed between them.

Waldon drew back, and sighing, as if his breath were laden with the fragrance of flowers, sat watching the swift mutations of that beautiful face under the ripple of his first kiss.

"It is something worth living for," he said in a voice rich with contentment. "To be thoroughly loved is the great necessity of a man's life."

Clara lifted her eyes to his with wistful questioning. He had shaken her heart as bees wrest honey from lilies. Did this content him? Had he no words of love to give in return?

The girl did not say this, even in thought, but a vague want disturbed her, and the joy in her bosom seemed slowly ebbing away. Perhaps she felt a subtle loss too, such as sensitive women know, without knowledge, when the first kiss of love is taken from their lips.

"There is no need of words," thought the girl, consoling herself. "One glance of his eyes speaks more eloquently than the lips of other men."

"Ah," thought Waldon, roving backward in his mind, "if such moments could last forever, the love of one woman would be enough for a lifetime, and where could I find a being more exquisite?"

Clara knew that he was thinking of her admiringly, but of the more subtle worldliness underlying that admiration she could have no idea. It was like a serpent coiled under a matting of roses. Feeling his glance upon her she looked up and smiled.

He reached forth his hand, smiling back upon her.

"You are happy now, sweet Bonnibel," he said; for it was his habit to use quaint phrases gathered from Mediæval romance, that his love-making might be unlike that of other men.

"Have I made *you* happy?" she answered, with smiles and blushes sweeping across the loveliness of her face. "Without that everything would be incomplete with me."

"Can you doubt it?"

"Oh, indeed, how can I?"

CHAPTER XVII.

BURYING BEN.

THE river ran close up to Mrs. Vose's garden, and could be seen from the back windows of her house creeping through the hemlock shadows that clothed the opposite banks. Here it was deep and slumberous, but further down stream it dashed off a rocky slope between the meadow-flats, lying westward, and the village.

These flats could only be reached by a ford which would have been entirely silvered with sunshine but for a clump of splendid elm trees that stood near by, from which a bed of white sand sloped down to the water, looking like a snow-drift from the distance. To this spot Lydia was sure to come when she had done up the slight work of Mrs. Anderson's household. And here she retreated in a state of high dudgeon one day when Waldon had remained longer than usual in the sitting-room, which had been adorned for his coming.

Nancy Vose had joined her on the road, and scarcely had they reached the elms when her brother came strolling down to the ford, trailing his stilts in one

hand and carrying a small painted basket in the other. Lydia had never forgiven the lad for the refusal to her request, and this sight rekindled her indignation.

"He's going to pick strawberries for that man, as sure as you live, Nancy. I've asked him not to do any such thing, and he just goes right in my face and does it. Over and over agin, I've told him she can't afford it, and all he cares is to laugh and ask which knows best, she or me."

"Supposing you ask him not to once more. Mebby he's forgot," said Nancy.

Without waiting for permission, the sister ran toward the ford, and called after Ben.

"Ho, Ben, stop a minute. Lydia wants to speak with you."

"Never mind. I know what it's all about," replied Ben, from the distance; "when I come back with the strawberries will be time enough."

"He's afraid to come; you talk to him so sharp," said Nancy, coming with some reluctance back to the elms. "I never saw Ben so hateful."

"So he won't speak to me. He don't try to make up," said Lydia. "Very well, we'll see."

"Oh, Ben don't mean nothing!" pleaded Nancy, seating herself under the elms. "Any way, he thinks all the world of you."

"Does he?" said Lydia, biting the strings of her sun-bonnet. "By-and-by he'll find out how much I like him."

"Oh, you'll get over it."

"Will I?"

Here Lydia began to tear up the grass around her

with energy. This exercise carried off the sharp edge of her anger, and she fell to thinking.

There was nothing in the scene before her to encourage wrathful emotions. On the contrary, everything was serene and pleasant. Beyond the opposite banks the meadows were golden with mottled lilies and buttercups. The elms threw their shadows delightfully on the river's banks, and the stream just there sparkled and murmured joyously as if to entice them to good nature. It was a very coquette, that beautiful stream, sometimes stealing slowly and steadily along, reflecting the hedge rows on its banks, and rippling among the long grasses that drooped greenly down to meet it, or frolicking onward, flashing and eddying in the warm sunlight, and making music among the loose stones.

Lydia gazed on all this in sullen absent-mindedness. She was pondering over her wrongs.

Nancy also was getting serious from pure sympathy, and sat down by her moody companion, looking drearily down upon the bank where it shelved off to a space of white sand, which sloped gradually down to the river's brink.

At last the girl grew restless; looking reproachfully at Lydia, she said:

"I'm getting tired of staying here with my feet in the grass. So, if you mean to sit here all day, looking cross as vinegar, I'll dig that well in the sand a little deeper. It was awful nice fun yesterday."

"What's the good?" said Lydia, nursing her wrath.

"It's fun, any way," answered Nancy, darting off with her pink sun-bonnet hanging by the strings and flying out behind, and her hair all loosened to the sunshine.

She came back directly, carrying two great white wood-chips, gathered from around the stump of a newly-fallen tree a little distance up stream.

Lydia did not move, and she flung the chips down in disgust, looking wistfully at the hole dug in the sand—too deep for her to work in it alone.

All at once Nancy's face brightened, a swarm of dimples chased each other across her mouth, and her sun-burned face sparkled with mischief.

She flung down the white wood-chips, and ran to the bank where Lydia was sitting.

"Lydia, Lydia, I have a thought!"

Lydia moved sullenly when the girl sat down by her, and muttered:

"Well, what of it?"

"You are mad as fire with Ben, and, come to think of it, so am I. You know he killed my beautiful black and yellow kitten only because the poor dear bit his hands and clawed his face till they bled. I told you all about it."

"Yes, I remember. You wanted me to help pay him out."

"Well, I'm going to do it now, if you'll help."

"How? I should just like to kill him, but he's bigger and stronger than both of us put together."

"I know that, Lydia, and he don't scare worth a cent—wasn't a bit frightened when I put the poor kitten all stiff and frozen into his bed. I got up ever so many plans to pay him off all by myself, but there's no fun in doing things alone."

"Not much," answered Lydia, impatiently. "I should like to try it though."

Nancy, placing her elbow on her knee, and her chin

in the palm of her hand, looked into her companion's face.

"You see that hollow choked up with Canada thistles across the river there," said she, laughing.

Lydia turned her eyes to the jungle of thorny foliage, where a hundred crowns of soft feathery purple were unfolding to the sun, and nodded her head.

"Well, when the great flowers first began to open and the leaves were covered with pretty, sharp thorns, I thought how nice they would be, laid all fresh and green on the under-sheet of Ben's bed, some night when I could hide away the kitchen lamps and send him up stairs in the dark."

"Capital!" exclaimed Lydia.

"No, no, I gave it up; Ben has grown terribly shy since he found the poor frozen kitten on his pillow; besides, if he did jump right into the thorns, we could not be there to see the fun. It was a bad plan, so I gave it up. There's no use trying it."

"No," answered Lydia. "Thistles wouldn't half pay him for going against me."

"Or me, the cruel wretch, as if I ever could get over what he did," Nancy broke in. "I wonder the ghost of that poor kitten does not follow him about everywhere; but he shall be paid off. I had a plan in my mind while you sat there pouting."

"What plan, Nancy?"

"Sit closer, and I will tell you," replied the other gravely, moving along, and patting the grass with her hand.

Lydia took a seat as she requested, and bent her head in deep attention.

"We'll dig the hole deeper and bury him."

"Bury him? O Nancy, your own, own brother?"

"Dear me, you won't understand," said Nancy. "Not forever and ever. I don't mean that—not clear overhead, that might stop his breathing, but just so that he can't get out. 'Oh, won't it be fun!'"

"We'll do it," cried Lydia, starting to her feet.

Nancy gave a shout and ran for the two great white wood-chips that lay on the sand.

When she came back Lydia had leaped into the hole, and had already filled her sun-bonnet with sand, which she held up for Nancy to empty into the river.

Never did two laborers work with more energy than these girls. Fortunately for their object, that hole was deep already, and Lydia, who worked in its depths till her hair was wet with the perspiration that dropped from her face like rain, soon found the surface above her head.

"That'll do, I reckon," she said, looking up and pushing the wet hair back from her eyes. "Just give hold here and help me out."

Nancy knelt down, and gave both her hands in answer to this appeal, but all her strength was insufficient to raise Lydia to the surface.

"Bring a bean pole or something," said Lydia, dropping back.

Nancy ran up the bank, and brought down the fragment of a broken rail, with which Lydia lifted herself to the sunshine again.

"Is he coming? Have you looked?" she questioned, casting a cross glance over the ford.

"No; he isn't in sight."

"Come then and break some twigs from the black alder bushes. No, I'll do that, while you run down

into that boggy hollow there and bring up some of the biggest swamp cabbage-leaves."

Nancy went off like an arrow, and directly there was a sharp cracking of twigs in the nearest clump of alders.

Both girls came up to the elms at once—one with a bundle of sticks in her arms, the other half buried under a mass of great green leaves, on which moisture was trembling.

Down upon their knees they dropped, weaving the twigs, basket-fashion, over the mouth of the well they had dug. When this was done the twigs were concealed by a covering of green leaves, a treacherous strata of sand was smoothed level with the surface, and their work of mischief was done.

"Help me drag this piece of rail up behind the trees," said Lydia. "No, no, I can do it alone. You keep watch for Ben."

Lydia had hardly reached the elms when Nancy called out in great excitement:

"Here he comes."

Sure enough, Ben Vose appeared that moment down by the ford, with a bunch of daisies, buttercups and meadow-lilies swung to his back like a sheaf of wheat, and a basket of strawberries in his hand. Swinging the basket on one arm, he mounted a huge pair of stilts and came with great strides across the ford.

Nancy ran toward him in high glee, leaving Lydia seated upon the bank.

"Come this way, Ben; you must come, or Lydia'll never speak to you again. You ought to be ashamed of yourself to treat her so."

Ben flung his long stilts on the grass and turned toward the elms, his lank arms swinging lazily, his

head bent forward, and his face in a broad grin of sympathy with the evident glee of his sister.

"What's the matter? What is it all about?" he asked, stumbling forward after the girl, who ran on flinging back smiles over her shoulder.

"All about! you've been awful hateful to Lydia, and she's going out of the neighborhood on your account."

"No!"

Ben was serious enough now.

Nancy paused and dropped a few words in strict confidence.

"I tell you, Ben, she's sure to go back to the Mill Bridge if you don't make up with her right away. Come along, now's your time."

Ben paused, and seemed to hesitate. Lydia had her face turned away as if resentful still. She was only afraid that he should see the laughter she was striving hard to quell.

"She's sulking yet," said Ben, addressing his sister, anxiously.

"Well, what if she is?" said the maiden, rendered serious by breathless suspense. "I would not be a coward anyhow."

In order to prove that he was not a coward, Ben accepted Nancy's lead. She gave a judicious leap across the dangerous spot, then turned to make sure that Ben was following.

A step forward, a faint crash, and down the poor fellow went up to the armpits, where he lodged ignominiously. The basket of strawberries flew up from his hold with a jar that sent half its red contents flashing up in the sun, and down on the white sand. The consternation in Ben's face was something Cruikshank

would have gloried in sketching; his struggles were grotesque beyond all ludicrous comparison. They drove Nancy into a wild delirium of glee. Lydia, who had been half upon her dignity, echoed the girl's laughter as she danced, like a whirlwind, around her victim.

Poor Ben! there was no help for him; up to his armpits in sand, powerless to move, except as his head turned first to his sister, then to Lydia, who, half suffocated with laughter, sat upon the bank with a hand on each knee, cruelly enjoying the wonderful grimaces of his ugly face.

In vain did the poor fellow attempt to draw up his legs and set himself free. The girls had done their work thoroughly; the hole was too deep; his efforts were powerless. The sunshine poured its hottest rays down upon the mass of hair which illuminated his head, rising between those lank arms, like the face and wings surmounting an old-fashioned tombstone.

Still, Ben struggled with all his might. He clenched up great handfuls of sand with a blind effort to fling it at the girls, but it only blinded his eyes, and rained back into his thick hair. The contortions of his face threw the girls into convulsions of merriment, in the midst of which Nancy fell upon the ground laughing, crying and shouting feebly at every new movement or grimace of her prisoner. The very birds that lived in the old elms began to flutter among the leaves, and flew across the river terrified by the noise, and a fish-hawk, which was flying over head with his talons extended for some unfortunate perch, wheeled in the air, darted upward and away toward the hills, scared from his purpose by this unusual noise.

When Nancy was completely out of breath, and could

mock him no longer, Ben ceased to struggle, and begged to be set free. His rueful face almost set the girl off again, but she gathered herself up to a sitting posture on the sand, using her finger with great decision in the terms she propounded:

"Now, Ben," she said, stooping over with an elbow planted in her lap, her cheek resting on one palm, and her laughing eyes bent on the comical-looking head at her feet: "Now, Ben, if we will do it, will you promise not to tell of us?"

"Yes, you image, I promise."

"You won't tell mar?"

"No, I won't."

"Nor Miss Clara?"

"Oh, Nance, I wouldn't let her know of this for the world," answered Ben. "She'd alles be thinking of it, and laughing inside of her pretty mouth when I came in sight."

"Just so. 'Buried Ben,' is what most people will call you if you ever tell. Not that we care; oh, no."

"But I have promised not to tell. So do make haste, the sand in my eyes smarts awfully."

"Poor fellow; but you see, Lydia and I must feel safe, you know?"

"What about?"

"Oh, everything. First, you must promise not to pay us off?"

"Well, it's tough; but I will."

"Will you be hung and choked to death if you do?"

"Well, yes; if that will pacify you."

"You'll never kill any more kittens?"

"Oh, Nancy, haven't you forgot that yet?"

"No matter how much they scratch and claw?" con-

tinued the maiden, determined to make her conditions binding.

"Are you never going to get through?" pleaded Ben. "This hanging by one's arms when your feet don't touch is awful tiresome."

"Poor fellow, I shouldn't wonder; but then things must be settled just here; it's easier for us, you know."

"Do make haste, then!"

"You'll never pick strawberries for that high-furluten gentleman to eat? Lydia don't like it, I tell you."

"But Miss Clara does. It is for her I picked them. She asked me partickler," expostulated Ben.

"She don't know what's good for her," said Lydia. "If they were for her I wouldn't say a word. But anyway it ain't fair to make you promise, hanging in the ground. Fun is fun; but I'm not mean enough for that. Come along, Nancy, and help him out. I like him ever so much more, because he won't promise now, when it seems as if he couldn't help himself."

Before this sentence was uttered, Lydia was half-way down from the elms, dragging the fragment of broken rail toward the scene of Ben's disaster. Using it as a lever, the poor fellow lifted himself out of the hole, and shook the sand from his hair and garments, like a Newfoundland dog freeing his shaggy coat from water.

"Lydia," he said, taking his basket from the ground and shaking down the berries it still contained, "take 'em. I give up. I'd rather see tears of disappointment in Miss Clara's eyes than have you keep mad with me. It's hard on her and the old woman though. Now ain't it?"

Lydia took the berries, but Ben could not make out

whether she was looking at them or at the broken sheaf of flowers on his back.

"If the berries were for Miss Clara, these others I meant for you, thinking that they might help to make up, for I hadn't the least idee you meant to be so revengeful."

"It wasn't her," said Nancy. "She helped dig the hole for fun."

"No, no. Don't tell fibs, Nancy. I helped along, and laughed as much as you did when he fell in. It was awful mean."

"Not so mean as I was," said Ben, brought to sharp repentance by a brace of tears that seemed balancing each other across Lydia's nose. "Now supposing we make up and say no more about it."

Here Ben reached out his hand with awkward conciliation, while the old kindly expression came over his face.

Lydia put both her brown hands into his.

"Oh, Ben, do believe me, it was for Miss Clara's own good I made a fuss."

"Well, I ain't a going to dispute that, nor anything else you want me to believe," said Ben. "So take these, and do what you've a mind to with 'em."

Lydia took the basket with a grateful smile, and the two walked away from the elms, making amicable explanations as they went.

Nancy looked after them with a rueful feeling of ostracism. Was Ben ready to make up with Lydia, and leave her, his own sister, in disgrace?

The girl darted forward and overtook the pair, fearfully anxious and out of breath.

"Ben, Ben, don't keep mad with me. It was all fun, you know."

Ben attempted to shake her off; but she entangled her little hands in his rough fingers and persisted in being friends.

"It was all fair; you remember the kitten, Ben; it was only 'tit for tat,' you know, dear Ben."

Ben looked into that half-laughing, half-penitent face, and a smile began to extend his mouth in spite of himself. Nancy took advantage of this, and nestled her little hand into his hard palm; his fingers closed over it—Nancy's face brightened—she gave a look over her shoulder, and beckoned Lydia to take his other hand. The next moment he was leading them towards the old house, good-naturedly calling both all manner of pet names, honestly forgiving them his untimely burial.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WALDON.

THE insatiable vanity of Waldon was appeased by the concession of love that Clara had made. Then worldly reasoning came in to check his ardor and minister to his selfishness. What did he want beyond that? Was she capable of filling more than a few weeks of his ambitious life? True, she was beautiful, bright as a star, capable of intense affection, richer than most girls of her age in feminine acquirements. Her appreciation of his works and his genius had been exquisite. In all his life he could not remember when the summer months had passed more delightfully with him. To monopolize the whole existence of a creature like that was a triumph

of genius which he had not, till then, experienced. While he doubted the possibility of his conquest, there was so much zest and excitement in the pursuit that he was in no haste to terminate it by a calm certainty.

Even in the first triumph of her frank but exquisitely modest confession, he had been cautious not to commit himself. A hungry craving for homage was forever upon this man. Even love was not enough to satisfy his intellectual greed; to meet that, love must be worship, and new votaries must be forever coming with fresh capacities of adulation.

This outgrowth of vanity, strong enough to be ranked among the passions, and to work as much evil, was at once his charm and his bane. It stimulated him to intellectual effort, gave warmth and apparent frankness to his manner which fascinated while it blinded the object.

I should do the man wrong in saying that his attentions to Clara originated in a wish to oblige the married daughter of Judge Lane, or that potentate himself. He was too well satisfied of the slight hold the young collegian possessed on her affections for the necessity of such treason, and would not have given an hour of his time to an unpleasant task for the whole Lane family put together.

Had Clara been less beautiful and bright, less worthy to do reverence to his genius, he would have wasted no more visits on her. He even laughed scornfully to himself at the delusion Mrs. Forbes was under. The man might be treacherous in his own behalf, but not to oblige the best friend on earth. Even in extreme selfishness he was epicurean.

He pursued women for their love, as they gather armfuls of roses in the Orient for a single drop of ottar.

That he was not coarsely vulgar, like most evil men, arose from the fact that love with him was a poetic passion of the mind, on which the senses acted like sunshine. He desired absolute homage, and gave back admiration for the time. Because these things were not vile and broad like the sins of many other men, he held himself in high superiority. He would have scorned to rob a man of his gold, but never hesitated to steal a woman's soul.

It is not likely that Waldon ever thought of himself in this way, or premeditated the wrongs with which his path was thorned. It is something, he would say, "to give a woman the power of loving: she should at least be grateful for that." In short this man was an egotist capable of such subtle sins that even his intellect could not discover their enormity.

In the solitude of his room, at the Stone Tavern, Waldon began to ask himself questions, which might have been propounded by other parties had Clara known the protection of any relative save that infirm old woman.

Remembering all that he had said, the selfish prudence of his nature came in and rebuked him.

The girl loved him: he had known that from the first hour that her eyes drooped beneath his gaze; for in a thousand ways, sweeter yet more convincing than words, she had unconsciously betrayed it. Why then had he been rash enough to win that confession from her lips? It was blindly giving her a right to expect something more definite in the future which he was not prepared to give.

She might even contemplate that an offer of marriage would follow the concession into which she had been so imprudently surprised.

Here the man smiled with a sort of pitying scorn of the idea. Could even that inexperienced girl dream that he might be brought to burden his career with a penniless wife, and that sour-tempered decrepit old woman? Still the girl was so beautiful.

Thus Waldon reasoned with himself in the solitude of his room where he was completing some work for the publishers, or he might have left the place at once.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHY DON'T HE COME?

AH! how different were the thoughts of Clara Anderson from this! All that night, after a sweet confession of love had escaped her lips, as burning carnation-flowers give their honey to the bees, she lay awake with her hands folded over her bosom, smiling to herself as she watched the moonlight creeping toward her head, like the gossamer of a wedding veil.

"He loves me—he loves me!" broke in soft murmurs from her lips, until the silence of the night was laden with the sweet sound, as the atmosphere is, sometimes, made heavy with the breath of flowers.

When the day broke, she arose from her bed, blessing the sunshine because it fell upon him also—blessing the wind which came sighing through the casement, because it came from the direction of his home. She took from the high chest of drawers in her room a garment of white muslin, soft and diaphanous as a cloud, longing to look more lovely in his sight; but a thrill of delicate

pride rebuked the wish and she put it back, contenting herself with one he had already admired. But something new she would have, so she changed the blue ribbon for her hair into one that seemed woven from the leaves of tea-roses.

"I will have something fresh as the morning," she thought, while threading the simple ornament through the waves of her hair. "Oh, how can I make myself more beautiful for him?"

Clara went down-stairs bright as the morning. Over and over again she thanked Lydia for services unheeded at other times. She called to Ben from the window, and gave him her last coin, from a pure impulse of happiness.

When her grandmother's staff gave its first sound on the floor, she darted forward and helped the old woman tenderly to a seat at the breakfast-table, and chatted with her pleasantly, while her hands fluttered over the cup she had filled, dropping in lumps of white sugar, and adding a liberal allowance of cream, that made the old lady cry out against the extravagance.

There was little work done that morning; Clara's hands flew like lightning when she thought of her task; but half the time they were folded in her lap while she looked dreamily out of the window, living over the scene of yesterday in her mind.

When the sun reached a certain flowering almond that had become a dial to her, she began to listen, at first with a smile on her face, then with a faint cloud overshadowing it, and, after an hour, with doubting anxiety.

He did not come.

That night she lay awake also, but those hands were no longer folded on her bosom, and if her eyes sought

the moonlight it was through a mist of tears. The stillness of that vigil was broken by heavy sighs, and sometimes a weary sentence:

"What can be the matter? Oh, what can have kept him? Why, of all days in the year, should he fail to come now?"

Many a time during the coming week Clara asked this weary question, but no answer was given her.

One day as she sat drearily working by the window, which had a sort of painful fascination for her, the sound of coming hoofs made the heart in her bosom leap and recoil like a shot bird.

It was his horse; she knew the tread. He was coming at last, riding eagerly. Ah, how unjust she had been to him!

The horse came nearer and nearer; it stopped at the gate.

Clara did not look out. He should not be given to know how anxious she had been. Nay, she would take up her work and seem to be very busy. The gate opened, a step on the walk. That step smote the breath from her lips. Did Waldon ever move so heavily?

A man came up to the open window and looked through; a strange, rough man, who held a bunch of flowers in his hand—hot-house flowers, such as were seldom seen in that village even by the richest.

"Be you Miss Anderson?" questioned the man, resting his flowers on the window-sill.

A faint sickness had fallen upon Clara at the sight of this man. But she saw, as through a mist, that a note was attached to the flowers and her heart leaped toward it.

"Yes, yes," she said, reaching out her hand.

"Well, marm, I was told to give you this; so here it is."

Clara laid the flowers in her lap and tore open the note. A poem was written on the thick, cream-white paper. The unequal lines danced before her eyes. Her very brain was dizzy. The girl conquered herself at last, and holding the paper between both shaking hands read it through.

Then she laid it down, as if the weight bore too heavily on her hands, and looked down upon it in breathless wonder, as if surely the thing could not belong to her.

With a start, as if just coming out of a dream, she drew herself up and looked out of the window. Perhaps the man was regarding her curiously all this time.

No, he had mounted his horse and was riding away, unconscious of the misery that he left behind.

Clara was now awake to the meaning of that subtle poison in which Waldon concealed his perfidy, as serpents are hid under vine leaves. As if his own will were fate, he bewailed their separation as inevitable, and dwelt in glowing words on the happiness that for him was dead.

The girl understood it all; felt it all, striking through her pride with the keen edge of steel. But her spirit rose; the enormity of this softly-worded dismissal brought fires of unutterable scorn into her eyes.

For a moment she hated the man.

Then a flood of memories swept over her, she snatched up the flowers from her lap, bent her face down upon them, and burst into a wild passion of tears.

Lydia had heard the horseman come and go; then a sound of sobs reached her and she came into the room.

"Oh, Miss Clara, don't, don't; he will come back again. Don't, now!"

Clara lifted her face; a new pang went through her; this strange girl understood her humiliation; her keen eyes saw everything, but they were full of tears now.

"Lydia, Lydia, promise me that you will never mention this. Never tell any one that you have seen Mr.—Mr. Waldon here."

"I never, never will. Oh, Miss Clara, I'll just die first."

"Most of all to Bertha and Miss Noel."

"I wouldn't tell them, not if it was to save their lives; no, I wouldn't." •

"I can trust you, Lydia," said the poor girl, and a weird smile stirred her lips, "though it seems now as if you were the only human being on earth that is not ready to turn upon me."

"No," said Lydia, loyal to her friends even in that tumultuous moment, "there's Ben, and Nancy, and their mother, they'd just die for you. Then there's our folks at the Mill Bridge. Oh, you've got lots on lots of friends."

"You'll be leaving me soon, Lydia."

Clara laid her hands on the girl's shoulders and looked earnestly into her eyes.

"I know that, Miss Clara, but I've promised."

"And I take the promise, knowing how well it will be kept."

Lydia wiped her eyes and choked back a sob.

"I must go when they send for me, or Mrs. Canfield won't have any one but Miss Bertha that's used to her ways. But Ben and his mother will be on hand, never fear."

CHAPTER XX.

PARTING ON THE WHARF.

TWO young girls stood together on the deck of a steamboat which was just preparing to leave for New York. One was speaking eagerly, as she clung to her taller and more stately companion.

"You will be faithful to me, Bertha! That which you and I have promised to each other shall be a sacred pledge. Kiss me here upon my lips, Bertha, and swear that it shall be so!"

Mary Noel was in earnest when she pleaded thus with her old school-mate; tears bright and child-like filled her blue eyes; a tremulous smile quivered over her mouth. Nothing could be more sincere; few things more beautiful. The arms that held her closed a little more firmly; the lips that answered this sweet appeal grew firm with inward force of emotion. A pair of dark-gray eyes, full of tenderness, looked into that uplifted face.

"I have promised, and have no fear of change! Nothing but treachery can ever unknit your heart from mine—and that is impossible!"

The smaller and more impulsive girl broke into a laugh of petty scorn at the possibility that anything but love and perfect truth could ever exist between herself and the girl who had been her best friend at school, and should be her fast friend forever.

"Kiss me!" she said; "again! again! for the bell is ringing."

Bertha Canfield answered with lips that grew warm and red with a sudden rush of feeling.

"Oh, I shall love you dearly forever and ever!" murmured the softer and more yielding nature. "Farewell! farewell!"

The bell was ringing loudly then, and the strong cable which held the steamboat at its wharf began to uncoil from the great, sodden posts, and creep like a huge serpent in the water.

"Don't forget to give my best love to Clara, and say that I will write to her the moment I reach Virginia. I will not forget. Farewell!"

"Farewell! God bless you! Now I *must* go!"

Still Mary Noel clung to her friend, weeping afresh, but Bertha took those two small hands finally from her neck, kissed them, and hurried to the sloping planks, which two men at each end began to remove, almost before her feet had reached the wharf.

Mary Noel leaned over the bulwarks, her face all flushed with emotion, and her eyes full of tears.

"Oh, Bertha!" she sobbed, with a gesture that her friend could understand, though the words were lost in the noises around the steamboat; "it seems like dying to part with you! Do not forget me, but love me always as I shall love you!"

Bertha stood close to the edge of the wharf, and looked up wistfully at her friend until the boat began to heave around in her berth, and left a great chasm of water between them, while a cloud of soft, curling smoke floated over her like a dusky banner.

If she had seemed less ardent than her bright, impulsive friend, at the moment of parting, no one looking at her, as she stood there, with great tears in her eyes, would have doubted the depth of feeling that possessed her. The boat had moved from her wharf, but she saw

the crowd upon her deck dimly. One small handkerchief, fluttering like the wings of a white dove, seemed floating away from her like that lone bird which never came back to the ark that had sent it forth.

Bertha gave no answering signal—for, unconsciously, her hands had clasped themselves, and her face settled into the sad expression of a mourner taking a last look at the flowers on a grave.

As she stood thus, a man came out of the crowd which still lingered on the wharf, and stood gazing on her as if she had been a statue suddenly presented to his view. The girl did not observe him, or she might have shrunk from the admiration that brightened his countenance. She was still watching the steamboat as it swept into the sound and disappeared, leaving only a broad track of foam quivering behind it. When this melted into the blue of the water, she turned to one of the rough posts on which the cable had been wound, rested her clasped hands against it, and bent her forehead upon them.

Then this man saw that her frame was quivering from head to foot, and went up to her.

"Is it that you think the boat unsafe?" he questioned, without apology or explanation to soften the abrupt question.

The girl started, looked at him proudly through her tears, and seemed about to move away.

He saw it, and smiled.

"There are occasions when etiquette seems trivial," he said. "I saw you in distress, and forgot everything but that."

Bertha swept the tears from her eyes, and looked this strange man in the face. Surely a noble, grand face, with that look of glowing interest upon it; the features,

moreover, firm and well cut—the expression heart-stirring.

"Thank you!" she said, gently. "I have just parted from a dear friend, and forgot where I was."

"And I, struck by so much genuine grief, forgot that we had never met before. You see how true it is that 'one touch of feeling makes the whole world kin.'"

A glow of color came into Bertha's cheek, and her fine eyes brightened. Who was this man, so bold, and yet so respectful? Her eyes asked the question.

"Forgive me! but we shall not always be strangers. The world will have its tithe of etiquette," he said, with a gleam of humor that made her smile; "but the man must be weak who lets it block any honorable purpose long. Some day I shall seek your pardon for this intrusion, armed with all the proprieties. But you are looking for your carriage; it has drawn off to the other end of the wharf. Shall I order it?"

Without waiting for a reply, the man hurried off, and was soon standing by an open rockaway left near the wharf.

"Who is this carriage waiting for?" he inquired, thus adroitly gaining information from the driver.

"I am waiting for Miss Canfield," answered the man, sullenly; "but she is a long time coming. She promised not to keep me waiting, but what does such folks care for a feller's time? You'd just oblige me by telling her to hurry up."

"Have you far to go?" inquired the gentleman, intent on forcing information.

"As far as the Mill Bridge, and that's a smart drive from New Haven."

"Well, that is hard," answered the gentleman, putting one hand into his pocket. "Young ladies cannot be expected to think of such things. Mill Bridge on the Naugatuck, is it not?"

The driver saw a bank note between the questioner's fingers, and answered him promptly.

"Drive this way," said the gentleman; "the lady is waiting."

The driver thrust what he considered his own personal perquisite deep into his pocket, and started his horses, while the gentleman walked on in advance, considering the information he had received cheap at the price.

Bertha was anxious to be gone, for the crowd had left the wharf, and her delay there seemed like a challenge for the attentions this strange man had forced upon her. She could not refuse the hand he extended, but scarcely touched it as she hurried into the carriage, and bent her head in exchange for his more elaborate adieu.

"By Jove! she is an imperial creature! I wonder if any king in Europe has a mate like that? Upon my soul, old fellow, I think you have found her at last! Let me make a note of the place. A good neighborhood, and my princess was well dressed, though her beauty would have carried off anything with grace. My friend Waldon, you are in magnificent luck to-day! Who would have thought of finding a creature like that on this dirty wharf? But virtue has its rewards. You made a sacrifice to meet young Lane, and lo! the recompense!"

Russell Waldon closed his memorandum book, and was about to leave the wharf, but some new thought struck him. He went around a pile of boards, just landed from a barge on the other side, which gave him

shelter from the sun, and selecting a blank leaf in his book, began to write—at first rapidly, but after a while with long pauses and much deliberation.

As this man wrote, you would not have taken him for the same person, for all the bright, almost glorious animation of his face was gone. His features grew heavy; his forehead gathered in frowns, save now and then, as a glowing idea sprung out of his efforts, and kindled his features to greater brightness than ever.

After an hour or more he left his shelter, and walked away smiling.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRST LETTER.

BERTHA CANFIELD seemed to bring the glow and business of a bright outside world into the room where her mother was sitting when she came home. You never would have believed that slender, sad and delicate woman the mother of a being so full of grace and bloom as the girl who stooped down lovingly to kiss her before taking off her hat or gloves. The elder lady smiled upon the girl; but never, in this world, was a smile so infinite in its tenderness, yet without a gleam of sunshine in it. Bertha was used to the touching sadness of this smile; but a stranger, on first observing it, would have felt a mist of tears creeping to his eyes, if they were such eyes as get their dew from a compassionate heart.

"Why, child, you look so bright! After parting with Mary, too.. I did not expect it."

"Do I, mother, dear? Well, yes, I do not look even decorously sorry," answered the girl, taking off her bonnet before the glass, where a beautiful face looked smilingly into hers. "But I was dreadfully sorry to part with her, only something happened to make me ashamed of crying so, with people looking on. Why is it, mother, that the very best feelings we can have are those we are ashamed of?"

"Because our best feelings are those we give to God, and thus hold sacred from human intrusion," said the elder lady, in her usual slow, gentle voice.

"I think it was not exactly so with me; but it really did seem as if my heart would break when the boat swept off with my friend, and I gave way so completely that a gentleman I never saw before came up and spoke to me."

"Indeed?" answered the mother; and a quick, startled look changed her face completely.

"No wonder you are surprised. It really was not just the proper thing; but he was so kind, and, in a certain way, respectful. Mother, in my whole life I never saw a face like his. It almost drove Mary out of my mind. Don't look reproachful—not out of my heart. That, no man on earth can ever do!"

Mrs. Canfield still looked anxious and a little wild. She evidently thought this encounter on the wharf of more importance than it appeared to her daughter.

"Mother, he was so unlike any man I ever saw!"

"Hush, child! He must have been a bold man—and you are so young. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing, much; but I will tell you every word. Then say if I have done wrong."

The elder lady listened with anxious attention for the

few words that had in reality passed between her daughter and the man whom she had already begun to regard with terror. Her face cleared up a little when she learned how harmless and simple the interview had been; still it troubled her. The warm, peach-like bloom on her daughter's cheek, and a certain strange light in her eyes, made the mother's heart grow faint in her bosom.

Bertha saw this, and crowded herself into the little sofa on which her mother was sitting. Then she drew the gentle woman down, and laid the pale cheek against her own.

"Have I troubled you, mother? Have I done wrong?"

"No, no—only I am so much alone that trifles seem important to me."

"Perhaps I should not have told you. After all, it was nothing."

Mrs. Canfield did not hear this. She was thinking of something else. Bertha felt the faint shudder that crept over that delicate frame, and it filled her with self-reproach.

"She is so nervous," the girl thought, "and I have made her worse." Then she began to talk of other things.

"Some day we will go down to Virginia, and see what Mary means when she talks about her hundred slaves, and plantation life in the Old Dominion—won't we, mother? She made me promise that I would never let you rest till I got consent. She thinks it would make you strong. Shall we go some day?"

"If you would like it, Bertha. The pleasantest place for me will always be where you are."

"Dear, dear mother!"

"In all the wide world I have nothing else!" continued the mother, with pathetic sadness.

"And I? What have I but you, mother?"

Mrs. Canfield lifted her mournful eyes. They were large and dark gray, like her daughter's; but all the fire had been quenched in them years ago, when love was crucified in a heart warm and ardent as that which swelled in the young bosom against which her head rested.

"Some day, my child—and it may not be long—there will be only a second place for me here!"

"This is a cruel thought—an impossible thing—believe it, mother! Oh, do believe it! How can such fancies creep into your mind?"

"We will not talk of them—at any rate, as yet, my child."

"Nor think of them, mother. There! sit down among your cushions, and I will sing for you."

Bertha arranged the cushions, put her mother's work-basket in tempting proximity with the hand she dropped, and opened the piano. She was, in fact, so restless that nothing but action of some kind seemed possible to her. Mrs. Canfield took up her work, but scarcely drew a thread in the delicate embroidery; not that she listened to the rich burst of music that swelled through the house—her soul was too far away for that. But Bertha carried herself out of all sad thoughts by the glory of her own voice, and left her instrument only when the sunset flung a shower of gold upon her through the open windows.

Just then the door-bell rang, and she stood up, with her hand on the keys, holding her breath. It was a

wild idea, but she had a presentiment that something unusual was going to happen. She looked around for her mother; she had left the room. That moment the old Quakeress came in with a letter in her hand.

"For me?" said Bertha, blushing crimson, and reaching forth her hand.

"For thee!" said the old lady.

Bertha looked at the address. A clear, bold hand had impressed the creamy white of the envelope, but she had never seen it before. She broke open the envelope and went to her room. It was the first letter that Fletcher had ever written her—a noble, grand letter; but that moment her heart was full of other subjects, and she fell to dreaming while it was in her bosom.

CHAPTER XXII.

AFTER-SUPPER CONVERSATION.

IN New York, where Russell Waldon was the centre of a choice intellectual circle, he was in the habit of giving bachelor parties such as the authors and artists of Old England have made famous. Out of this circle he had selected some half-dozen unquestioning admirers of whom he was the literary autocrat and chief.

On the day that Bertha Canfield took leave of Mary Noel on the wharf, he had left the Stone Tavern, which was becoming dreary from want of excitement, and came down to New Haven, in order to meet young Lane, who had broken restlessly away from Saratoga, resolved to press his suit with Clara Anderson once more if Waldon had any encouragement to give him.

On his way through the town, Waldon had met several of his choice friends loitering in that most beautiful of all summer retreats, and, with his usual off-handed hospitality, invited them to a little supper, which he forthwith ordered at the principal hotel.

Perhaps some cowardly gleams of conscience made a meeting with Lane, at first, in the company of others, desirable to the man who had with such cool effrontery betrayed the most sacred trust that could be imposed on him.

Let this be as it may; a brilliant knot of young men assembled about Waldon's table that night, and among them was young Lane, impatient for the moment to come when he could ask the questions burning in his heart.

At the choice suppers where Waldon presided, wit was expected to be more sparkling than the champagne, and humor more mellow than the fruits; for, with him, genius counted for nothing if it was not brilliant, and even then secondary to his own, which made him a social marvel wherever he went.

That night when the wit flagged and the wine flowed freely, Waldon spoke of the thought that had agitated him all the day; for he talked freely, among his favorites, of those things that most men hold sacred as prayers.

"Ulster," he said, addressing a clever young graduate who had just entered the literary world under the glories of a sparkling valedictory, "you have had a pretty fair run of all the boarding-schools lately—tell me if you have seen anything remarkable in that line."

"Remarkable! That is according to taste, you know, Waldon."

"A girl—say eighteen or twenty—with bewilderingly

fine eyes, and magnificent hair. She has lately graduated at some up-town seminary. I learned that much from the crowd."

"Surely you cannot mean the girl who set madam's school on fire with jealousy?"

"I dare say. The person I met would be very likely to do that."

"A superb figure?"

"Juno never had a finer."

"Almost a brunette?"

"Too light for that. A pure, rich complexion."

"Sings like a mocking-bird?"

"Not exactly. Mocking-birds sing in the open air. She did not oblige me so far."

"It is the same girl, I'll be sworn. I saw her once, and was half in love at the first sight."

Waldon frowned. His supreme selfishness resented the idea that any other man would presume to speak in this fashion of the woman he had deigned to notice.

Ulster saw the cloud, and redeemed himself.

"It may not be the same person. Our schools are crowded with beautiful girls," he said.

"Did you learn this girl's name?"

"It was Bertha—Bertha—"

"Never mind—I know it myself. But you have seen her, and can bear witness that she is worthy of our wine. Gentlemen, fill up to the loveliest woman that draws breath!"

"Another?" laughed one of the young men.

"A woman of exquisite beauty!" murmured Ulster, filling his glass.

"The only woman who ever brought the heart into my mouth with a glance!" said Waldon, watching the

sparkles float up into his wine, as if they had been diamonds. "She inspired me, and I have not written such poetry in a year!"

"A poem! a poem! Give us the poem, Waldon!" cried Ulster, setting down his glass. "It must be wonderful, to match her loveliness!"

"And she superb, to match his genius!" said a guest opposite, affecting to speak under his breath.

Waldon took in the flattery, but was almost unconscious that he had heard it. His parasites had learned to deal out their homage so daintily, that he might feel but not seem to accept it.

"The poem! the poem! But first we drink to the unknown lady."

Waldon drained his glass with the rest, and took out the first draft of his poem. There was a hush in the room. That was, of course, expected. When he began to read, one or two of the guests lifted the half-drained glasses to their lips, and sat them down noiselessly, that nothing might break the full, rich swell of a voice that would have made commonplace ideas grandly harmonious. These young men, even in the heat of their wine, wondered that this exquisite delicacy of thought and richness of expression could belong to a man capable of the cruel acts which they had too frequently witnessed in him.

When Waldon had finished reading, he leaned back in his chair and calmly awaited the homage which was never withheld in that company. The champagne those young men were drinking did not flow more freely than their praises.

"Some fast school-girl, I'll be sworn," observed one of these young Bohemians, as he went, arm-in-arm with

another guest, from Waldon's door. "A fellow that writes such poetry has only to imagine a girl beautiful to believe it. There was Byron, you know, and his 'Maid of Athens,' a regular fright. None of us fellows will be wise to run crazy about this girl till we have seen her. Wald's poetry is superb—but that for his facts!"

A loud snap of the young man's fingers, and a stumbling step on the sidewalk ended this lucid opinion.

Meantime Waldon and Lane remained at the table, where a glow of fruit and the rich ruby and topaz sparkle of half-drained glasses brightened even the disarray of a feast enjoyed.

Waldon pushed back a claret pitcher that stood in the way of his elbow with a look of impatient disgust, and regardless of the questioning anxiety in his companion's eyes, broke forth with his usual egotism.

"Lane," he said, "you must know the young lady I was speaking of. She has a grandfather or something living up at the Mill Bridge; at any rate she is staying there now."

"Yes, I recognized the description at once, but was not willing to mention her name before all those fellows."

Any man but Waldon would have blushed at this indirect rebuke. He only met it with an angry flash of the eyes.

"The honor or dishonor done to the name of a lady depends on the lips that utter it," he said, haughtily.

Lane grew impatient.

"Let all that pass," he said; "I wished to speak of other matters."

"Not yet, Lane; I am serious about this Bertha Canfield—a pretty name, Bertha—quite serious. Don't give me one of your knowing looks; I am indeed."

"For how long?" questioned Lane.

"How can any man answer a question like that? Forever! I tell you, Lane, I am in dead earnest. Tell me all that you know about her."

"Oh, the young lady has no romantic history that I am aware of. She is well connected. The mother is a Mrs. Canfield—a widow—who lives mostly in New York. She is not much in society, I fancy; but there is a look of refinement about her that compels respect."

"Lane," said Waldon, eagerly, "I must know this young lady. Will you help me? I want a favorable introduction—such as your sister might obtain for me, I dare say. Manage it, and I will do anything on earth for you."

"My sister knows everybody; she can manage it, I dare say," answered Lane; "I know the young lady myself, however, but have some compassion on her."

"Compassion! Can that word belong to a woman whom Waldon admires?"

"But I was thinking that she might love you."

"Might! By Heavens, she shall!"

"Some day you will come across a woman who will demand a great deal more than you have yet been willing to give."

"I hope so! If this is the woman, so much the better. I have been all my life searching for her."

"But I thought all ideas of marriage hateful to you."

"Marriage! Lane, I am of a generous nature, and capable of great sacrifices."

A smile that displeased Waldon crept over the young man's face. He admired, at times almost worshipped, this gifted man; but only real goodness can insure permanent respect, and germs of underlying contempt

would now and then shoot up through his delusions, and mar them, like rank weeds in a flower-garden. One of these swift monitors disturbed his features.

Waldon saw it and frowned.

"Why do you smile? I see a woman so unlike—so above anything feminine that I have ever met before, that the very memory of her smile is like a drink of old wine to me. I long to know her better. Will you help me?"

"I could have done once, for she was a school-friend of Clara Anderson's."

A hot flush crimsoned Waldon's face; for an instant he lost all self-possession.

Lane looked at him keenly.

"You can tell me, Waldon, whether this is an advantage or not? No doubt you have done a friend's part by me with her, but I have hardly the courage to ask with what success."

Waldon hesitated. In his mind the image of Clara Anderson, in all her spirited beauty, rose vividly before him. He had given the girl up, but felt a jealous dislike of any renewal of her friendship with Lane. Even more, a dread that the young man might discover the almost intangible treachery of his own conduct.

This he resolved to guard against, and used the hesitation he could not conquer to that effect.

"If I have appeared to avoid the subject, Lane," he said, with apparent frankness, "it is because I have really nothing definite to say. I visited the young lady frequently, and exerted myself as delicately as possible to discover her real sentiments. She is a splendid creature, no doubt of that, but proud as Lucifer."

"I know, I know," interrupted Lane. "It is on that

pride I found my hope. Under it all must lie some tenderness, some glimmers of love. She is capable of so much feeling, such noble sacrifices. To be really and fully beloved by that girl might be the glory of any man, even yourself, Waldon."

A strange expression shot over Waldon's face. He was a man of swift mental calculation, and adroitly seized upon these impassioned words.

"You are right, Lane. She is a creature that few men could resist. I went to see her often, for her nature is a study; sought, for your sake, to win an insight into the feelings that must exist under all that frosty pride, but I found the task too dangerous, and gave it up."

"You! Waldon. Oh, I might have known that your friendship in this would prove dangerous. You have acted nobly by me; I shall never forget it."

Waldon took the hand that his friend reached out; his face beamed with sympathy; and such was the peculiar construction of his character that he was half-convinced of his own magnanimity.

"I could not do less, my dear fellow; so you must not give it too much importance. You see I escaped the fascinations of one woman only to be ensnared by another."

"You are thinking of Miss Canfield; she is lovely—"

"As a dream!" Waldon broke in.

Waldon reflected a moment after this outburst of admiration.

Yes, he could develop the thought that had just flashed into his mind. The pride of that girl would forever shield his secret even from her best friend. Besides, had he not confessed almost as much as she could tell, and turned it to his own advantage?

"Miss Canfield knows how much you admire her friend, I suppose," he said.

"I have never kept it a secret; of course she does."

"Then why not make her your confidante?"

"Why not, indeed!" said Lane, with great animation. "She is one of the kindest-hearted creatures in the world."

"Women understand the delicate diplomacy of such affairs so much better than the wisest man," said Waldon.

"I will see her. We will go back to your old quarters by the morning train. There is no reason against riding up to Mill Bridge at once."

Waldon's eyes sparkled. He took Lane's hand in his with a cordial grasp.

"Nothing can be better," he said. "Now that you are yourself again, I can see great encouragement in your plan."

Lane colored with shame.

"Did you think me beyond hope?" he said. "I was reckless, revengeful, glad to wound my father; but only tortured myself with a two-edged sword. In mortifying my father I struck down my love. It was a form of madness, nothing worse than that."

Once more Waldon reached forth his hand.

"Ah, this looks promising, Lane. Stand firm in that, and all things are sure to turn out well."

Here both men arose, their hands still clasped.

"In the early train?" said Waldon.

"Yes, I shall be ready. Good-night!"

Waldon sat down and fell into thought after his friend left, slowly sipping a glass of wine, as if that aided the drift of his meditation. He had been from the first

anxious to keep his friendship for the Lane family intact. The young man was one of his most devoted admirers; would possess great wealth, and, as one of his social satellites, might be of great importance to him in his future course of life.

The sister, Mrs. Forbes, held a commanding position in the best society of New York, and her countenance was of great value in that respect.

All these advantages had been put in great peril by his rash intimacy with Miss Anderson; but one bold dash of policy had given him a stronger hold upon the Lane family than ever. Still a rankling distaste was left; his vanity revolted at the idea that Lane should aspire, even unconsciously, to fill the place he had abandoned in Clara Anderson's heart.

"Fool!" he said, draining the last drop of wine from his glass, as he prepared to go. "Fool! as if all the women under Heaven could drive my image from her heart."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FAINTING FITS.

"**W**ERE you frightened about me, mother? I could not help being a little late; the ride was splendid, but so long."

Bertha was untying her riding-hat and taking off her gauntlets as she spoke, while the shadowy woman hovered around her with the loving solicitude of a heart always apprehensive, always tender in its solicitude.

"No, I was not really frightened: that would be too

strong a word, Bertha; but somehow I am always apprehensive when you cross the ford."

"Yes, yes, I know, dear mother, but it is so wrong of you; why the water was not up to Jason's knees; he enjoyed it amazingly. So did I; but one does come home tired, and a little heart-sick too, after a visit to Clara. She is so sad, so depressed; I declare her eyes have grown twice their natural size since she was here, and have such a strange, dreary expression. I am afraid the poor girl is working herself to death, mamma."

"I am sorry to hear that; we must have her over here again. I dare say it was the shock of that awful time that has disturbed her. I cannot think of it without shuddering."

"Ah, you are sure to do that when one mentions a great storm; I always tremble when one comes up for your sake."

"For my sake! Really, I think you never have a fear for yourself."

"For myself," answered the lady, with a sweet, sad smile. "Why, Bertha, you are all of myself that is worth caring for."

Bertha wound both arms lovingly around her mother's neck.

"I came very near not being yours only a few weeks ago, didn't I, mother? Wasn't that a wonderful escape?"

Mrs. Canfield cast both arms around the young creature, and held her close.

"I'm glad you were not in sight when the old bridge went down, mother. It would have frightened you to death. Oh, the crash was awful! I seem to feel the planks parting now, and that poor, brave horse going down, down into the depths of the flood!"

"Thank God, my child was saved!"

"Oh, yes, I also thank Him. But it seems to me like a dream now—one of those dreams that are constantly sweeping us into danger, and, just as we are about to fall into awful depths, land us in some other place. But you look pale, mother—you tremble!"

"Yes, it is natural when I think of your danger. I was wrong, fearfully wrong to let you go."

"But how could you foresee the danger, mamma? We started early in the morning, when the water was rising; but had no idea of a flood. Mr. Fletcher would not have let us go an inch, if he had dreamed of it; for we all knew that every one at home would be frightened to death if the river swelled above its banks. There never was a flood so overwhelming and sudden as that in the valley before; you have no idea how the rain poured down while we were on the mountains."

"Yes, one."

How hoarse that gentle voice had become! How cold the hand was which still touched Bertha's neck!

"Yes, one. I remember they told me about that. The bridge gave way then, and a gentleman was drowned. Some person grandfather knew, was it not?"

Bertha received no answer; but she felt the hand on her shoulder turning colder.

"Clara Anderson told me about it as we rode down the mountains, and said it happened the year she was born, and she was near twenty. That is just my age. Did you know the gentleman, mother?"

Still no answer; but the hand upon her shoulder grew cold as ice.

Bertha turned as the little hand dropped, and saw that her mother had fallen down among the cushions of

her couch, where she lay white as marble, with her eyes closed.

"Mother! mother! what is the matter?" she cried out, in quick alarm. "What have I said? What can I do? Grandmamma! grandmamma!"

The old lady, so frantically summoned, came up-stairs in haste. Without pausing to ask a question she stooped down and lifted that white face into a current of fresh air that swept in through a window that Bertha hastened to open.

"Here is water, ammonia, cologne. Oh, grandmamma, is she dying?" cried the poor girl in an agony of terror.

"No, no, my dear; thee need not tremble so; she is coming to, now. Does thee feel better, my child?"

There was a faint stir of the eyelids, a quiver of the lips, as if the fainting woman would have been glad to answer, but had no power. The two watched her for a while in silence.

"Mamma! mamma! are you better?" cried Bertha, giving way to the tender impatience of her youth, and kneeling down, she rested the pale head upon her bosom. "What was it that came over you, mother?"

"Nothing much. You were telling me of danger. You are my only child, Bertha, and the thought that I might have lost you—"

Mrs. Canfield said this faintly, looking into her daughter's face with pathetic tenderness, and smoothing her white hand with her own trembling fingers.

"But I am here, safe and well," said Bertha, kissing her mother till the warmth came back to her face.

"Yes, thank God!"

The mother's face brightened.

"We will never speak of that awful old bridge again," said Bertha.

The mother only answered by a cold shudder.

"Grandfather told me not to talk with you about it; but how could I help talking when you questioned me? Besides, I had to tell about Mr. Fletcher, for he saved my life, and that was a thing you had to learn in order to understand the rest."

"Yes, yes—everything you have done is right. But tell me, darling, do you—can you—love this young man? You had a letter from him?"

"Me! Oh, mother, why did you ask that question just as I was so happy? Love him! I tried to; I thought, perhaps, it was love; but now—"

Bertha paused suddenly, and a flood of scarlet swept over her face, neck and arms.

She looked around fearing that her grandmother was there; but that gentle old lady had glided softly downstairs when the invalid found herself able to converse. Like most sensitive persons this feeble woman, having once entered on a painful subject, pursued it closely, fearing that the courage to open it again might be wanting in the future.

"Now," said that gentle mother, regarding the vehement protest of that blush with anxiety, "now you have discovered that it is only gratitude that you feel. I am glad of that. He has saved my child, and I would give him everything I have but herself. It will be a sad day, Bertha, when you and I have to part."

"We never will part!" answered Bertha, straining her arms tighter about that slender form. "There, now, you are getting comfortable again. We won't talk of serious things any more. Just tell me again that you love nothing so well as me. It is so pleasant to hear it from you."

"Foolish girl!" said the mother, smiling faintly, but with a sparkle of animation kindling in her eyes.

"Who makes me so foolish? Not my dear little mother! Oh, no!"

Bertha was rearranging her hair in the glass as she spoke. All at once her own face struck her as being of a different type to the delicate and soft features of her mother. She had never thought of this before; but now the lovely image in that glass was an object of peculiar interest. She turned her head.

"Mother, dear, who is it I look like—my father?"

A wild light broadened in Mrs. Canfield's eyes, and she almost shrieked out:

"What? What did you ask?"

"Only if I looked like my father. It seems to me as if I must!"

Mrs. Canfield sat a moment with both hands drooping to her lap. Then she said, more quietly than she had yet spoken:

"Yes, Bertha, you look like your father."

"I thought so, little mother. It was not from you that I got my height, or this hair. Oh, I hear some one calling!" Here she fell upon her knees, and kissed her mother over and over again. "You are so good to let me go! I have left everything ready. The books and flowers are all on the table. There is your foot-stool, and an extra cushion for your back. Grandmamma will come in if you only touch the bell. Now are you quite comfortable?—that's a dear! You always say yes. Let me slant the shade a little against the sunlight. Now I will go down and see who wants me."

When Bertha went out of that room it seemed cruelly darkened. There a gentle little woman lay back against

her cushions, with a look of trouble on her sweet, worn face, that had not been permitted to appear while her daughter was present. Slowly and sadly the tears came into her eyes, and trembled down her cheeks. Once or twice she clasped two slender hands over her face, and they dropped away helpless and wet.

She arose from her couch, looked around as if dreading observation, then bolted the door, that no one might intrude upon her, and opened a little brass-bound travelling-desk, which always stood locked in a corner of her room. From this she took the miniature of a young and remarkably handsome man, dressed in the fashion of twenty years ago, and, sitting down upon the couch, gazed upon it with infinite tenderness.

More than once she lifted her hand impatiently, and wiped away the tears that blinded her vision. Then she fell to kissing the painted shadow with passionate sobs, murmuring:

"Yes, darling, she *is* like you! I have just told her so. She smiled that dear old smile."

Tears blinded the poor woman now, and, clasping the miniature between both her palms, she dropped them in her lap, holding her treasure close.

After a while she opened the desk and the drawer where was the miniature of another man, older and gray-haired. This she put aside to make room for her treasure, locked the desk, and crept off to her couch again, after drawing both curtains over the windows that no sunshine might look in upon her grief.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FRUIT FESTIVAL.

BACK of that old farm-house was a peach orchard now in full fruit, under which the grass grew thicker and greener than it could be found in less shady places. This turf was always rolled or trimmed so closely that you could see a fine underlaying of moss which is sure to creep through sward so perfectly cultivated.

This peach orchard was the old Quaker's especial pride. Not a dead knot could be found in the thrifty trees, nor a dry twig upon the velvet turf. If a peach fell, over-mellow and ripe, it found an emerald bed so soft that not a bruise harmed its ruddy bloom. Then the surroundings were very beautiful. The back door, with its honeysuckle porch, was in full view. The well, with its old-fashioned curb and moss-covered bucket, gave rustic token of the crystal water beneath, and at dusk you could watch the swallows go twittering in and out of their nests under the porch, from any point of the little orchard.

When the peaches in this orchard were red-ripe for eating, the old Quaker lady had each year been in the habit of inviting the children of her near neighbors to a little festival under the trees. It was to decide about the arrangement that Bertha was called down from her mother's chamber on the day she returned from a brief visit to Clara Anderson.

The next afternoon everything was in readiness for these riotous little guests, who were expected to enjoy

without stint or limit to any childish fun that might suggest itself.

The table was spread under one of the most umbrageous peach trees in the orchard, which, with a delicious burden of fruit bending the branches earthward, formed one of the loveliest and most leafy tents that ever sheltered a demure knot of children.

Indeed it was all very beautiful, and, if a little romantic, that should be forgiven, in an age when the ideal is so rudely handed out of good society.

For a while the children huddled together hesitating and uncertain; but Bertha soon had them in a ring, with their little feet dancing on the turf, and their merry shouts resounding through the air. She was the very life of the occasion—now standing in the centre of a gleeful circle, teaching the young ones how “the farmer sows his seed,” now leading a toddling little girl through the grass, or tying her handkerchief over some larger fellow’s eyes for a game of “blind-man’s buff.”

Before the sun went down, the little rioters were called in from their play, and found the old lady at the head of a long tea-table, quiet as a brooding dove.

A merry, merry tea-table that was where the nice old Quakeress presided, to the delight of every child present, smiling blandly amid the riot of young voices, as the crowd came trooping up for their annual supply of biscuits, seed-cake, and “turnovers.”

These tiny guests had seen the old-fashioned little silver tea-pot in that withered hand every year since they could remember, but it never seemed to lose its grandeur or novelty to them. Indeed this annual fruit-feast was the great gala day of their lives, and everything connected with it became a pleasant memory for the year to come.

After tea there was a great gathering of peaches. Then the good old Friend would settle a ladder against some especial tree where the sunshine had lavished itself most broadly, and with a vigorous shake send the mellow fruit rustling down to the grass, where the children darted upon it like bees; the boys filling their pockets, the girls loading down their aprons, while each baby came tumbling out of the scramble with a peach in its tiny fist.

Of course the old Quaker in the branches could not attend to an equal division of the spoils; but Bertha had mounted on a chair at another tree, and was dropping fruit into the aprons of a half-dozen timid little girls that had fared badly among their stronger playfellows, when two gentlemen came round a corner of the house, and stood silently regarding the picture she made.

Unconscious of criticism or admiration, the girl stood balancing herself on the chair, bearing down a heavy branch with one hand, while the other wandered through the thick foliage in search of the ripest fruit. Her sleeve had broken loose, and fallen back to the elbow, exposing the rounded whiteness of her arm as she thrust it among the green branches, pressing her fingers now into a golden and then into the crimson side of a peach, in her eagerness to secure the best.

The old lady saw the strangers standing there, and instantly warned her granddaughter of the fact.

“Bertha, dear! I think thee has friends coming.”

Bertha looked around, saw the strangers, and, all in a glow of burning red, sprang to the ground, leaving the branch to rustle back to its place.

“I trust, I hope we have not intruded,” said young

Lane, advancing toward the old Quakeress, whom he had known as a boy.

"We found the house empty so far as we dared explore it, and hearing voices in this direction ventured to come round."

"Thee is very welcome, Edward; thee and thy friend. Bertha, this is Edward Lane."

Bertha came forward, blushing more than seemed needful, and after one swift glance at the young man's companion, held out her hand.

"You are welcome, Mr. Lane. Very welcome," she said.

"May I be permitted to ask as much for my friend? Miss Canfield; Mr. Waldon."

Bertha was seized with an unaccountable fit of shyness. She could not for her life have given her hand to this acquaintance of an hour, and her head seemed to droop of itself rather than offer a salutation.

Waldon was not discouraged by this reception, but turned smilingly to the old lady, whom he soon won into a conversation that seemed almost confidential; for the charm of this man's voice and manners had its effect even upon her.

Still his eyes followed Bertha in all her movements, and amid the gentle commonplaces of the old Friend he managed to catch the drift of that young lady's conversation with Lane, who was talking earnestly.

"The fellow pleads his case well," he thought; "and just now he shall have the chance; to look at her as she talks ought to be enough for any man."

The old Quaker came down from his ladder, gave the strangers a quiet salutation, and went off with half-a-dozen of the youngest children hanging around him,

while the rest trooped off, loaded with cakes and fruit, for their homes.

Still those two men lingered under the peach trees, though the old lady grew a little restless and became almost silent. The others would not understand this. Lane was pleading his case with an earnestness that rendered him blind to everything else; and Waldon would have been content to sit there till daylight, with that bright, lovely face for a study.

With both these men it was agreeable enough, to sit there under the laden boughs, with the last rich breath of summer fanning their cheeks; the sun went down gloriously, turning a bed of white clouds into banks of roses and caves of golden fire. The scene was more than beautiful when the last sunbeams lighted up those dusky branches and kissed the peaches into a richer red, just before the dew fell upon them.

When this little party at last retired from the orchard the late summer flowers had folded themselves to repose, stars came out in the heavens, the leaves stirred heavily under their weight of dew, and the black shadows of the hill lay like drapery along the valley.

As Bertha parted with Lane in the front-door yard Waldon heard her say:

"I will do my best, my very best; only I do not quite understand Clara, she is so changed."

CHAPTER XXV.

HUMBLE FRIENDS.

IT was true; Clara Anderson had changed greatly, both in person and mind, since Waldon had so unaccountably ceased to visit the old house. Soul and body she was in constant antagonism with her fate. Up to this time she had scarcely known how deep and all-absorbing her love for this man had become. To her ardent nature this first passion of a life had swept everything before it and was now the one idea of her lonely existence.

This entire concentration upon one being would hardly have been possible to a young girl surrounded by friends and the pleasures fitting her age. To Clara it had grown something far beyond the romance or dream of a young heart. That one solitary love had twined itself about the very springs of her being, and the attempt to uproot it was destroying her.

She did not know this; in the tumult of passion and pride she had no time to think of consequences. She only longed to cause herself the severest possible pain, to blot out every gleam of sunshine, tear up every sweet blossom of hope, and fling herself down in the darkness. Like a wounded animal, that madly plunges among brambles, and down broken rocks, she turned into the thorniest path, and, wounding herself with bitter thoughts, kept constantly at work, allowing herself neither rest from toil nor pain. Her old grandmother pleaded with her fruitlessly to seek relaxation, for there was something startling, even to her impaired perception, in the haggard look of that young face.

One day, at breakfast, the old woman put on her spectacles, and, leaning forward, scrutinized the girl's face with sharp anxiety.

What she saw there set her old head into tremulous motion.

"It's all true," she soliloquized, forgetting that others could hear her words; "the girl is just working herself to death. Clara! I say, Clara Anderson! you are just working yourself to death, and I won't have it so. Cut off my tea and white sugar; cut off everything but a crust of bread and a drink of milk. I always liked them, but you never will let me have what is best for me. Just as if cossetting up an old woman would do her any good. I tell you this sewing, night and day, has got to stop."

Clara was so nervously irritable in those days that she answered the old woman's real kindness with curt impatience.

"I have got the work to finish, grandmother; and it must be done."

The old woman knew how positive her granddaughter could be and strove to subdue her own fretful spirit into persuasiveness.

"You'll make yourself sick; then what will become of us, I should like to know?"

"Our kind and good-hearted neighbors—we will depend on them," replied Clara, bitterly.

"I'm thinking if we waited for them we might both die here without help," was the sharp reply.

"Possibly, grandmother, but I do not intend to be sick."

"You will, though; you are as white as a sheet now."

"That proves nothing."

"What troubles you, Clara? Do tell me? Is it anything but the work?"

"Nothing at all. Why will you torment me with such questions?"

"That's the way you always put me off; you don't tell me anything more than as if I were a stranger."

"I have nothing to tell. What can happen in a place like this?"

"I don't know; but you're not like yourself; I am sure there is something the matter."

"Please don't imagine such things, grandmother; you will only make me fancy myself ill or miserable when I am not."

"I wish it was all fancy; but you won't make me believe it," muttered the old lady.

"I am perfectly well; why will you think otherwise?" persisted the girl.

Mrs. Anderson ceased her expostulations, they were perfectly useless and only gave pain to both. The old woman saw that and was too much disturbed for a useless contest.

Lydia, who was listening, now joined in the conversation.

"The work isn't all that's breaking her down, grandma," she said, so well pleased with the old lady that she gave her this honorary title. "She doesn't eat worth a cent, and only pretends to when you're looking on. New-laid eggs are nothing to her. I don't believe she'd hanker after briled chicken now if it was right before her; which it isn't, the chickens being tough old hens every one of 'em."

"That's so!"

This pithy indorsement came through the back-door, where Ben stood with a basket in his hand.

"Lydia and I investergated the hen-coop; nothing worth while there; but here is a critter that'll make Miss Clara's mouth water. I've been on the watch for it more 'en a week, and nabbed him at last. Look-a-here!"

Ben came eagerly forward, set his basket on a corner of the table, and raising a layer of fresh chestnut leaves, revealed a fine brook trout, with drops of crystal water on his fins, and delicate amber and ruby spots on his sides.

"Ain't that a beauty, now?" cried Ben, looking proudly from face to face for the admiration he had so well deserved. "I've been a watching him in that deep hole under the willers; you know the place, Miss, for I've seen you up there Sundays all summer. He was good at hiding himself amongst the brake leaves and scraggly roots; I've counted his spots many a time, but he kept awful shy of the hook. This morning I baited with a lively bluebottle that kept his wings a going. That brought him. Golly!—I beg your pardon, Miss, but sometimes I can't help swearing—but didn't my heart jump when he dropped all of a quiver on the bank! 'There's a good breakfast for the Miss,' says I; 'if that doesn't give her an appetite nothing will.' Just you look at it, Miss; fins like a butterfly's wing, spots that might be sot in a lady's ring, and *such* meat!"

Clara was touched by the honest fellow's kindness, and his heart swelled as she looked down into the basket with a smile on her lips.

The old grandmother put on her glasses again and peered down upon the prize with great satisfaction.

Lydia took a glance from under Ben's arm.

"Oh, isn't it a lovely shiner?" she exclaimed. "I say, Ben, ask your mother to come over and cook it; that sort of fancy work is too much for me."

"She'll come if the Miss will only try to get up a splendid appetite. Say now, will you?"

Clara smiled, and this time tears came into her eyes.

"I will promise anything, if that can repay all your kindness, Ben."

Ben answered this with a broad grin of delight.

"Then there's another thing, Miss, that Lydia and I and Nancy have been thinking of. The horse is splendid now, getting sort of rampagnacious for work; if you'd just ride him now and then?"

"Oh, Ben! we mustn't think of that; I have no wish—no time," said Clara, who felt as if every one must know of her cruel humiliation, and shrunk nervously from the observation of her neighbors.

"Then again," said Ben, "there is the dug-out a swinging under the willers, like a cradle that wants to be rocked. You might go down to the river once in a while, and let me row you about."

"Oh, do now! It's the loveliest sort of fun," Lydia broke in, "and nobody to see but us."

The old grandmother had arisen and stood leaning with both hands on her cane, looking anxiously from one face to another as these suggestions were made.

"They're good-hearted children, both of 'em," she said. "You ought to go, Clara; it will do you good."

"It will please the only friends I have in the world," said Clara, with deep feeling, "and that is enough for me. Yes, Ben, we will have the trout for dinner, and try the canoe after."

"That's the time o' day."

Ben's voice was joyous as a shout when he said this. Giving Lydia a sign to follow him to the back stoop he held a short conference with her there.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE CANOE.

"I'LL have everything splendid; never you fear," he said. "I'll dress the dug-out like the Fourth of July. You and Nancy may stand on the bank and see us float. It'll be something worth while, I can tell you!"

"If it'll just bring a mite of color into her face, and drive them black shadders from under her eyes, I won't ask for nothing more," said Lydia. "Oh, Ben! how sorry I am that you ever minded me about them strawberries and the horse and things! What bissness had I to drive her friends away?"

"Well, it can't be helped now anyway, so let's see about making up for the feller's reading. It's that she's a pining after."

"Yes, of course it's the reading. I only meant that. I miss it myself since he's given up coming. It's the lonesomeness that ails her."

"Well you run over and speak to marm about cooking the trout, Lydia, and I'll fix up the dug-out so that you won't believe it's her."

Ben was as good as his word. Like many persons to whom nature has been a chief companion, he had unconsciously acquired a love of flowers, ferns, and mosses that was almost artistic. From the banks of the river, the stone walls, and meadows, he gathered golden rod and wild asters, everlasting, clematis vines and ground pine, which he brought on his shoulders like a great bundle of wheat from across the river. With these he

decked the canoe; placing a tall plume of golden rod in the prow, and twining the vines and field flowers in gorgeous wreaths down both sides till they united in a glowing mass at the stern, and trailed a yard or two out on the water.

"If that isn't a craft that she can sail in and be proud of. I don't know how to rig one up," said Ben confidentially to himself, as he stood on the bank surveying his own dainty work. "It floats like a bird's nest and looks like—like a poppet show."

For a minute or two Ben stood rubbing his hands with great satisfaction, then casting his eyes toward the house, he saw the young lady coming toward the river, followed by the two girls.

"There she comes, tired out before she starts. I wonder if she'll ever get back that springy walk agin, or laugh as she used to. There, she sees me now and is trying her best to smile like old times; but, dear me, she can't do it."

Ben was wrong. For one minute the old bright smile came to Clara's lips when she saw the canoe rocking like a great cradle of flowers upon the water.

"Ah, how beautiful!" she said, seating herself in the stern and looking around as if the outer world were new to her. "Will your little craft hold us both, Ben?"

"No danger," answered Ben, stepping into the dug-out, which rocked under him till the flowers on one side were under water.

"Would it be safe to take Nancy?" questioned Clara, with a kind glance at the girl, who was following them with wistful eyes.

"If you want to, miss. She don't weigh more than a kitten."

Clara beckoned the girl with her hand; but Nancy hesitated, not quite understanding the gesture.

"Come, jump in, you image, if you want to," said Ben, reaching out his hand.

Nancy sprang in with a joyous leap.

"Oh, how splendid you look!" shouted Lydia, quite content to be left behind.

The canoe shot into the stream like an arrow barbed with flowers.

The sunset was just flinging its golden veil over one portion of the river, while the rest lay in shadow. From her childhood the stillness of an hour like this would have possessed Clara with a feeling of gentle sadness; but now the sensation deepened into a melancholy that was almost weird. The contrast between her grave face and the sparkle of happiness lighting up the features of her little companion was painful. While she was looking upon the shadows as if a pall were dropping around her, this girl turned her face to the shifting gold of the sunset. All the way up stream she was bending her beautiful head over the side of the canoe, holding her hand in the water and laughing as the waves rippled through her tiny fingers. Now and then her red lips parted, as with a sweet pressure of music, and sent forth a burst of wild melody like the gushing notes of a wood thrush; but frightened at her own audacity she would dart a glance into the dreary eyes that were looking so far away, and hush her truant voice into silence.

Before their return down the stream the moon had risen, and was raining her silver down upon the water where the bright stars were mirrored, and black shadows lay among the bushes on either side. Even Nancy felt the beauty and the quiet, for her head was thrown back

and her eyes lifted to the expanse above with wondering thoughtfulness; while Ben, sharing the general impression, allowed his canoe to drift as it were through the stillness.

They drifted thus, by the elms, across the ford, into deeper water and darker shadows. On and on till the stream became narrower, gliding heavily along toward a hollow where its stagnant waters gathered in a dark eddying pool, fearfully deep, overshadowed by thick undergrowth and low bending trees.

Here the gloom frightened Nancy, who started up screaming aloud.

"Sit down! sit down!" shouted Ben. "We are close by the deep hole!"

This only intensified the girl's terror. All her life she had been warned against this dangerous place, toward which Ben had imprudently allowed his canoe to drift, but to avoid it was steering close to the shore, where the limb of an old tree projected from the bank.

Nancy did not sit down, but leaning forward, caught at this limb desperately. The branch broke with a quick, sharp crash. Nancy tottered—reeled—the canoe shivered under her, curved suddenly, recoiled, and drifted on half full of water, but otherwise empty.

Nancy came out of the depths first—a circle revolved in the water—a score of bright bubbles—another circle, and she rose to the surface. The moonlight was full on the spot to which she had drifted—her eyes were open and turned upon the shore in despairing agony—her arms were tossed wildly up—her golden hair was tangled about her hands, and a suffocating cry broke from her lips—

"Help! help! oh, help!"

The cry reached Lydia, who had followed the canoe in its progress down the river. She sprang down the bank, seized upon a sapling that grew upon the edge, and with desperate strength bent it down to the water.

The girl made an effort to cry out, but could not. She saw Nancy's hands dart upward, clenching blindly among the leaves. A moment and all was under water—another and the young tree was drawn back, scattering the drops about in a shower, and with it Nancy was lifted within reach of Lydia's outstretched hands, that dragged the girl ashore.

As these two girls lay wet, shivering and helpless on the bank, something like the staggering rush of some fierce animal tearing through the underbrush made them cling closer together; for the agony of great terror was upon them yet. It was Ben, who plunged into the moonlight with Clara Anderson in his arms.

He almost flung her upon the grass, and was making a wild rush for the water again, when Lydia found breath and cried out—

"Oh, Ben, Ben, she is here! Nancy is here in my arms!"

Ben strode toward his sister—saw that she was alive—turned and met the eyes of Clara, who had lifted herself to a sitting position on the grass and was looking around in wild bewilderment.

Then, and not till then, the brave lad fell upon the earth, and, covering his face with both hands, sobbed like a child.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MEETING ON THE PRECIPICE.

"I HAVE accepted Mr. Waldon's invitation to ride to the upper falls to-morrow morning. It is understood that you will join us somewhere on the way. This gives me an opportunity to gain the interview with Clara that you have so much at heart. After hearing all the particulars I am satisfied that in some accidental meeting, seeming or real, lies your last hope of a reconciliation. Were it not from the fact that she seemed to relent and call you back in that interview by the willows, I should have little hope for you. As it is, you shall have one more chance to plead your cause if I can give it to you. I have sent a note to Clara asking her to join me on my way to the falls. So meet us there. It will prove your own fault if she is not intercepted on the road and escorted to our party. Neither Clara nor Mr. Waldon will know anything of this little arrangement, which is to remain our secret.

"BERTHA."

Young Lane understood this note well—for he had given Bertha his entire confidence—and in great hopefulness prepared to act upon it. Waldon too was in high spirits. His pursuit of Bertha Canfield had been so checked by her mother's presence or the old Quaker's quiet vigilance that a spirit of contest gave fire to his first impetuous admiration. Never had this man thought himself so deeply in love—never had his suit seemed so vigilantly guarded against. Bertha had accepted his invitation to a ride so promptly that there was no room for after protest, and Waldon seized upon the opportunity with a glow of triumph.

The silvery haze which makes September so chastely beautiful filled the morning with a delightful calm as these two rode away from the old homestead in company. They were both splendid riders, the horses well matched and managed with that easy grace which one seldom finds out of England. Waldon had a stern, masterly control over his spirited horse which betrayed in itself the singular self-poise of a character full of power both of thought and motion. Bertha's action was marked with gentle grace—a grave dignity. She sat her horse well and rode with serene fearlessness, keeping firm control of the animal, but leaving herself free to enjoy the hazy loveliness of the morning with all the relish of youth and perfect health.

They rode rather slowly at first, and spoke only of the glorious day—the trees so rich in foliage; glimpses of scenery breaking upon them from the opposite shore, to which Waldon's imagination gave all the glow of poetry. Then the conversation drifted into more dangerous channels, and insidiously approaching the one subject that filled the hearts of both; for Clara Anderson had never listened to this man with deeper thrills of joyous fear than stirred in Bertha Canfield's heart that morning.

The position in itself was a happiness. There was something delightfully strange in the mere fact that she was alone with him, though her eyes fell if he looked that way, and she sometimes felt an impulse to turn her horse and flee home. Waldon marked all these emotions, and was in no haste to cheat his heart of its full enjoyment, which it found in the faint suspense which to his nature was like the prolonged taste of some rare wine in the mouth. Still his actions became more and more

lover-like. Their horses moved close together; sometimes his hand lay caressingly on the neck of her steed; sometimes he held her hand too fondly under a pretence of teaching her how to manage the curb or snaffle, and when he could find no other excuse for these caressing attentions, he leaned toward her, and many a thrilling word was poured into her ear which brought a richer color to that lovely face than the light autumn air could have given.

Still he did not speak clearly of his love. It may be that the memory of another fair girl, sitting alone by an open window suffering from wounded pride, toiling on through all the pangs of a starving heart, rose up to choke back the treason of such speech. It is impossible to say how this was, for many an aching conscience lies coiled under faces smiling like his, and who can judge of feelings so carefully hidden, even from the soul that folds them in?

But this is certain, so far as appearances went a happier pair never galloped up the hard broken banks of the Housatonic, and a brighter sun never kissed more blooming cheeks than those of Bertha Canfield.

On they went along the shore, sheltered by broken hills and richly-wooded banks; now dashing through the sunshine, then moving more slowly athwart the shadows.

The falls were beautiful rather than grand. Wild broken scenery lay around them, gray rocks, noble old pines, and rough hemlocks so ponderous and ancient that the tops were smitten and blasted with more than a hundred winters that had filled them with their snows. On the broken rocks below the falls, where the waters leaped and rioted, mosses green as emerald had crept, and ferns started up among them bending beneath a per-

petual baptism of spray. It was just a place for enjoyment; not sublime enough to take the breath away, but suggestive of grand practical ideas, and presenting glimpses of beauty which were sure to live pleasantly on the memory.

Once or twice Bertha had looked anxiously down the road during her ride, but seeing nothing of the persons she expected to encounter every minute, allowed them to pass from her mind. So for half an hour those two wandered about the fall, or sat on some rock within the very baptism of its spray, listening to words so like love that she only lifted those soft eyes once, when Waldon held her gaze fascinated till her cheeks were like carnations when the sun kisses them. Directly her eyelids drooped and she began to tremble, but not more than the leaves that just quivered around her.

Then Waldon smiled and resolved to go no further just then. With him love-making was almost a science, and he was not a man to brush the bloom from his grapes in a rude haste for eating.

But the happiest hours of life, even for lovers, are always brief, so after a while these young people were constrained to mount their horses again.

They crossed a bridge and came down the opposite bank of the river, determined to enjoy to the full its varied scenery. For several miles the road was walled in between the base of a rocky hill and the waters; sometimes it curved around some projecting rock and made a sweep up the hill, dropping down to the stream again when the obstruction was cleared.

Waldon and Bertha drew up at one of these short curves to make room for a laden wagon that came heavily up the road with a reckless driver on the board seat

in front. As the man passed he gave a vigorous crack of the heavy whip in his hand.

Waldon's horse gave a frightful leap, and, spite of his strong arm, rushed up the eminence like a thunderbolt. The animal that Bertha rode sprang after him, and both passed over the brow of the hill on a sharp run.

On the right was a broken hill wooded thickly from brow to base. On the left, between the road and the river, a precipice from forty to fifty feet high, washed at its foot by the deep water. Just at the highest and narrowest curve of the road a blasted tree shot its naked limbs partly across it. Bertha's horse was going at full speed; a sharp point of this branch grazed him and broke off with a crash; the animal grew wild, reared, and came down with a force that sent his rider clear over his head.

Bertha fell on the verge of the precipice, stunned. Waldon sprang from his horse at the danger of his life and came to the place where she lay, white and still as death. Down upon the earth he sank, and lifting her in his arms, laid her head upon his bosom. All semblance of life had left her. Her hand fell limp and pale over his shoulder. Her lips were blue and cold.

Terrified for once out of all self-control, he called upon her in an agony of real feeling to speak, to open her eyes, only to move, that he might know that she was not dead.

She did not speak or move.

Then his head drooped; his lips sought an answer of life from hers. Between these despairing kisses he passionately called her name.

In this paroxysm of distress he was unaware that a lady on horseback turned a point of the road and came

suddenly upon them. She curbed her horse with a slow pull at the bridle, and drew up. She was singularly pale, and evidently struck with wonder at what she saw. Her habit of dark green was well worn, but its folds fell around her like a queenly garment. She curbed her horse back with such slow violence that he scarcely made a noise in the road, and sat upon him like a marble thing regarding those two.

Her appearance was enough to attract attention; but the haughty curbing of her horse and the passionate glance that she cast upon that panting girl was most remarkable of all. Her cheeks could not well be paler; but as she gazed and took in the whole group, her lips grew absolutely colorless, and a thrill of wild astonishment, if nothing more, shook her from head to foot.

A cry—a groan—some indescribable sound smote Waldon, and he lifted his head.

Then his eyes met those of Clara Anderson sitting there motionless upon her horse.

For one moment he was paler than the woman he had wronged. His arms loosened around the young creature who was coming to life on his bosom; but instantly he folded her close again, hurling a smile of bitter defiance to the figure on horseback.

She smiled also; but oh! what a proud, icy smile it was! Slowly wheeling her horse, she turned back on the way from whence she had come. At the foot of the hill her horse broke into a fleet run, and the traitor she left behind saw her borne along the river's bank at a fearful speed till she disappeared entirely from sight.

Notwithstanding the hardihood which made Waldon brave among women, he was paralyzed by the sudden apparition of that girl. Though Bertha was still in his

arms, unconscious of any strange presence, he kept his face turned on the retreating horsewoman, and its features had changed to marble. Bertha felt his clasp loosen, and struggled faintly from his arms. He let her go without a protest, and stood listening till the sound of those retreating hoofs died away. Then he besought her to rest with him again, but in so strange a voice that she burst into a passion of nervous tears.

No, she would be lifted to her saddle at once. Jason had come back penitent, and she could ride very well.

He scarcely seemed to understand, but lifted her to the saddle, and with the bridle of his own horse slipped over one arm, led him down the hill.

They were in the neighborhood of the Stone Tavern now, and rode slowly toward it. When they reached this house a horse with a side saddle on it stood panting in the shade. Waldon recognized the animal at a glance, and turned his face away. Bertha had suffered so much from the shock of her fall that she could scarcely walk into the house. The landlady took her directly to a chamber, and having composed her on the bed and darkened the room, sat watching her till she fell into a quiet slumber.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VITAL QUESTIONS.

BERTHA slept. The nervous shock had passed off, and she was dreaming of a water-fall where every drop of spray broke in music as it fell to the earth; but all at once the smile left her lips, her brow contracted,

and she began to breathe heavily. The door had opened without noise; Clara Anderson came into the chamber and drew close to the bed. A pale, anxious face it was that looked down upon that sleeping girl.

Again Bertha frowned, and put up her hands vaguely, as if she felt danger nigh even in her dreams.

"Bertha! Bertha Canfield!"

Bertha started from her pillow. Her nerves were so shaken by her fall that the voice alarmed her; but she recognized Clara at once, and, though still weak and faint, held out her hand smiling.

"They told me you were hurt, Bertha. I could not go away knowing that."

"You are kind, Clara. I have been looking for you, it seems to me; but just now my head is a little bewildered. When were you not kind to me? Clara, I think I was dreaming about you just now."

"Were you, Bertha? Sometimes I wish that no dream would ever haunt me again."

Clara's voice sounded so strangely that Bertha half raised herself on the pillow, and supported her head on one arm, while Clara stood regarding her with that singular look—half tender, half questioning.

The young girl shrunk from that earnest gaze and made a nervous effort to arrange her dress, for her habit had been unbuttoned, and left the graceful whiteness of her neck exposed, while her garments were generally in picturesque derangement. Indeed, Bertha looked very lovely amid the shadows of the room, with her hair falling about her shoulders and her great eyes full of strange bewilderment.

"I hardly knew you at first, Clara," she said, wishing to atone for any deficiency of warmth in her reception.

"I am dizzy still from my fall. I did not know how nervous it has made me till now."

"Have you known the man who rescued you long?" questioned Clara, speaking low and hoarsely.

Bertha was wounded by the tone of this question. There was bitterness in it.

"Not very long," she answered coldly.

"I should think gratitude to any one a sweet feeling," pursued Clara, more as if talking to herself than addressing her companion. "Almost like love."

Bertha felt hurt. She was both embarrassed and pained without knowing why.

"You have grown very lovely since we met. Still that is only a few weeks ago," said Clara, regarding her with embarrassing interest.

Bertha turned away her face. She could not bear to be so coldly complimented by her close friend.

"You are angry," said Clara. "I was very rude. I beg your pardon. You see I am forgetting even the usual forms of social intercourse in my hermit life."

"Then you must be greatly changed in a few days; you, Clara, who were my model for everything kind and gracious."

"Was I ever that? Perhaps. But with some people harshness genders harshness, and I have been treated so roughly."

"I am very, very sorry," said Bertha, and her eyes filled with tears; "but perhaps you take little slights too earnestly. The girls never meant half they said or did at school, you know."

"The girls! Ah! their playful spite was heaven to what I have experienced since. Look at me. Am I handsome?"

There was a mocking irony in Clara's voice that troubled her friend.

"You always were the most beautiful girl in your class—I used to think in the whole school. But somehow you—there is a change."

"That is honest," answered Clara. "Then you think I have lost all the beauty for which some of the girls hated me?"

"Lost—no! But it is changed. There is something on your forehead which makes one wonder. You are pale, too, and your eyes have a light that I never saw in them at school."

"I look much older within the last month, don't I?"

"No; but stranger—less contented. I fear that you are not quite happy. This sewing must be hard work. I wonder why you chose it for a living. People don't think how sensitive a person may be about working. To me there is something grand in honorable labor of any kind."

"You are very kind—honestly kind, I think, Bertha."

"I meant to be so; indeed I did."

Again Clara returned to the one painful subject.

All at once, with an effort that seemed to hold her breath in thrall, Clara grasped Bertha's hand.

"Bertha, we have been friends—fast friends—and it will be an evil day when we are anything else. Tell me; do you care for—do you love the man who dragged you back from the precipice to-day?"

Bertha tried to wrest her hand from that fierce clasp.

"Why, Clara, what has come over you, that you ask such strange, wild questions?"

"Strange are they; wild and rude. Still, Bertha, you will remember our old friendship and answer them."

"No one need be ashamed of being loved, I dare say; but I am very reluctant to think of these things, much less talk about them, even to you, Clara."

"Still, do answer me."

"This is unkind, Miss Anderson," said Bertha, with tears in her eyes. "I cannot permit any one to question me in this way."

Clara looked at her earnestly, and a shade of gentle feeling softened the brightness of her eyes.

"Yes, it is unkind, and I have no right to annoy you," she said. "Still, if you would only be frank with me."

"I will be frank, and tell anything that one girl has a right to ask of another; but I cannot listen to such cruel questions. I am sure you did not think how strange they were."

"Oh, yes, I know," answered Clara, with a hoarse laugh; "but I have gone through with worse things so often that all this seems gentle. Harsh usage has made me rude."

"You were never harsh or pressing like this before, and I dare say did not mean it now; but I am not well yet, and so nervous," she continued, with quivering lips. "Pray forgive me if I have been impatient."

"I did not mean to wound you. There exists a reason why I have asked so awkwardly, and in so many ways, if you love that man. Would it distress you much to answer me? Frankness might save a world of pain."

Bertha's eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed angrily.

"You have no right to ask such questions, Clara Anderson, let your reasons be what they may. If you wish to talk against Mr. Waldon, or offer advice about

him, I would rather not hear a word; that would seem as if I had an interest in him."

Clara's face lighted up. It was a beautiful and instantaneous change. She was so anxious to have her fears contradicted that her heart seized on this vague speech as a denial.

Bertha remarked the sudden change in her features—a change such as few human beings are capable of—and smiled.

"Have I said anything to give you pleasure?" she murmured.

"Me! No! Why do you ask?"

"Your cheek bloomed out so suddenly, and I could just catch a shadow of the old dimples about your mouth."

"Well, you see how soon smiles spring out of kindness," she said eagerly. "Now I am going away and will not trouble you again."

"You do not trouble me," said Bertha, struggling between kind feelings and a sense of offended modesty. "If you would only talk of something else I should be very glad; only I am not strong just now."

"I see it. Forgive me," answered Clara, moving toward the door. "Sleep if you can; be happy, and sometimes think kindly of others in the world who are quite as sensitive, but less fortunate than yourself."

"I do think of them very often, and always kindly. If I am better off than some it is from no merit of my own, while there is real honor in such struggles as you are making, my dear friend."

"Well, thank you. I am going now."

"Wait a moment, please! Don't be offended, but—"

"Well. Go on."

"I would like to say something to you about Mr. Lane."

"Not now! Not now!" answered Clara. "I cannot think of him!"

"I meant no harm," pleaded Bertha. "I beg your pardon."

Again Clara swept toward the door, and paused with her hand on the latch.

"I thank you," she said; "you meant kindly. I am sorry to have disturbed you. Good-by."

CHAPTER XXIX.

STRICKEN DOWN.

CLARA ANDERSON left the Stone Tavern and was going blindly toward her horse when she felt the clatter of a pair of hoofs almost over her head, and, looking up, saw that a horse in full speed had been suddenly thrown back on his haunches and must have trodden her down but for the prompt energy of its rider.

She stood mute and helpless whilst the man leaped from his saddle and came towards her, pale and intensely agitated.

"Clara! Great Heavens, is it you? I have been miles and miles searching for you."

She did not heed the strangeness of this confession, but stood gazing upon him, pale still, but with soft relenting in her eyes.

"Are you hurt? Did the hoofs of that awkward

beast touch you? or is it only the shock?" he questioned, terror-stricken by her pallor.

"Nothing has hurt me," said the girl, looking at him in a wild, questioning way. "Nothing ever can hurt me again I think. But I am glad we have met, Edward; I was cruel to you once. It seems a long time ago; you remember we were by the willows that overhang that trout pool in the hills; I was sorry and tried to call you back, but you would not come."

"I know, I know," said Lane. "I was hurt, angry, anything but myself, but shame and sorrow for my rudeness came afterward, or I should not have been searching for you since morning as I have been."

"Searching for me—how?" said Clara, lifting both hands to her temples. "I—I came to meet Bertha—Bertha Canfield—she was a dear friend of mine once—and you have been waiting for me. I did not think any one would care to search for me."

"I would go to the ends of the earth for you, Clara."

"Would you, Edward? How strangely things get twisted! Well! well! there was something I meant to say for you."

"Let us go out of the sight of these windows," said Lane, glancing toward the tavern where he saw a woman's face peering curiously through a break in one of the red vallances that blazed across the lower sashes of the bar-room. "Come this way."

As he spoke, Lane opened a rude gate that led to a garden back of the house, and from thence to a broken hill-side covered with oak and chestnut trees.

Clara followed him without a thought, beyond the great wish of atonement that filled her aching heart. She walked by his side with quick, uneven footsteps

until they stood within the shelter of the oaks and were surrounded with broken rocks, where the gushing waters of some spring could be heard above the soft shivering of the leaves.

Here the girl paused and placed one hand on her companion's arm. Surprised by this act he looked at her earnestly. Those pale, regular features were terribly agitated. Her eyes were flushed, her lips trembled. All the haughty pride, which seemed a portion of Clara Anderson's nature, was swept away. Her features revealed great anguish, nothing more. The young man had turned as one who expects reproaches; but when he met her look his features relaxed, and for a moment his eyes rested on her with an expression of sad tenderness.

"I have wanted to speak to you so much," she said, "to beg your pardon over and over again for the unhappiness I have brought upon you."

"Have you indeed relented, Clara?" cried the young man, grasping her hand.

"Indeed I have! I did not know how terrible such agony could be. How should I? how should I?"

Her voice went out in a pathetic wail, the misery in her eyes made them black as midnight.

"Oh, Clara! is this true? Has one gleam of love for me softened your heart?"

"Love! love for you, Edward! Oh, not that, but something better, holier; such tender pity; such infinite gratitude for your love; for myself such overwhelming wretchedness—that is nothing; I am speaking only of you, Edward; it is your charity, your forgiveness, I am asking for, that is all."

"That is all!" exclaimed the young man, hoarse and wild with disappointment. "Then you have nothing

but pity to give to the man who worships the very ground you tread upon, who has made himself a madman on your account, a by-word to his friends."

"No, no," cried the girl, "you have never been that, you never will be that."

"God only knows what I shall be if you continue this course of torture; now lifting me to Heaven with a gleam of hope, then dashing me down to earth again. You, Clara Anderson, drove me into a reckless course that has brought repudiation upon me, even from my own father."

"I did, I did," cried the wretched young creature, wringing her hands.

"You taunted me with the acts of those who have been cruel to me as they were to you."

"I know it."

"You drove me by your mad pride into the very excesses with which I had been charged, innocently till then."

"O God, forgive me—I cannot forgive myself," she moaned.

"I became an outcast from my father's house, because he had been cruel to you. But for one friend I might have been an outcast from society."

"A friend—what friend?"

"I spoke of Waldon, a noble, true man, who held forth his hand to me, and when others dropped away from my unworthy fate, gave me his confidence."

The girl, white as death, shivering in all her frame, threw out her hands as if pleading for her life.

"Do not say more, you are killing me. Hear what I can plead for myself—no, no, I will not attempt that—the ground over which we must tread is too thorny. I

was harsh, cruel, very cruel, sarcastic, insulting, but this blow I have not deserved!"

"What, Clara? I have given none."

"No, no, I do not complain, but you have not yet fathomed the depths of misery that underlie some lives. I have been unjust, cruel, wicked; but what do you know of real humiliation! No one but a woman can feel that!"

Lane seized the two hands she had clasped in her anguish and held—nay, wrung them, till at another time she must have cried out with the pain. His voice was low and broken; tears stood in his eyes.

"Oh, Clara, my poor Clara, do not wound yourself in this dreadful manner. Have mercy on yourself and me."

"Not mercy for myself, but humiliation. Ah, do not fear that I shall not be punished for the havoc my pride has made, for the hardness of a heart that could not love you, cannot love you."

"Cannot love me! Then why are we here?"

"That I might win your forgiveness, and beseech you to be my friend, Edward."

"Friend! no, a thousand times no! Clara Anderson, when I offer love you shall not fling back ashes. When I want a friend he is in yonder, ready even in the first glow of his own happiness to give me both sympathy and help."

"You mean—you mean—"

She could not finish the question; the words died on her lips.

"I mean that Waldon does not find your friend Bertha ice-cold as you have been to me."

His words reached that unhappy girl's heart like a

death-shot; without a word or a sign she fell to the earth.

The young man sunk to his knees beside her, white as she was, trembling, as she had ceased to do.

"God help me! God forgive me! In my rash anger I have cast her off forever and ever," he moaned. "What did I say, that my words should smite her down like the blow of a sword? I cannot remember! I cannot remember! terrible it must have been to hurt her so! Is she dead? Is she dead?"

Urged to action by this awful doubt he ran to a spring that flowed from under a neighboring rock, gathered some water in his hands and dashed it over her face. She did not move or give a sign of life. Wild with terror he ran toward the house.

But the water had its slow effect. He had scarcely reached the tavern when Clara moved and opened her eyes—a moment she lay upon the grass weak and confused. Then stung to life by a recollection of what had been revealed to her on that spot, she struggled to her feet and pressing both hands to her temples moved away with a step so painfully unsteady, that but for the undergrowth to which she caught from time to time the poor girl must have fallen. She had scarcely passed out of sight when young Lane came hurriedly up the hill carrying a tumblerful of wine, which in his unsteady haste dashed over his hands. When he saw the place empty where he had left Clara the glass dropped from his hold, and sitting down upon a fragment of rock, he covered his face and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GATHERING SCANDAL.

CLARA ANDERSON went slowly across the garden, staggering as she walked. With difficulty she mounted her horse in the shed where he had been left, and rode away. She had no knowledge of looking behind her, nor thought where she was going, but held the bridle loosely in her hand and reeled to and fro in the saddle, as if each motion must fling her under the animal's hoofs to be trampled on.

She reached home at last, but instead of leaping from her saddle with the fearless grace usual to her, drew her horse close up to the board fence, and holding to that let herself to the ground, a hopeless, broken-hearted girl.

For weeks no one saw her. Mrs. Vose went out for her work and carried it home again. It was always finished in time, for Clara, in spite of her misery, retained a single feeling, her grandmother must not starve, so she worked on like an automaton with dreary faithfulness. After a while she came out of this dead state and grew so nervously irritable that the closing of a door made her cry out. The doctor came, and a second time prescribed wholesome diet and exercise on horseback. But she uttered a cry of anguish when this was mentioned. The remembrance of her last ride came upon her with such force. "Riding hurt her," she said; "nothing would ever tempt her to try it again. Exercise! No; she would never go out of doors again if she could help it."

Thus a few weeks went on heavy as death to the

wretched girl. To say that she was weary of life would be little: she absolutely yearned to die; smitten to the earth in her love, and stung so entirely in her pride, she was ashamed to live.

But they would not let her rest quietly even in this miserable isolation. Judge Lane was well informed regarding his son, and could not feel quite safe when he was so near the neighborhood of this enthralling girl, whose beauty and high spirit had made a singular impression upon himself. While he kept strict watch upon the young man, his neighbors were equally vigilant regarding Clara Anderson. That solitary horseback ride was a subject of deep solicitude: they knew that she had taken the road to the toll-bridge, and had been watched galloping up the river road; whether she crossed into the town, where Edward was staying, or not, was a question they were for some time unable to solve.

But when the malice or curiosity of a country neighborhood is aroused, the movements of no one person can remain a secret forever. It so happened that the landlady at the Stone Tavern sometimes went to meeting on the other side of the Housatonic, where she had friends who loved a little gossip between the sermons, and were very willing to extend their field of observation whenever the chance was afforded them.

The landlady was by no means a malicious woman, but she loved to carry a little news back and forth as well as her neighbors, and, enjoying a capital post of observation, she always had something of interest to chat about.

Did she know Clara Anderson by sight? Well, she rather thought so. Why one day that girl came galloping up the river road with her horse all in a foam, and riding right under the tavern shed, she jumped off, came

into the house and sat down in the out-room without saying a word to anybody, good or bad, but there she sat, looking out of the window with eyes as bright as a wild-cat's. About half an hour after, a rich gentleman, who often boarded at her house in the summer, came with Miss Bertha Canfield from the Mill Bridge who had been on a horseback ride to the falls; she had been thrown from her horse and was frightened half to death, so went up-stairs to lie down, and in the bustle everybody forgot Clara Anderson. But the help saw her creeping about the chambers, as if in search of some one. Then after a while the landlady herself saw the brazen creature side by side with young Lane, going up the hill back of her garden, and talking so earnestly that no one could have helped noticing it. She was busy getting dinner for the party and should not have thought much about it, but when she went to the bar to get a drop of brandy for the pudding sauce young Lane came in, looking all sorts of ways, and pouring out a whole tumblerful of wine carried that up the side hill; for she watched him herself till the great butternut tree hid him from sight.

Was that all? Oh, no; by no manner of means. Before the pudding sauce was ready she saw that girl cross the end of her garden, coming back all by herself, walking so unsteadily that it was a shame to behold, and with her own eyes she watched her ride down the road, when she expected every moment to see her tumble under the horse's feet.

If anybody doubted what she said, that person might ask Miss Bertha Canfield, who got up from her bed and stood at the window when Clara rode away, just reeling on her saddle. Mrs. Crane never should forget to her dying day the look that girl gave to the young lady.

She had seen such looks in the eyes of a rabbit which her boys caught in a sweet-apple trap once, and was going to kill for a pot-pie, but never anywhere else—never.

Miss Canfield seemed to think it strange, and had tears in her eyes when she turned away, and seemed down-hearted as could be when she started off for home. The young lady did not come down to dinner, which was a great disappointment, for she had roasted a lovely pullet just for her. But she really believed young Lane was glad of it, for he looked wild as a nighthawk, and called for wine, and finally brandy, till the elder gentleman interfered, and took him away from the table—that was all she knew about Clara Anderson or wanted to know. Other people might fancy such doings, but she was the mother of six children, besides two that were dead, and had no idea of putting up with them.

There is no scandal so penetrating as that which is founded on unexplained facts.

Mrs. Crane had an eager audience between sermons that holy Sabbath day, and knowing that she spoke the truth, enjoyed the sensation she was creating with infinite zest.

So that harmless gossip, handed from mouth to mouth within the shadow of the church, grew into a mighty slander by a swift exchange of malice and garrulous imbecility, and was not long in doing its unholy work.

During the next week the malicious reports which had before been in circulation regarding young Lane's attentions to that "Anderson girl" increased in virulence, and became so general that her name was fairly a byword in the neighborhood.

Of course neither Clara nor her grandmother had any idea of the prevalence of these tales; the person slan-

dered is always the last to learn that which is intended to blast both reputation and peace. Many of the neighbors knew that she was out of favor with the great magnate of the town, but had liked her, spite of the quiet exclusiveness that rejected patronage, but no one had ever heard a whisper of the things which were now subjects of familiar and constant conversation throughout the whole place.

Thus the bane of village life spread and grew like nightshade, till it crept up to the very threshold of that old house and left its poison there.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BERTHA'S FIRST BALL.

"MOTHER, will that do?"

Bertha Canfield came into her mother's room fresh from the most elaborate toilet she had ever made in her life. Her dress of amber-colored silk, softened and subdued by an over-cloud of tulle, swept the floor with the rustle of ripe wheat ears. Scarlet cactus flowers burned in her hair, and looped back the tulle over-dress. A necklace of large coral beads fell low upon her bosom, and coral buttons fastened her cream-colored gloves. She came into the room blushing with a shy consciousness of beauty, half ashamed of her own glowing delight.

"Will it do, child?" repeated the mother, and, for once, her features brightened all over. "Come and kiss me, darling! Who will dare to say that you are not beautiful?"

"Am I really, really, mother?"

"Do you care so much about it, Bertha? If so, I am foolish and wrong to say yes."

"I wonder if any one else will think so? Do I look as if it were my first party? Isn't it strange, mother, that people should have taken such a fancy to me all at once? Monday night, at the opera, with Mrs. Forbes and her brother; then this invitation. Wasn't it good of Mrs. Farnsworth to search me out, and get madame to come here and introduce her? She had heard me sing, and had a fancy that my voice would match hers, which is splendid, mother; so took all that pains to know us. Isn't it singular?"

Bertha sat down at her mother's feet as she said all this, and half buried the gentle lady in an amber cloud.

"Isn't it all like fairy work?" she added, holding up her lips to be kissed.

A delicate hand was laid on that white shoulder, and a soft kiss touched the red mouth offered for it. The very warmth and brilliancy of that young creature seemed to startle the mother.

"It is all like fairy-land," she said. "Sometimes I cannot realize that you are really mine, Bertha."

"Everything seems like fairy-work since we came back to New York, I think," said Bertha, blushing without seeming cause. "This invitation to Mrs. Farnsworth's party among the rest. How did it happen, I wonder, that she took the trouble to call on us? Then Mrs. Boyd—was ever any one so kind? We might have been the intimate friends of her family all our lives. I only wish they would be half as generous to Clara Anderson, poor girl. Why do they hate her so, I wonder?"

"Judge Lane was always a proud man," said Mrs. Canfield, thoughtfully; "but he may come round in time now that his son is behaving so well."

"I fear not, mamma. Mrs. Forbes will not hear Clara's name mentioned. She forbids her brother to speak of it in her presence."

"Have you written to Clara explaining why we came back to the city so suddenly, and were obliged to send for Lydia without warning?"

"Oh, yes, mamma, I wrote all about that by the man who went after Lydia."

"What did she say in her answer?"

"She did not send a line."

"Nor a message?"

"No. I thought it very strange; but Clara has been strange ever since that day when the bridge went down."

Mrs. Canfield shuddered.

"No wonder, no wonder," she said, whispering out the words.

"You cannot think how strangely she acted that day when we failed to meet at the falls. She looked like death, if anything dead could have such eyes."

"She was frightened by your fall, I suppose, Bertha?"

"No, it could not have been that. I did not feel the shock half so much myself. She questioned me as if I had done her some wrong."

"Perhaps she thought you had taken a great liberty in bringing her face to face with a man she had once rejected?"

"No, mamma, it was not that. Clara did not know that Mr. Lane was in search of her till after she left me. Still she must be angry about something, or my note would have been answered."

"She may feel hurt because we sent for Lydia in such haste," said Mrs. Canfield. "Indeed I have noticed that the girl herself seems more restless than usual. Two or three times she has asked if we have heard from Miss Clara, as if she, too, felt that her silence was remarkable."

"Lydia may know why she acts so strangely. Would there be any harm in asking her?" replied Bertha, seizing eagerly on the suggestion.

Before Mrs. Canfield could reply, Lydia pushed the door open, and came into the chamber where this conversation was held.

"Oh, my! Isn't that scrumptious?" cried the girl, walking around Bertha and examining her dress. "Silk as yeller as if it was wove out of wet butter-cups, cobwebs hanging round yer arms, and that hot-red flower in your hair! Why, Miss Bertha, the Queen of Shebee would just have to step out if she was here! Queens are nothing to that!"

Bertha laughed, and allowed the girl to spread out the silken length of her train, while she watched the process over her shoulder with smiling eyes.

"You think the dress pretty then?" she said.

"The dress? Well, I never saw anything like it in my whole life!"

"So you only praise the dress, Lydia?" said Mrs. Canfield, jealous as mothers will be that the beauty of her child had been overlooked.

"I never saw anything that could come up to it before—but as to her face and all the rest of it—well, I have!"

A queer, sad expression came over the girl's face as she said this, and she turned her head away.

"You are thinking of Miss Clara?" said Bertha,

with a gentle touch of sympathy. "Yes, Lydia, she is far handsomer."

"Handsome! Her face is enough to break one's heart. Oh, my! what a sorrowful angel she will make."

"I hope it will be a long time first," said Mrs. Canfield, forgetting to be jealous that any one could be deemed more beautiful than her child.

Lydia shook her head.

"I don't know—I don't know."

"Is Miss Clara ill?" questioned the lady, seriously interested.

"I reckon she never feels like doing much in that old house," answered the girl; "but what of her? she isn't going to the party, and Miss Bertha is. There's a ring at the door."

Down the girl went, leaping half-way down the stairs, and completing her descent with a slide on the balusters. In less than a minute she came back with a small bouquet of rose-buds in her hand, richly red, and, as it seemed, only kept from bursting into bloom by the moss that fluttered around them.

"It isn't the carriage—only this!" she said, thrusting the bouquet into Bertha's hand, under a volley of cross glances at the mother, intended to draw off that lady's attention until a folded paper attached to the flowers was properly disposed of. "But you had better be on hand down in the parlor. High-furluten ladies don't like to be kept waiting, if I know anything about 'em."

Bertha fastened the rose-buds among the lace over her bosom, blushing and trembling: she had no wish to deceive her mother; but the note, held tightly in her hand, was too precious for anything but secrecy.

"Who could have sent them?" questioned Mrs. Can-

field, turning faint as the odor of the roses floated by her, for she was delicately sensitive to perfumes.

"Ah, yes, who indeed?" said Bertha, snatching up her fan and feeling like a guilty wretch for having kept the note out of her mother's sight till the last moment, when she huddled it under the lace of her handkerchief, and floated away like a sunset cloud, leaving a soft fragrance behind her.

Mrs. Canfield followed the fair vision with her eyes till it disappeared. Then she lay back wearily in her chair.

"Now is the time of my peril," she thought. "This very night she may take the first step that leads her from me. Ah, me, where shall I find strength to meet all that may come?"

"She's bound to take the shine off any girl in the crowd, she is. Oh, marm, isn't she a beauty?"

Tears were swelling under the mother's closed eyelids. Lydia saw them, and stole out of the room a little conscience-stricken, and went down-stairs. No one in that house ever attempted to restrict the girl, so she passed directly into the parlor where Bertha stood under the chandelier reading the note.

"Into her own hands it was," said the girl, with a look, which was distorted into something grotesque and comical by the habitual squint of her eyes, "and into her hands it is; but not to cheat her own mother in earnest—no, not for all the handsome fellows with cockades on their hats that ever was born."

"Hush! hush!" said Bertha, putting the girl back with her hand without lifting her eyes from the sheet of note paper, covered with unequal lines, at which the little girl rubbed her hands gleefully, and cried out:

"My! how ragged the lines are, and what a grist on 'em!"

"Hush! hush!"

Lydia was more than silent in an instant. That creamy-white paper, the delicately shaded monogram, the faint perfume, struck her dumb. She had seen exactly such paper, such uneven writing before.

"Miss Bertha! Miss Bertha!" she said, in a spasm of distress. "Don't read it! don't read it! There is poison in the paper, rank poison, the essence of henbane. Give it to me, and let me send it back where it came from."

Bertha tore her eyes from the paper, with a sigh, and turned upon the girl.

"Go away, Lydia; how can you be so rude?"

"Just one word; is them ragged lines poetry?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Is there any name to it?"

"No—no!"

"Miss Bertha, will you let me look at it close, just once?"

"There, there; now go away!"

Lydia bent her cross-eyes close down to the paper, scanned it keenly a moment, then lifted her appealing face to the young creature who held it.

"Miss Bertha, I say again and again it is poison; snakes ain't more so."

"Foolish girl. There, there, you shall not touch it again. Go up to mamma, she will be lonesome."

"Let me take that paper—she ought to read it. Let me take it to her, and I will. You and I have no business to be a cheating of her."

"Not now, Lydia; not now; I have not read it myself."

"But you will give it to her?"

"What is it to you, child?"

"A good deal; when I took it from that fellow with the cockade, and says to him: Peraps there'll be an answer, and peraps there won't: who knows, without reading? and after that sneaked the thing into your hand without winking. In course, it's a good deal to me."

"Well, go away, Lydia, and I promise that mamma shall see it at the proper time."

"That's a promise," said Lydia, fluttering out of the room like a moth.

Bertha drew a deep breath, and fell to perusing her treasure again. It was a poem such as few men ever write in a lifetime—delicate, full of sensitive thought, with an underswell of passionate feeling, shadowed but not expressed. This poem, written that very day, was addressed to herself. Who could have written it? Who *could* have written it?

The girl knew well enough in her heart of hearts; but she chose to question her own sweet consciousness.

Does love ever come to a human heart, as an arrow flies, without reason and without warning? Who can answer? This much is certain: Bertha Canfield threw herself down, with her face buried on the cushions of a sofa, after she had read this poem, and murmured over whole lines of poetry, in a voice that was soft and mellow as the summer wind which ripens our peaches.

Before that carriage drove up which was to bear her to the party, Bertha Canfield had the poem by heart, and she knew, in the depths of that heart, who wrote it.

God help her!

A carriage stopped in front of the house; a footman ran up the steps, but before a servant could answer the bell, Bertha appeared.

Out from the carriage window looked forth a bright dark face, crowned with purplish-black hair, in which diamonds gleamed like stars, and the voice of Mrs. Forbes called out gayly, as her brother was mounting the steps to meet Bertha,

"I am glad you are ready, for we are late."

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNDER THE WILLOW.

MRS. FARNSWORTH lived sufficiently out of New York to call her home a "villa," and the acre or two that surrounded it "grounds." Both the house and all its surroundings were this night brilliantly illuminated. A huge weeping-willow, near the front entrance, was so strung and laden with tiny and many-tinted lamps, that it seemed a mighty fountain of leaves, dropping jewels over a marble basin filled by a jet of sparkling water which was garlanded with Ethiopian lilies, noble ferns, and entangling passion-flowers. Two or three forest maples, rich in crimson and golden foliage, were sufficiently illuminated to throw out all their gorgeous colors, and the velvet grass beneath gave forth its richest noonday green.

Along the open verandas blossoming vines flung their gorgeous draperies, and wound up the slender columns in garlands, thickly starred with lights. Crimson carpets lined the walks; all the French windows were thrown open; musicians, hidden among the trees, made the foliage tremble with their sweet notes; and in-doors a band sent its ringing melodies through all the rooms.

To Bertha this was enchantment. She could scarcely restrain the exclamations of wonder and delight that sprung to her lips at every turn. She could hardly realize that the groups of people moving to-and-fro in the grounds and through the verandas were human beings.

As she stood with her chaperon, looking at the great drooping-willow, a man came out from under its branches. She gave a little cry of surprise, and gathered up the folds of her opera cloak, that he might not see that cluster of moss-roses in her bosom. To her they seemed magical like everything else. The appearance of this man was more marvellous to her than all the rest.

"Why, Waldon, you are really here!" said young Lane, who had led Bertha and his sister to the fountain, knowing well the surprise that was in wait for them. "Prompt as other people for once."

"On some occasions Waldon can be punctual enough; but I really did not expect to find him here before midnight, when stars are—or always ought to be—brightest," said Mrs. Forbes, holding out her hand. "At any rate, we shall be well attended now."

"It is time that we present ourselves," said Lane, giving his arm to Mrs. Forbes in the magnanimity of his friendship, which she accepted with some hesitation, and evident surprise.

"Will you take charge of Miss Canfield, Waldon, while we find our way to Mrs. Farnsworth? She must be in the east drawing-room, I fancy," said Lane.

The next instant Bertha felt her arm drawn within that of Waldon, and his voice was in her ear, low and alluring.

"At last—at last we meet again!"

She made an effort to answer him, but could not.

"You will not speak to me?"

His head was bent toward her. She almost felt his breath on her cheek.

"You will not say that this meeting gives you pleasure?"

"Yes, I can say that. But the surprise is so great."

The white cloak fell back as she said this, and Waldon saw his moss-roses in her bosom. The smile that flashed athwart his face was bright as a meteor.

"I hoped that you would wear it," he said.

"I did not know—I was not sure—" she whispered, coloring painfully.

"Was not sure who sent it? Would you have given it a place closer to your heart if you had been certain?"

"Perhaps I should not have ventured to wear it at all," she said, recovering herself.

Waldon was annoyed. Always eager in his wooing, he was satisfied with nothing less than a response more prompt than any modest woman would have given.

They were entering the house now, and Bertha saw that her companion was known to every one—that the gay throng gave place, and showered both greetings and compliments upon him, as he led her toward the hostess.

A glance of quick intelligence shot from the fine black eyes of the hostess, and met an answering smile from Waldon. The two certainly understood each other. Perhaps Mrs. Forbes comprehended this, for a smile crossed her lips as she came up to give her greeting.

"You were kind," the hostess said, extending her delicately gloved hand, "to suggest that I should send an invitation to this lovely girl, who is sure to be a belle to-night. But I begin to fancy that it was not altogether your idea."

"No," answered Mrs. Forbes, blandly; "my brother suggested it. I have never seen him so much impressed."

"Ah! I begin to understand. Her brother is the bosom friend of Waldon," muttered the lady, turning to receive new guests as they crowded up. "This poor girl is doomed, like the rest!"

A pleasant doom it certainly was, so far, to Bertha Canfield, who moved through the crowd in her superb beauty, leaning on the arm of a man whose popularity seemed universal—a man of magnificent presence, whose manner and speech inspired the man or woman he addressed with a feeling of personal exaltation. To her inexperience all this was paradise.

There was dancing in the large drawing-room, from which the music sent out a ringing challenge. A group stood near the door, indulging in such low laughter, and half-whispered words, as well-bred people sometimes prefer to the waltz or quadrille.

Waldon joined them, and began to talk. When he deigned to converse, it was the fashion to listen. That night he was unusually brilliant, and the crowd increased around him, some to listen, and others to gaze on the lovely young creature who rested on his arm, and whom he was fast making the idol of the hour.

Waldon saw all this with a glow of triumph, and frequently addressed Bertha in his brilliant talk, when a flash of poetry was sure to enrich it. But, spite of all this, Bertha's heart leaped to the music, and her foot beat time upon the marble of the vestibule. It was her first ball, remember, and she loved dancing better than poetry—for which we, who have partaken of the bewitching sin, need not blame her.

Waldon saw this, and acted upon it.

"Would you like to dance?" he said, in a low, tender voice, as if he were asking her to love him.

"Would I like it?" she answered, as if doubt on that subject were impossible. "Oh, yes!"

His arm stole gently around her waist. Her hand rested on his shoulder. The next instant they were treading time to the music, his eyes looking into hers, his breath floating across her face.

More than one couple retired from the floor, and stood gazing on these two. The crowd at the entrance gathered closer.

When Waldon danced it always created a sensation, for his partner was sure to be selected from the most brilliant or beautiful women of the occasion.

For a minute or so they had the floor entirely. Then Waldon drew his partner to a window, where she stood flushed and smiling; the flowers that lay glowing in the lace on her bosom scarcely trembled to her rising breath. The health and strength of that young creature were so perfect that no exercise disturbed her.

"I never enter round dances with any woman I do not desire to love me," said Waldon, in a low voice.

Bertha looked up suddenly. Then her thick eyelashes drooped, and her face brightened.

"And those who love me," continued this man, in his subtle audacity, "never care to dance them with any other person."

The glow upon Bertha's face deepened. This assumption of authority offended her. Did he hope to make her his slave without the trouble of winning consent like other men?

Waldon saw that rebellious spirit lift the lashes from

her eyes, and gloried in it. The conquest of a tame nature had no excitement in it for him.

"You think me precipitate," he said, with an air of apology; "but feelings are not measured by time, and it is weeks since we met. I have seen you daily since you came to the city."

Bertha looked at him in astonishment.

"Your light has not been extinguished once since then that I have not seen it go out."

"You!"

"Every morning I have laid flowers upon your threshold with my own hands."

"It was you then. I could not tell."

Bertha blushed guiltily, for she had known in her heart who the flowers came from all the time.

"So that our acquaintance dates from the hour I first saw you on the wharf at New Haven—and that is more than the lifetime of ordinary people."

"But I scarcely know more than your name, and that only through Mr. Lane."

"My name?" answered Waldon, reddening. "Have you heard it for the first time from him?"

"No," she said. "I have seen it. I have read—"

The dusky cloud cleared away from his face; the smile that most women found irresistible was bent upon her.

"When we have read a man's thoughts, and partaken of all that is best in his nature, can it be said that he is a stranger?"

"But my name had no significance."

"You forget that I saw you first with tears in those eyes—a child in your grief; in all things else a perfect woman."

The expression of his face, so intense, so searching, filled her with shrinking embarrassment. She would not lift her eyes; the guiltiness of concealed emotion burned on her cheeks.

Waldon pushed the French window open, and led her on to a balcony which had steps descending to the grounds. They walked toward the willow, under which that fountain sent its silver arrows up through the leaves, which rained them back again in diamond drops. All around, this tree threw out rays of light; directly under it slept deep shadows. They stood by the fountain, in which the lamps were reflected like shattered stars.

All at once the man dropped Bertha's hand, which rested on his arm.

"This is torture!" he said, with sudden passion. "You chill me with talk of the time in which we have known each other. This is not the return generous women give to great admiration!"

Bertha drew back. Did this man intend to wrest the heart from her bosom before she understood it herself? His reproaches startled her womanhood into self-protection.

"Let us go to the house," she said, with dignity. "People will think it strange to see us here alone."

"As you please. I cannot plead with a dumb heart!"

Waldon's voice was cold and haughty. He offered his arm, and led Bertha forth to the light, when he saw that her eyes were full of tears, but did not seem to regard it.

On the veranda they met Mrs. Forbes, with her brother, coming in search of them. The lady was pale, the young gentleman restive at being kept so long from the dance.

"The drawing-room was so close," she said, "and I longed to breathe the fresh air."

"And I longed to dance," said Lane, almost rudely.

"That is Miss Canfield's passion," answered Waldon. "Perhaps she will honor you while I take a turn in the grounds with Mrs. Forbes."

Bertha took Lane's arm. Waldon watched keenly to see if she would dance. In a moment she was whirling past one of the windows, her beautiful head lifted with the air of a queen. For once, Waldon felt that he had carried his audacity too far.

Waldon took a turn through the grounds with Mrs. Forbes, who seemed restless and ill at ease, while he was burning with wounded vanity.

"So this poor girl is to be another of your victims," she said, with dull bitterness, "and I have been made an instrument to draw her across your path. I might have been spared this!"

Waldon laughed, and was ready at once to meet bitterness with gall.

"As this is the only way left by which you can give me pleasure, it seems hard that I am to be reproached for it; especially after setting your brother on his feet again."

"At any rate," answered the lady, with a hysterical laugh, "this young lady has not fallen at your feet with the first summons."

"Like some others we could mention," retorted the man, with a cruel smile.

Mrs. Forbes made no answer, but bit her lips in silence till the blood came and tinged the edges of her white teeth.

"There! there! I have no wish to carry this scene too far. Forbes is coming yonder, and he might think it strange, for he is a man of most sensitive delicacy."

"He is a noble, good man!" cried the lady, stung by words that seemed to have a double meaning.

"Have I not just said he was a man of supreme delicacy? And such taste! I have letters which I am sure he would take pleasure in reading—literary treasures that I can never part with."

The delicate fingers resting on this man's arm clutched it like the talons of a bird. He winced a little, for even this light thrill of pain amazed him. He could inflict agony without a pang, but shrunk from it with the cowardice of a child.

"Fiend!" muttered the lady, under her breath; then she spoke aloud, with more composure: "Take me to my husband. He will ride home with us and leave Miss Canfield in safety with her mother."

Bertha Canfield had just paused in the dance, which Waldon had indirectly forbidden to her, and was now the centre of attraction in that brilliant throng.

He saw this with angry amazement. Had this young creature, whose very presence in society had been brought about by his management, the talent and the courage to stand alone? To be thus ignored by the woman he chose to distinguish was a new experience. Thus stung in his vanity, he watched her closely, while he made himself the life of a brilliant circle.

Her face grew sad; now and then she turned it wistfully toward that portion of the room in which he was standing, and this half appeased his resentment.

Had Bertha Canfield been the most practised coquette on earth, she could not have inspired a man like Waldon to keener pursuit than her prompt independence, which proved that his wishes were not omnipotent, had done. But he did not address her again that evening, and she went home miserable.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PIOUS FRAUD.

EVER since the return of Mrs. Canfield to her home in New York, Lydia had been surprised to find a bouquet of newly cut flowers just within the door each morning. Asking no questions, and making no comments in basement or parlor, the girl had gloried in placing these trophies upon the pillow of her young mistress before she was awake in the morning.

At first Bertha had shyly questioned her little maid about these flowers, but with a consciousness all the time that she could account for them better than the girl herself. Indeed Lydia could give her no information except that each day, just after the outer doors were unlocked, these flowers were left on the marble floor of the vestibule by some person who was sure to depart before any one had time to see him.

Of course Lydia knew that such flowers could be intended for no one but Miss Bertha and carried them up accordingly.

This was all the girl had to tell. She had been delighted with these attentions to her young lady, and proud of the confidential relations they had established, until that bouquet of moss roses, and the poem in the handwriting of a man who had brought so much misery into another house had alarmed her. Then in the wrath of her warm heart she resolved to trample the next flowers that came deep into the mud of the gutter, and watch over her young mistress vigilantly if that lordly man ever presented himself at the door.

But Lydia watched in vain. She gathered no flowers from the vestibule floor, at early morning, during the week after Bertha's first ball, but kept her eyes, with their searching cross-glances, on the young mistress, and saw that she drooped.

Then she began to relent, and fell to mourning over the sadness which was falling on this other young heart, and, spite of the danger, she would gladly have found the vestibule choked up with flowers rather than encounter the wistful look which Bertha cast on her when she opened her bedroom door in the morning.

One day, struck with compassion by that expectant look, the girl rifled her tin bank of all its pennies, ran to a flower stand in Broadway, while Bertha was languidly dressing herself, and came back carrying a cluster of moss rose-buds and violets, which she had taken apart and rearranged on her way home, like those she had studied of late.

When Bertha saw these flowers, the shining masses of hair she was braiding fell down half way to the floor, and, covered with this burnished mantle, she ran toward the girl, took the blossoms from her, and, turning away, covered them with kisses, while she pretended to be inhaling their perfume.

Lydia saw this, and, marking the radiance of that glowing face, began to mourn that she had not another bank to break, and was going away very thoughtful.

Bertha called her back.

"Where did you find these? And when?" she questioned, while her lips parted with involuntary smiles.

"At the door, miss—just like they came always."

"Not early?"

"Yes, marm—very early."

"Strange!" said Bertha. "I looked out at daybreak—for I did not sleep well—and saw nothing."

"Oh, that was *too* early, miss! He never comes like that."

"But I sat at the window a long time—the air was so pure—and never lost sight of the door at all."

Lydia's eyes became restless, and shot glances across each other like rival archers.

"It might be later than I thought—who knows? They was just laid down softly in the vestibule, and I didn't look at the clock."

Bertha was too happy for much cross-questioning, and Lydia seemed restless to be gone.

"You have been a good girl, Lydia—so kind to mamma. I haven't given you anything in a long time. Here is some money—or, if you like it better, take one of my neck ribbons."

"I'll take the money, please!" cried Lydia, seizing upon the finances with the greed of a "ring-leader." "It'll be more useful all round."

Bertha half emptied her pretty portemonnaie into Lydia's hand. She was in haste to be alone with her flowers.

"This will settle for two more," muttered Lydia, darting a pleasant cross-fire of glances into her hand as she went down the stairs; "for that girl in Broadway needn't expect me to pay profit, because I won't."

Bertha laid her flowers upon the dressing-table, and stooped forward to kiss away their perfume, as she twisted all that rich mass of hair into braids, bands, and curls, arranging them on her head helmet-shaped. Then she filled a vase with water, and put their stems tenderly into the crystal liquid, wishing they could live forever.

How good this man was to forgive her haughty independence! No wonder he thought she would not care to dance with another, having once been his choice and received the homage of words that might have been addressed to an empress! How superior he was to the crowd, which seemed born to exalt him by the contrast! Gifted with rare genius and such superb manliness, he had selected her from all that throng of lovely women, and lifted her almost to a level with himself! How had she requited all this noble kindness? By doing the only thing he had suggested that she should avoid!

These thoughts had filled Bertha's heart with self-reproach every hour since the ball. Now they came upon her with double force. She forgot that Waldon had attempted both to win and force her into a confession of love before he had made one himself; she forgot everything except that this man was the most splendid creature she had ever seen, and that he still thought of her.

Bertha went down-stairs that morning radiant. Mrs. Canfield wondered at the change; for all that week the girl had been fitful as a bird whose nest is threatened, and settled at nothing. Sometimes she would make a dash at the piano, fill the house with a flood of music, and break off suddenly, with her hands on the keys, lost in thought; sometimes she would sit by the window, with a wistful, far-away look, and start, as if from a dream, when any one spoke to her.

The elder lady saw all this, and remembering her own wayward girlhood, said in her heart:

"It is only the restlessness of youth. This party has unsettled my child. It is but natural."

But Lydia, who was sharp as steel and quick as light-

ning, understood all these signs better. She had not carried flowers up to Bertha's chamber so often without asking mental questions, and these questions she had solved by rising early and watching in the area.

Now Lydia spent all her leisure time in reading certain cheap novels that a literary shoemaker, who had cast favorable eyes on the rather good-looking cook, brought into the basement, and from this source gained an impression of the qualities requisite for a heroine of romance. Of course, such persons were never described as taking a youngish and rather nervous mother into confidence; that, as Lydia justly reasoned, would be likely to break up the story at once; and such heroines usually had faithful attendants, who were ready to be torn to pieces by wild horses rather than betray secrets. No rampant steeds appeared in this case, but Lydia was not the less silent on that account. She was not only faithful but inventive, and out of all this came that generous fraud about the bouquet which had sent Bertha down to her mother, that morning, happy as a humming bird with his bill in the white heart of a jessamine flower.

Most young ladies have a little romance of the heart about nightfall, even in a great city. There is something in the soft purple shadows that settle upon the tiny gardens, linked together and lined out by snow-white fences, that give vines and blossoms breathing space between our houses, which take a faint shadow of nature, and suggest sadness.

Bertha had drawn aside her snow-white window curtains, and was looking out on a scene like this, where Virginia creepers, curtaining the back doors, blazed like a red sunset, while the last purple clusters hung amid

the crisp leaves of the grape-vines, and many-tinted chrysanthemums were gathered in stocks of dusky leaves and starry blossoms in the hardy richness of late autumn. She had been expecting something all day—something of which that tuft of flowers had been as a rosy dawn; but night was coming on, and she stood there alone, sad and disheartened.

All at once some one pulled at her dress, and before she could turn, the voice of Lydia came over her shoulder in a breathless whisper:

"He's come—I tell you he's come!"

"Who—who?"

"Him—that's his name, he told me to give it to you. I'd rather die than have you take it; but there it is!"

Bertha took the card, and read it by the waning light—"Russell Waldon."

"Where is he—where is mamma?" cried Bertha, trying to strike a match, and failing from a woful unsteadiness of the hand. "Do look, Lydia, and tell me if my hair is all right! Oh, mercy! I wish you had given me a little more time—you have not told me where my mother is?"

"Gone to church with the lady next door—lecture I mean, and for my part I'm glad of it. I don't want to see her fainting."

Bertha looked as if she were glad, too.

"In the parlor, gas a-blazing—I saw to that. Handsome as a picture of General Scott, he is, and loves to kill folks just as much. Don't let him read to you now, Miss Bertha, don't!"

Away went Lydia down the back-stairs, and Bertha swept her rustling draperies in an opposite direction, but paused in the hall, with one hand on her heart, gathering courage.

How magnificently the man's face lighted up when Bertha appeared. He came toward her, extending one hand with the most winning frankness; but searched each expression of her features keenly all the time.

She gave him her hand; he hesitated a moment, then lifted it to his lips, and left a burning spot upon its whiteness, and a flood of color on her face.

"Forgive me if I could not stay from you longer," he said.

The girl had thought of fifty things that she would say to this man, if he ever gave her a chance; but now all the words she had bremeditated seemed broken up into delicious sighs.

"I hope this is not an unpardonable intrusion," he added, well pleased by her blushing silence.

"An intrusion!" she replied, at last; "that is impossible. Surely you cannot doubt a welcome anywhere!"

"Ah, but here I crave something more than a welcome!"

Bertha felt her heart beat loudly. Why was her visitor always attempting to commit her by some expression of interest?

Her bewilderment amused him. He asked no better proof of interest than the color in her cheek, which was warm and red as a peach in the noonday sun. With easy grace he swerved from the subject that embarrassed her, and spoke of the ball; from that he turned to some book she was reading, fastening her interest by his keen appreciation of the author, adding grander ideas of his own which startled her with their originality. As her brain kindled, the throbbing at her heart grew less. She felt almost as if this man were a being to demand worship, but give nothing in return. Her own fancy found

all its native brightness, and met his wit as flint strikes steel; but she was quite unconscious that her share in the conversation was in any way remarkable. Waldon felt this, and gloried in a power which enabled him to bring the diamond sparks uppermost in a mind so fresh and vigorous that for once he felt himself mated, as strong men love to be matched by delicate women. Waldon was too well versed in social life to remain in any company long enough to risk the possibility of being parted with willingly. After an hour he arose to go. Bertha fairly caught her breath.

"So soon," she said, almost imploringly.

"More than an hour, I think," he answered, smiling.

Bertha had told him where her mother was. It formed no part of his wish to see this lady yet, and it was nearly time for the lecture to close—she must not find him there.

Bertha would not urge him to stay. She, too, shrank from an explanation which might alarm her mother, who remained quite unconscious of the intimacy which had rooted itself so deeply between these two young people.

Waldon held her hand in his; a smile dimpled her mouth; she tried to look him fairly in the face, but his glance met hers, and overpowered it; the dusky lashes fell; she drooped shyly before him, like a bird charmed.

"Good-night—I shall see you again."

Again! again! that word haunted Bertha's dreams all night.

On his way home, Waldon met Edward Lane, and took his arm.

"Lane, lose no time in finding out the points I gave you. I have seen that girl again. She drives me beyond myself. Her graceful wit outmatches her beauty.

I have no patience to wait. Get me information, or I shall do something imprudent."

"I am on the track—you shall know all about it soon," said Lane, and they parted.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HE TOLD HER THAT HE LOVED HER.

NOT a word had been said between Bertha and Waldon about meeting in the park at any time. But in his careless, poetic way, he had spoken of its greenness and luxuriant beauty, describing various leafy nooks and rocky points with rare enthusiasm, which made her feel as if it would be Heaven to see those places while his words were burning in her brain.

For two or three days, Bertha resisted the keen desire that possessed her, and kept away from the park—though it was not far off—for quiet, womanly delicacy was stronger in her than the mesmeric influence this man had cast upon her. But the fourth day found her in the rocky hollow about which he had been most eloquent. It was only a small ravine, adown which a blue-waved brook crept lakeward between a double fringe of fresh grasses, seeded ferns, and long, trailing ivy, which swung down into the shadows, and kept the moist air in perpetual motion. Above her, great masses of Virginia creeper covered the leaning rocks with curtains of crimson flame, and through them came a line of shimmering silver, which made the brook dimple and laugh among its shadows, like a healthy child aroused from sleep at daybreak.

In a cleft of the rocks, hidden away among the burning foliage of the creeper, a man sat, with a book in his hand, gazing quietly down upon Bertha's bright face, as she turned it from object to object, searching out his description in the beautiful reality.

Waldon would not disturb her yet; her form came out so gracefully from the shadows. The queenly bend of her head—the light upon her cheek, which glowed like a sun-kissed carnation—the picture was perfect. He would have broken a statue, or dashed his hand through the superb coloring of a picture, rather than startle her from that exquisite *pose*. So he lay idly among the ripe leaves, enjoying the life and beauty of that vision; believing that it was thoughts of him which gave the rich coloring to her face.

So it was. In the depths of her heart she had expected to find him somewhere in this labyrinth of greenness and shadows, and shame that she did expect him burned in her face. She had not seen or heard from him in days, and a hungry desire to hear his voice possessed her.

All at once that living picture was broken up. Something had disturbed the girl. She started back, took a footpath that wound out of the ravine, and Waldon could just see the flutter of her garments, as the wind from one of the small lakes took them.

Waldon closed his book, seized hold of a mountain ash, and swung out of his leafy lair down to the ravine. Softly, and holding his breath, he picked his way through the clustering ferns, and stood close behind Bertha, who was searching the carriage-road on the other side that tiny lake, with the wistful earnestness of a person who waits for something dear as life itself.

"He will not come!" she muttered, dropping the hand that shaded her eyes, with a gesture of keen disappointment. "Perhaps those other days he waited as I have now."

Waldon heard this, and a flash of triumph shot over his face. Back he stole into the ravine, softly as he had advanced, laughing gently to himself. There was no doubt of it now; the girl had come to meet him. All his anxiety of the last few days, when he lay among the red vine leaves watching for her, was over now. She had struggled against herself bravely, but had come at last, obeying the faint hint he had ventured to drop, unconsciously perhaps.

"Now, now!" he said, clenching and unclenching his hands in an ecstasy of delight. "Now she is mine! mine! mine!"

The footpath which Bertha had pursued in one direction led in another to a recess, or tiny cove, formed by two great round rocks striking against each other at their largest circumference, and leaving a mossy hollow underneath. In this hollow Waldon placed himself, and watched the unconscious girl from its shadows.

Bertha came slowly up the ravine, with a listless, saddened air, her feet, weary with disappointment, dragging through the grass, her figure drooping, and all the rich color quenched in her cheek. She broke off a bit of ivy from a branch that trailed over the rocks she was passing, and flung it with a passionate gesture into the brook. This brought her eyes into view, and he saw that tears flashed through their dusky disappointment.

Again his heart leaped with exultation. She had turned now, and stood with her shoulder toward him, looking down into the water.

"Bertha!"

She started, stifled a glad cry that sprang to her lips, and turning her back fairly upon Waldon, dashed a hand across her eyes.

"I did not expect you—I did not dream of—of seeing you at all," she protested, angry with herself for crying, and at him for having seen her tears.

"But I did hope to see you."

"Why, how could you? I never spoke of coming."

"No; but men will sometimes hope against probabilities," answered Waldon, smiling. "I have been in this neighborhood every day."

"I never come here. How could any one suppose I did? Only to-day I had a headache, and—and thinking how beautifully you described this place, I thought the air would do me good."

"I hope you are made better by coming," he answered, enjoying her fluttering anger with infinite zest.

"No, I think, rather, that the sun makes me worse. My—my forehead aches yet, and my eyes feel hot with fever."

She turned her eyes upon him with audacious courage, thinking to carry off their flushed condition by this plea of fever; but tears hung thickly on their lashes yet, and one dropped upon her cheek, which instantly took fire.

"Sit down," said Waldon, pausing by a fragment of rock which lay bedded among the ferns. "The shadows are cool, and there is music in the water."

Bertha sat down, burning with shame.

"You are angry with me, Bertha. Why?"

"Angry! No. What have you done that I should care about?"

"Intruded on you when you wished to be alone, perhaps."

"I did not care about being alone. This is no intrusion; only," she added, attempting to account for her tears by another feminine device, "something had gone wrong. I was not well, and finding myself in this sweet solitude, gave way, and make a baby of myself."

Waldon laughed pleasantly, and she joined him, quick mirth flashing out from her tears, as sunshine strikes dew.

"Quiet, and the sweet air drawing through here, will soon make your head all right."

"Will it?" answered Bertha, demurely. "I'm sure I hope so."

Waldon threw himself among the grasses at her feet, and resting one elbow on the rock, lay supinely, with his eyes upon her face, not caring to speak.

Bertha grew restless; her lashes drooped; through the soft red cleft of her mouth the breath came in delicious little sighs. To avoid his gaze she pulled up tufts of grass, and sent them floating down the brook.

She had cast half-a-dozen little emerald rifts upon the eddies, when Waldon caught her hand, tossed the grass it held into the water, and fell to kissing it tenderly, as if her palm had been the heart of a rose.

She trembled a little at the first touch of his lips, and struggled to get up from her seat; but his elbow was planted in the thick folds of her dress, and held her down.

"I must go!" she said, breathless. "They will be expecting me home."

"Not yet. I have something to say; but this silence is so delicious. Why must we break it?"

Bertha settled back to her seat, trembling and half afraid. Her blushes were all gone; her mouth began to tremble as if she were about to cry again; he had made her his prisoner.

"This smoky air is so soft. The brook never had sweeter sounds, and the perfume about us is heavenly. It comes from the frost-bitten ferns. Where on earth could we find a more lovely spot?"

Bertha did not answer. He held her hand firmly; his eyes searched hers, as the sun penetrates deep water.

"It is beautiful, but getting a little—a little cold," she said, with another faint struggle to free herself.

"Cold!"

He imprisoned her other hand, and said, again:

"Cold! Promise never to be cold to me! Girl, promise!"

She wrung her hands away from him, and arose from her seat.

"Mr. Waldon, by what right do you ask such things of me?"

"By the right of a man who loves you better than his own soul!"

She was struggling in his arms; her head was pressed to his bosom; the kisses that he rained upon her face and hair terrified her. She pushed him away in fierce anger.

"We are alone, and you insult me!"

"Insult you!—insult the woman whom I entreat to become my wife!"

"You say this here?"

"Yes, girl, my wife! I, who have avoided marriage—laughed at it—reviled it—ask no better thing on earth than that you should become mine forever and ever!"

All anger went out from her face. She could not lift her eyelids, but the sparkle of diamonds flashed out from under their thick lashes.

"Your wife!"

Her lips grew redder; the soft, panting breath came through them unsteadily and gave a pure, ringing sweetness to these two little words, which thrilled the very air. She began to comprehend their meaning in all its passionate force.

"You will not refuse me. It is impossible," he said, reaching forth his arms again. "Love like mine must have love back again. Girl, girl, I adore you—soul and body I adore you!"

She did not resist him now. Her lips turned to his for the kisses which had stirred her wrath a moment before.

"Say that you love me, Bertha!"

"I do! I do!"

"That you will love me forever and ever!"

She tried to say "forever and ever," but the words stopped in her throat. She could not utter them, but gave him kisses instead.

"Again—say that you love me—again and again!" cried the man, in his strong, wooing passion, holding her from him, and searching her face with his shining eyes.

"Again and again, I love you!"

Her face was buried in his bosom. Her lips thrilled with the sweet confession.

He gloried in her agitation, and holding back her head with his two hands, feasted on her blushes.

"You love me surely, fully?" he questioned again, not in doubt, but because the insatiate feeling within him demanded new homage every moment.

"How can you ask?" she answered.

"Because I would hear it over and over again, till the sweet truth pervades my whole being—because worship demands worship."

Happiness like this would be pain if the capacities of humanity did not limit it. Bertha felt poverty-stricken because she had no language with which to express the joy that sung at her heart.

"What can I say—how can I act?" she whispered, shaking her head. "A child of three years would answer you better."

"A child of three years could not be more innocent or more lovely! It ought to be enough that your lips tremble and your eyes speak; but what man ever was contented with dumb assurances?"

"But such things seek a language of their own, which I have had no time to learn," she answered, with deprecating playfulness.

"Not as the birds learn it when they sing among the apple blossoms?"

"That music is here," answered the girl, pressing one hand to her heart; "but I have no power to utter it."

"Heavens! what a child she is!—what a glorious woman!" he exclaimed, never at a loss for words.

"No! no! You frighten me with these praises! Even my mother does not think so highly of me as that. I have ten thousand faults."

"Each one a charm, I will be sworn! No, no, Bertha, even your own lips shall not convince me that the woman I love so can be anything less than perfect!"

Bertha shook her head a little mournfully.

"Even now I am doing wrong. Not one word of all this does my mother know. Until the last few weeks

she was all I had to love in the world. Now I am keeping secrets from her."

"And why?"

"Because I *could* not tell her that which seems even now like a vision that will float away when you and I leave these shadows. Even to one's mother it is not easy to speak things that are so sweet and seem so unreal: besides, what had I to tell?"

"Having kept your secret so long, perhaps it would be well to let it rest between us."

"I don't know," answered the girl, looking up quickly. "It will be a joy to give her pleasant news."

"Will this news be pleasant?" said Waldon, with some earnestness. "Women are not always eager to part with only children."

"Part—part from my mother! Does love for you mean that?" inquired Bertha, with a startled look.

"Perhaps not. Who can tell? Remember I know but little of your mother. She might look upon me as an enemy, if she knew what we were planning. Give me an opportunity to win her kind feelings, or it may turn out that she will not think our engagement good news."

Bertha became thoughtful. She remembered now that her mother had always shrunk nervously from the subject of her marriage with any one, and the especial interest she had expressed about her first meeting with Waldon flashed on her mind with depressing force.

"She might be grieved—but not after she knew him. Yes, it is better so!"

With these thoughts, Bertha strove to excuse herself for doing that which her lover desired, and which conscience smote her for.

A flash of crimson light shot down to the ravine. Bertha started up, breathless.

"It is sunset! We have been here hours and hours!"

"No, minutes—only minutes. Thank Heaven! for a little time we have forgotten to count hours!"

"But now I must go—mother will be anxious."

She held out her hand, but he folded her gently to his heart and blessed her.

"Good-by, Bertha. I ask no greater blessing of God than that you should be my wife!"

He spoke solemnly, for poetic devotion formed the finer part of his strange nature; and Bertha left him with happy tears in her eyes.

That night the girl lay awake in her white bed, like some fair Undine dreaming among restful water-lilies. The moonbeams came through a window close by, and threw their shimmering silver all over her so clearly, that you could see her lips move, and almost hear her whispers as she told herself over and over again, "He loves me—he loves me! He will love me forever and ever," exactly as Clara Anderson had done!

While the soft moonbeams were shedding divine smiles on her, they were shut out from the supper-room in which Waldon and young Lane sat after the other guests had retired, and, in their place, came down a flood of gas-light from the overhanging chandelier. Lane was leaning with both arms on the table, looking at Waldon, who spoke eagerly:

"I hope to Heaven, Lane, that you have made no mistake about the property, for I have committed myself to-day beyond recall; had no control of myself, in short. Are you certain?"

"My authority was her mother's banker and her own trustee," answered Lane. "If better is to be found, I do not know where to seek for it."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OLD WOMAN'S PASSION.

ALL this time Clara Anderson lived on smitten by the miasma of that growing slander. Her work fell off, and she did not know why. The few friends that visited her grandmother seemed to avoid the house. When Judge Lane, or any of his family, drove by, they took the farthest edge of the street, and turned their heads aside, as if contagion lay in the old house, and half the people in the village were ready to follow his example.

Mrs. Vose, who worked in all the better class houses, came home more weary of heart than of limb, for to her this cruel gossip came in its coarsest form.

"They ought to know it," she would say, "then something could be done; but I haven't the nerve to speak; besides, it seems to me as if Clara had lost courage somehow. Poor thing! she looks frost-bitten—all her color gone—all the vim dashed out of her. Nobody sends her work now-a-days. She's always mending up old dresses, sitting there so white and gloomy by the window. Things can't go on this way. She must have work or they'll starve out."

After pondering over these things in her mind a day or two, the good woman sought an opportunity when Clara was away from home, and went to spend an hour with the grandmother.

The old woman had her sharp points of character, and was not always an agreeable companion while gliding down her last decade of life. It was more difficult for her to express tenderness than feel it, and no one who

knew her well ever wondered whence Clara got her indomitable pride.

Sitting in her easy-chair withered and bent as she appeared when Mrs. Vose went in, you might have supposed that this great passion, like all others, had died out of her, but that idea would have been given up at once, when Mrs. Vose, with much faltering, began her cruel story of the scandal. Then the black eyes filled with keen fire. The bent figure upreared itself, that head crowned with snow was held firmly erect, and both withered hands were pressed on the arms of that huge old chair.

The old woman was fully alive now.

"You have done right to tell me this, Betsey Vose. I am the person who should hear of it; you, an old friend to me and mine, would have been treacherous not to bring it here. Yes, Betsey, it is a blow that makes me reel; but I thank you for it."

"I didn't tell because I believed one word of it," said the little washerwoman, wiping her eyes.

"Believe! of course you didn't. Haven't you known us all your life?"

Here an old brazen-face clock that stood in the corner of the room wheezed out four in the afternoon.

The old woman stood up half a foot taller than she had been in the morning.

"Betsey Vose, you will find a black silk bonnet in that closet, and a shawl. I haven't had either of 'em on in three years; bring them out for me."

Mrs. Vose brought the bonnet and the shawl.

The old woman took the bonnet from her hand, went up to the looking-glass and crowned her white hair with it, tying the strings in a bow under the chin, and smoothing it out daintily.

"Now put the shawl on my shoulders, Betsey; then tell your son to bring up the horse, and put Clara's side-saddle on him."

"Why, Mrs. Anderson, you don't mean to ride?"

"Betsey Vose, I do mean to ride! Tell Ben to bring up the horse!"

Mrs. Vose went at once.

Directly that old lady came out of the front door, and walked toward the horse-block where Ben stood holding Clara's horse by the bit.

"My goodness, marm, you don't mean to try this beast? It ain't safe, now, I tell you."

Mrs. Anderson mounted the horse-block; sat down on the saddle, settled the short alpaca dress, and took the bridle from Ben.

"Cut me a switch from that lilac-bush, he may need mastering," she said, sharply. "That'll do; now go home and keep that tongue of yours between your teeth. Do you hear?"

"It don't seem to me as if I did, or see either," said Ben, watching the old woman as she rode away. "What on 'arth is up now, I wonder?"

In the centre of the village, opposite the most important meeting-house in the place, stood a white house well shaded, and comfortable in all its aspects. The occupant was the pastor of the flock that assembled in that steepled edifice, of which Judge Lane was a conspicuous member.

To this house Mrs. Anderson rode, looking neither to the right nor left, though an object of general curiosity, for she had not been to church in years, and her appearance on horseback was a wonder to every one who saw her on the road.

The old woman dismounted easily at the horse-block, tied her bridle to the iron-ring there, and entered the front-door which stood ajar, without knocking.

The parlor-door was also ajar, and she went through, remembering that the minister's study opened from that room.

Here the sound of voices disturbed her: she wished to see her pastor alone, and some one was with him talking earnestly.

The old woman resolved to wait, and sat down on the nearest chair.

"You are too charitable, minister. I al'ays thought so—but being no talker, say it only to your face—but it's a fact!"

"I am doubtful of these facts; there must be proof before I help to wound the feelings of a helpless, and, for ought I know, irreproachable young lady."

"If Judge Lane is satisfied, it is enough for me. He went to see her in the spirit of a Christian father, and how did she receive him? rudely, sir; impudently as if it had been some common man picked up out of the street. He was ready to do anything to save his son, and get her out of the place; but she defied him—defied him, sir!"

"Judge Lane has a son who has met with the severest censure for conduct in which this young lady can have had no share; he should remember that, and be gentle in his condemnation of others. Judge Lane may not be altogether blameless in this matter himself."

"Hush! hush!" said a voice the old lady knew as that of a deacon in the congregation, with imploring caution. "Don't let anybody but me hear you say such a thing! Just think how much the Judge gives the

church every year: if he heard of your talking so he'd join the Baptists before the week's out."

"That threat would not influence me, Mr. Jones! Heaven knows I pity the father, but I pity that poor girl and her grandmother also."

"Poor girl! Why, you fairly make my hair stand on end—take care how you put a cushion under sinners and ease the way of the transgressor. That girl, why, I sometimes think she's possessed like the folks in the New Testament, minister. She's drove Edward Lane to ruin, and now she can't let him alone—going after him the way she does, it's outrageous. It's a scandal to the town."

"I cannot see my duty clear," sighed the minister; "I have wrestled and prayed, but I don't get any light."

"She don't belong to us," urged the deacon: "she seldom sits under your preaching."

"Are we to confine our efforts to do good to the members of our church?" inquired the clergyman, in a reproachful voice. "Christ did not teach that, brother Jones."

The deacon was silent; possibly that was a novel view of the case to him and he had no answer ready out of his theological wisdom.

"Well," he exclaimed, resolutely, more savage perhaps from his discomfiture, "unless her grandmother'll turn her out of doors the old woman ought to be churched—that's my opinion, and I ain't afraid to have it known. Besides, the fact is, between ourselves, nothing less'll pacify Judge Lane; if neither the law nor the church can help him get rid of her, what is he to do? No church member of ours ought to harbor her."

"It is a measure I would not take. Urge a grand-

mother to desert her orphan child—the idea is monstrous !”

“You don't pretend to stand up for the girl's goodness, I suppose ?”

“That is impossible, I fear. Still harsh measures toward her, or her old grandmother, I do oppose.”

“Just take into consideration the things people say. There can't be so much smoke without some fire.” Here the deacon ran glibly over the various reports, and each false word fell on that old woman's ear like sparks of fire.

“I have heard it all,” said the minister. “Poor creature ; who can tell what her temptations have been ?”

“I tell you she ought to be sent out of the town—it's wrong to leave her here,” persisted the deacon.

“I hope you'll never be the one to suggest a measure like that.”

“No—I shan't; but I shouldn't be the one to say no if anybody proposed it. You can't put it in any other way and satisfy the Judge.”

As the words left his lips the door opened, and when the two men looked up they saw before them a thin old woman, with ghastly wrinkled face, and eyes sharp with fire. They recognized the grandmother of the girl whose faults they had been canvassing.

The deacon shrank back in absolute fear, and the minister himself was powerless under the gaze of those keen eyes.

For several moments after her appearance the two men sat staring at her, the deacon quite pale and horror-stricken, as if half inclined to believe that some supernatural warning had been sent in rebuke of his uncharitableness, the minister more tranquil but greatly troubled.

“I am an old woman, minister, and you, Deacon Jones

—a very old woman, and if age, or poverty, or both together, can make a woman helpless, I am the oldest one of the poorest and most helpless of your whole congregation. But old, poor, weak, as I am, the great God whom you pretend to serve, Deacon Jones, and whom you do serve, my pastor, has given me strength to come here, and the power to rebuke all that you have been saying of my grandchild. I have not seen her since this vile slander was told to me ; I do not need to question her. Hasn't she worked like a bound slave that I might be lifted above want, and out of the reach of church charity ? Hasn't she given up her books, her youth, everything that a girl loves, to stay with me, a lone old woman who has outlived all her friends, and who was oftener cross than kind to her ? Is this the girl you want me to turn out of doors, Deacon Jones ? Is this the girl that I am to be brought up before the church about ? I tell you, my pastor, no angel among all those that will greet you in Heaven will be of nobler or purer spirit than my granddaughter, Clara Anderson !”

Before either of these men could answer this outburst of passionate remonstrance the old woman that uttered it was gone.

Without help, and lifted out of her infirmities by a miracle of will, she had mounted her horse and rode in a sharp trot through the village, regardless of the wondering faces peering at her from doors and windows, and of the gaping school-children who paused by the wayside to see her pass. The old woman had not been outside of her own small domain for years. No child in that village remembered seeing her in the street before, and older persons watched her wonderingly, as if a ghost were flitting by them.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE REVELATION.

CLARA ANDERSON had taken a long walk that day. She had plenty of leisure, for work, which had come in more and more slowly, was withheld now altogether, and but for the cunning devices by which Ben smuggled help into the house the wolf would have been howling at her door, as that other wild beast, slander, was hunting her down in the community.

On all sides the darkness of utter despair was settling around this poor girl. Since that accident in the river, and the excitement of her ride to the falls which followed it so quickly, the magnificent health which had given her beauty such rare glow and coloring had broken down. At night she was feverish and incapable of sleep, her appetite fled, her strength waned, and her step, as she walked by the river side that day, was painfully heavy. She sat down on the bank and watched the waters flow by with a strange longing to drift on with them and be carried out of sight forever.

The canoe, which Ben had rescued from a ruck of drift wood far below the deep hole, a day or two after it had been wrecked, lay in the stream, rocking like a cradle under a curtain of drooping willow boughs. Why had it failed in its work that night? Why had not Ben allowed her to sink and end her weary battle of life then and there?

These questions haunted the girl. She was afraid of them, with that tempting water in sight, and arising, with a dreary spirit of resistance, went toward the house.

She did not feel like going to her grandmother's room just then. The old woman had grown gentle and kind as a lamb in their misfortunes, and she did not like to trouble her with a sight of her own face when these fits of despondency came over her.

Entering the kitchen, she sat for a long time in her low chair in the darkest corner of the room, her hands folded upon her lap and her eyes fixed upon the floor.

Then the stillness of the house grew oppressive, and, forcing a look of calm to her face, she went to her grandmother's room. It was empty!

Where had the old woman gone? The least thing had power to disturb Clara then. She feared that her grandmother had been taken ill, and was perhaps lying helpless in some other room. She might be dead.

With this awful thought came a wild cry that rang through the house laden with terror.

"Grandmother! Grandmother!"

No answer; no sound.

Clara went through that old house, room by room, wailing that one cry until every nook and corner had been searched.

As each new disappointment struck her she looked wildly about and listened—she almost fancied that she heard the old woman calling upon her for help. It required a strong effort to subdue the feeling, and the alarm left her so pale and weak that she was forced to relinquish her lonely walk and sit down again.

There she sat, listening to every sound from without, longing to rush from the house and seek her grandmother, almost expecting to see some door open and a terrible shape appear to keep her company.

The spell which held her faculties in his grasp seemed

a sort of nightmare which she was powerless to break, and could only crouch in passive misery under its thrall.

At length she heard the slow tread of a horse—her own horse—approaching the house. She arose at once, and, opening the front door, met her grandmother half-way down the yard.

"Grandmother! What is this? Where have you been?"

Those wild eyes, that earnest, white face, seemed to wither the woman into decrepit old age again. She faltered in her walk, stooped feebly, and, missing the support of her cane, searched around her with a half-frightened look, as if she expected to find it in her need.

"Grandmother, speak to me! Have you gone wild? What is the horse doing here?"

"I—I have been riding him, Clara. It is unhealthy staying in the house so much."

"Riding him! You? Oh, grandmother, what does this mean?"

"I wanted to see my minister, Clara. It is so long since I have been to meeting. One cannot always stay in-doors."

The old woman walked into the house with difficulty, pausing a moment as she uttered each word. Clara followed her until she sank, white and nerveless, into her own great easy-chair.

"Grandmother, you are faint. You have done enough to kill yourself," said Clara, kneeling down by the chair.

"No, child, tired—tired, that is all," gasped the old lady, trying her best to smile.

"Why have you done this, grandmother? Do you wish to leave me utterly alone? What should I do—what should I do then?"

The slow tears which come with such pain to the aged rose singly into those eyes in which the unnatural fire had been long since quenched. Stooping forward the old woman laid her hand solemnly on the girl's head.

"You have been a good child, Clara, wonderfully good; I have not praised you much, but this has been in my heart always—always. Much speaking is not my gift—I may be vexatious and cross: that is because I am so old and unable to help myself; but I want to tell you now, my darling—don't that word sound strange, Clara? I never used it to you before. Did I now? But it has been in my heart like a hymn ever since you began to take care of me. Yes, you are good; and remember, God takes care of such. If I never speak to you again remember I said that with my last breath."

"Oh, grandmother!" cried Clara, struck with fresh panic.

"Let me lie down now, child; my words should not frighten you so: they are only those of an old woman who feels herself tired. Come now, shake up my pillow a little: rest is what I want most."

Clara almost lifted the slight form in her arms and laid it on the bed she had prepared. Spreading a soft woollen shawl over her, she knelt down and laid her head on the pillow from which that pallid old face looked out with but little appearance of rest.

"Now, grandmother, tell me what it is that troubles you. Is it because the work comes in so slowly?"

The old head was weakly shaken on the pillow.

"Is it because you think I am not quite happy, then?"

Again the same negative movement.

"But something has happened. Did any letters come while I was out?"

"Yes, one. I laid it down somewhere, but can't recollect where."

"Did it bring bad news?"

"I don't know, Clara; I did not open it."

"Did not read it! Then something else took you away. What was it, grandmother? Has any one said cruel things to you?"

"Cruel as the grave, Clara."

"Ah! tell me. It must have been something terrible to send you away from home. Tell me!"

"Wait a little, Clara; I am so tired, so dizzy and weak. Sit by me, but don't speak a while."

Clara saw by the old woman's faint gasping for breath that she was in fact unable to speak, and bending her head to the pillow, waited, in dumb, patient fear, for the new evil which she felt was pending over her.

A knock at the door made her start up with nervous apprehension. It was Mrs. Vose, who had seen the horse at the door, and came in dreading the effect of that strange ride. The old woman's eyes were closed, so Clara made a sign to Mrs. Vose, and stole out with her into the next room. Standing there in the gathering gray of a clouded twilight, she began to question the washerwoman.

"What does this mean, Mrs. Vose? Can you tell me what drove my grandmother to this dangerous ride?"

"Oh! Miss Clara, I cannot tell you!"

"Why do you hang back and look so frightened, Betsey Vose? If my poor old grandmother has had trouble brought to her, surely I ought to know it."

"Oh! Miss Clara, why will you ask? Why do people hate you so?"

"Hate us! Oh, indeed! Why? If ever I wronged a human being among them it was unconsciously."

"I know that, miss, and have allus said it and will. Why they should want to drive you out is beyond me. But you don't begin to know."

"Know what?"

"What people are saying."

Then a new fear came over Clara: she felt that it was something more real and terrible than she had anticipated—something which concerned herself. Nothing else could have moved her grandmother to the strange step she had taken.

"About me?" she asked, in a voice which sounded calm enough, though a slight tremor betrayed the tempest within. "Things that they say about me?"

Mrs. Vose nodded her head in assent.

"Oh, they nearly drove me crazy!" she burst out. "I didn't know what to say or think! When I came home and saw you sitting there looking as innocent as a lamb—"

"What have they told you?" Clara asked again. Even then she could think of nothing more painful than the stories which had already reached her of an unwomanly attempt to lure young Lane into a marriage.

"Such dreadful things!" groaned the poor woman. "They told me the minister was coming here to talk to you."

Clara started to her feet, and all her fire and strength came back. She recollected her conversation with Judge Lane. No other human being should ever insult her with such counsels. Doubtless this powerful man had urged the clergyman to do this: it was all his work. Clara's pride rose, and the whirl in her brain increased, as this suspicion flashed through it.

"I will not be lectured!" she exclaimed. "Neither that man nor his friends shall come here to annoy me."

"It isn't what you think," faltered Mrs. Vose. "Worse, worse than that!"

"What can be worse?" demanded Clara.

"Disgrace, miss, shame—slanders and lies! These are worse; they wound like knives; they kill like poison!"

Clara stood wildly gazing on the woman. She could not comprehend the full meaning of her words.

"Disgrace! shame!" she repeated. "What have we to do with them? They can never reach us."

"God help us, they have come!" said the woman, desperately. "They have taken away your good name. They'll kill your old grandmother."

For the first time a perception of the truth broke upon the girl.

"What have they said of me?" she whispered.

The words which Mrs. Vose strove to utter seemed to burn her lips. She could not bear to blast the life of a young creature she had known from infancy by a revelation of the trouble which had befallen her.

"Tell me," persisted Clara. "I am not as weak as you think. I can endure it, and you will feel easier when you have told me."

"Not now, not now!" Mrs. Vose begged piteously, as if there could be any hope of comfort in putting off the disclosure.

"I would rather hear it from you than any one else."

"I cannot tell you, Miss Clara."

"Some one else will tell me, and more harshly. I must hear it."

"How wild you look, Miss Clara! Don't stare at me so; you make me afraid."

The woman put up her hands to shut out the sight of the pallid face which was bent toward her with such keen anxiety.

"Will you tell me, Betsey Vose?"

There was something painful in the icy coldness of these whispered tones. Mrs. Vose could neither answer nor look at her.

"I will know! If you can't tell me, I shall find some one who will."

She leaned both hands hard against the back of a chair, and supporting herself in that manner, rose to her full height and turned toward the door.

"Miss Clara!" cried Mrs. Vose, "where are you going? What is it you mean to do?"

"I am going to some one who will tell me the whole truth, Betsey Vose."

"Come back! come back!" exclaimed the widow, despairingly. "I will tell you! I will tell you!"

The girl returned, bowed her head and pressed her lips hard. The touch, as they clung together, was like that of frosty steel.

"Tell me, Betsey. Don't stop. I can bear it."

Mrs. Vose could not speak aloud. She whispered the story in short, broken words. Clara did not interrupt her by a movement or an exclamation. She stood there so pale and still that it seemed almost as if the woman were talking to a statue.

When Mrs. Vose had finished, Clara stood upright, pressing her hands against her forehead, her lips parted in a struggle for breath.

"I have killed her!" groaned the woman.

"Hush!" said Clara, "hush! I can bear it!"

"And you won't mind it? You won't let it break you down? Oh, do say that!"

"No, no!"

Clara was benumbed with the shock of that monstrous falsehood. She neither felt ashamed nor afraid. Why should she blush and shrink when women could so outrage the sweet modesty of nature, and dare accuse her of things that carried infamy in the very thought? Was it not enough that she had lost her means of livelihood? Must these female birds of prey rend her good name also?

The thought made her wild and strong: for the moment she was lifted out of her weakness. If the minister came to rebuke her she would meet him. Why not? She was innocent in thought and deed as himself, servant of God though he was.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SOFTENING INFLUENCES.

AFTER a time Clara went to her grandmother's room. The old lady was still on the bed, very pale and weak, but her eyes were bright and keen as steel, when the girl approached her. She understood in a moment that everything was known.

"I will get up," she said, rising with some difficulty from her pillow. "Betsey Vose is making tea for us both; you and I will drink it up here."

Clara helped the old lady from the bed and placed her in an easy-chair. "Your tea will come up in a few minutes. Don't look at me so pitifully, grandmother; I am not fretting much."

The old woman's eyesight was very poor and the paper shades at the window dimmed the light in the room, so that she could not distinctly see Clara's face, and those kind words soothed her a little.

"You feel better," she said.

"Yes, grandmamma; we have borne so much—we can bear this."

She made the old lady as comfortable as possible in the stiff chair, placed a footstool under her feet, and threw a shawl over her shoulders.

Betsey Vose came up and was about to spread a cloth on the round stand, but the old lady made a sign of dissent.

"Not yet, Betsey; I don't want anything just now—by-and-by, when I am in bed. I want to talk with my child here."

Clara was softened greatly by this unusual tenderness. It was so childlike, so loving, that the sweetness of it drove half the bitter pain from her heart. She began to reflect that while such love existed under her own roof, there was something worth living for. She longed to converse freely with her only relative, but saw how weak she was, and desisted.

Still her heart was full, and she wished for some one with whom she could talk without giving pain, who would direct her how to meet this slander with the truth. When tea was over she said to her grandmother:

"Was not the minister coming to see me?"

"Yes," Mrs. Anderson said, beginning to tremble anew.

"He wanted to talk about—about—"

She could not finish the sentence; there was no need, the old woman understood only too well.

"Yes, he thought it was his duty. I belong to his church," replied Mrs. Anderson, faintly.

The girl was silent a few moments, then she said, "I am going to see him, grandmother."

"The minister?"

"Yes; I will hear what he can say."

Mrs. Anderson had a truly New England reverence for her clergyman, and believed that if any one could offer counsel in an extremity like that it would be a man of God. She would never have proposed the thing to Clara, but it was like a gleam of hope in great darkness to hear her mention it.

"I am glad," she said. "He is a good man—go to him, Clara."

"I will at once."

She rose with a return of her old decision.

"Clara!"

"Yes, grandmother."

"Be patient, you know, and listen—"

"You need not be afraid."

She went up-stairs, put on her bonnet, and came down into the room again.

"I shall not be gone long; you won't mind?"

"No, come here, Clara—kiss me before you go."

Clara bent over the old woman and kissed her tenderly. It was very seldom that those withered lips sought caresses, and this went to the girl's heart.

Clara rose at length, and said very gently,

"Now, I am going."

The restless hand of that old woman clung to hers with tender longing.

"Bless me again, before I go; it makes me strong."

Once more the grandmother's lips repeated the sweet and holy words.

Clara turned to go. "I can bear it now," she said, "good-by, grandmother."

"May the God of heaven bless you, oh, my child," she said, with unusual solemnity, and closing her eyes she seemed to pray.

"Now I will lie down again," she said. "Help me a little."

Clara helped the old lady undress, and robed her in a night-gown, kissing the old face as she fastened the garment at the throat. Then she took off the cap which covered an unusual quantity of hair, white and soft as sea-foam, which the old lady was accustomed to shake afloat when she slept.

"You will rest a while now, and have some tea by-and-by," said the girl, as she drew the bed-clothes softly over the old lady whose hearing seemed unusually keen, for a distant knock at the street door made her start.

"Who is it, Clara?"

"I don't know. The minister, perhaps: some one said that he might come."

"The minister! oh, that is best. A kinder man never lived. Tell him I said so: he will be glad to know that I had faith in him to the last."

"You shall tell him yourself: he will want to see you, of course. Do not look at me so, grandmother. I feel sure that this good man will befriend us when he knows the truth."

"Go to him, child, as if he were your own father."

"I will, I will."

"Tell him that I, the oldest member of his church, charge him in the name of my God to hold you scathless from the slanders I have this day denied."

The old woman rose up and, leaning her elbow on the pillow, pointed her quivering finger upwards, appealing directly to heaven.

"Oh, grandmother," said Clara, shivering under the effect of that solemn picture of inspired old age; "I will not forget one word that you have said to me."

The old woman fell slowly back on her pillow.

"Clara!"

The word seemed to come from a great distance, recalling her from the door. She went back, holding her breath.

"Grandmother!"

The old woman reached out her hand. Instinctively the girl knelt, and it was laid softly on her head. She heard no sound save low whispers that she knew was a blessing. Then that old voice spoke out very tenderly,

"Go, now. I shall sleep, I shall sleep."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LOVE'S DEFEAT.

CLARA opened the parlor door and walked in, expecting to find the minister, but instead of that she found herself face to face with Edward Lane. She had prepared herself to meet the man who had doubtless come to rebuke her, but this new apparition struck her dumb. She could not draw her mind from the subject that possessed it, and stood looking vacantly at the young man as if seeing nothing at all.

"May I come in?" he said, humbly enough. "May I come in for a few moments, Clara?"

She stepped back mechanically and allowed him to enter. In the same dumb apathy she closed the door and sat down in the nearest chair.

"You are ill, suffering," he said quickly.

Her lips framed a denial, but she could not speak it aloud, her throat was so dry and parched.

"Oh, Clara, Clara! cannot you receive me more kindly? I did not come to annoy you with unwelcome importunity. It is the first duty of an honorable man to protect the woman he loves. I have come to shield you; to fight your battles with my own father if that becomes necessary."

"Battles! I have no battles," answered Clara. "Those who have nothing to struggle for need not fight."

"Still, Clara, you and your reputation are dear to me."

"Thank you," said the girl, with vague gentleness.

"You were always kind to me. I realize it fully. If you are friendly now, and have some painful thing to say, speak out quickly; don't hesitate; tell what you have to say. I can bear another blow very well."

He sighed heavily.

"I have come too late," he said. "I see you have already heard that which shocked me beyond anything I can express."

It was incomprehensible, almost beyond belief, but even in that hour of supreme agony, maddened with pain, the old pride flashed up amid the conflict in this girl's mind.

"Did you come here to complete your father's work?" she said coldly. "He will not hesitate to use this visit in his efforts to crush me."

"I come here to humble myself again; to ask—to entreat—that you will give me a right to defend you. It is in consequence of my own rash indiscretion that this cruel odium has been cast upon your name. Be my wife at once. Who shall dare to lift a voice against the woman I marry?"

"Did you think that I would be crushed and humbled? That you could say what you pleased? I am neither the one nor the other. Some hearts can neither bend nor break. God help me! mine is one. If I would not accept such offers when all hands were uplifted against you, is it possible that I shall seek refuge from slander in your generosity?"

"I only remembered that I loved you dearly, and that you were suffering for my sake," said the young man, with deep feeling. "This unpleasant news reached me in New York, and I came at once."

"Thinking that I would escape unmerited disgrace

through a marriage which would ruin you. No, no, Mr. Lane, I am not so selfish as that."

"Selfish! Oh, Clara! would it be selfishness to reward a love like mine?"

"Do not ask me. I am in no condition to reason. This chaos of slander has just been revealed to me. There is a fever of resistance in my brain that makes me dizzy. It is noble—it is wonderfully good in you, this visit—this offer, I mean. There may come a time when I can be grateful, but not while this agony is so new. I think just now that my brain is not entirely right."

There was truth in this remark. It would have taken very little more to have turned her brain completely. She was in a state which required the most tender watchfulness. Instead of that, she was compelled to suppress the indignation that burned in her heart, put by the dizzy rush that stirred in her brain as if innumerable wheels had been working there, and meet the world with calmness.

Lane regarded her with infinite tenderness. To him her firmness was marvellous; but looking in her eyes, where fever both of mind and body smouldered, he saw it was rather a species of insanity than any effort of courage or self-control that nerved her.

He had come to that house spite of everything, burning to avenge the girl's wrongs, ready to sacrifice himself in her behalf, and perhaps hoping that in her great distress she might learn to value his love. But he saw that she was speaking the truth. For once her splendid physique had succumbed to the mind. Her veins were hot with fever; her mind reeling under the force of a great shock.

Still the young man hesitated to leave her. At times

she became restless and drew back from him like a caged leopardess ready to spring upon her keeper. She was not soothed by anything that he said, but forgot his presence, and half the time was unconscious when he spoke. She had been pale as death when he entered the room; but now the whiteness left her cheek; a vivid crimson burned there instead, and her eyes seemed full of sheet lightning. Still, about her mouth a dead, sickly paleness lingered, which increased the strange expression of her face.

Lane felt how useless it was to plead or reason with her in that state; still his feelings were too strong for entire suppression.

She knew that he urged his plea again—asked her to become his wife. She could only put the subject indifferently by: it really appeared of no importance then. But he would be heard. He could not relinquish his last hope without making every possible effort.

"You cannot stay here," he said.

She stirred slightly.

"Why not?" she asked, coming out of her apathy again.

"You would suffer everything."

"I have already suffered as much as any woman can. The rest amounts to nothing. I cannot sit here," she said, rising suddenly.

Cold chills crept over her; lights danced before her eyes; the objects around faded into the distance. Still she preserved her consciousness.

"Please to go away; I have something to do," she said, with pathetic entreaty.

"I want to talk to you. I wish to help you."

"I need no help. Do go away."

He tried to reason with her; she silenced him with still more pressing entreaties.

"I must go to my grandmother," she said. "Leave me, I entreat."

Lane went out of the house greatly disturbed, but more hopeful than he had been for months. In her semi-consciousness she had not wholly rejected him, at any rate with the decision of former times.

Clara became more calm after she was left alone. The tender interest which Lane had expressed, the desire that she should become his wife under all the surrounding disadvantages, made an impression even on her disturbed mind. The delicate feelings of her womanhood came back, stirring her heart to gratitude and her pride to honorable self-defence. She would not sit down and rest content with a stain on her name.

While moving about the room she saw a letter lying on the little table where her desk always stood. She took it up and examined the writing with a sort of dread, for everything she touched seemed like the work of an enemy to her then. This feeling was deepened when she recognized the writing of Bertha Canfield.

At first she cast it from her with a shudder of foreboding. Then she snatched it up, tore the envelope in twain, and holding the enclosure away as one deals with an enemy, read it through.

This was the spirit of the letter:

"MY OWN DEAREST CLARA:

"We promised each other at school that no great event should happen in the life of one that its secret should not at once be given the other. You seemed strange to me—cold and almost severe—the last time I

met you, after we unfortunately missed each other at the falls; why, it is in vain for me to attempt conjecturing. You never met me so icily before, and I hope you never will again. It makes the tears come into my eyes when I think of it, for no one ever loved a school-mate better than I loved and still love you, and I will not believe that any serious ill feeling has arisen between us, though you left me so abruptly, and have not sent line or message to me since.

"At any rate, darling Clara, I have a promise to redeem and news to give which I trust will be pleasant to you as it brings happiness for me.

"Clara, I am engaged to be married. This will amaze you, but not half so much as it surprises me. How a man so superior, so wonderfully handsome, so completely and overwhelmingly my superior, could ever have taken a fancy to me will forever remain a mystery. You have read his books, and I think he told me that you had met in some way. If so you can understand the marvel of his choice when it falls on me.

"Ah, Clara, this man is a lover indeed! My imagination, wild as it is, never reached his level. But you will smile. I dare not, even to myself, say all that I think of him; it would seem so much like worship.

"Send me your congratulations, dear, and let them be such as I can read to him. This reminds me that the sweetest hours of these early love-days are those in which he reads to me his own grand thoughts. Indeed, Clara, I am afraid that this is adoration rather than the love other girls talk of.

"I remember how you questioned me once about Waldon. It was that day when you were so cross. I did not understand myself then; but even so early as

that time love must have been sleeping in my heart. He teases me by saying that while I lay insensible my head was on his bosom, and his lips defrauded mine of a first kiss. I wonder if this is so. I never dreamed of it; but now it seems to me if I were dying his kiss would bring me back from heaven.

"His engagement ring flashes on my finger as I write, Clara. In a few minutes he will be here.

"Do write to me, dear, and believe me always

"Your faithful friend, BERTHA."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WAS SHE DEAD?

CLARA read this bitter news, every word of it, as men drink poison or women kiss their rivals, with smothered loathing. Before it had been an apprehension which she had put aside as too improbable for belief. Now it was a dead certainty.

There must be a limit to human torture or it would kill its victim. At a certain point of mental agony feeling grows incapable and sinks back into leaden apathy. Indeed, some phases of suffering may pass for happiness. When suspense merges into certainty, a feeling of relief comes with it. When experience has taught us our full capacity for anguish, we know the limit and can measure it with something like philosophy.

When Clara read that letter she smiled. The worst had come. Fate had done its utmost. Friend and

lover swept off at a single dash. Reputation; the very bread needful to her life trampled under foot or cruelly withheld.

On all this desolation the sun sank low with gathering threats of a storm. In her painful preoccupation Clara had forgotten the old woman whom she had left with closed eyes lying upon her bed. She now remembered, with a feeling of self-reproach, that the usual hour for tea had drifted by—an occasion that in ordinary times would have been a cause of special complaint. As she was passing toward the kitchen Betsey Vose met her with a tray in her hands going toward the old lady's room.

"This is kind, Betsey," she said. "I was not hungry and forgot."

They entered the room together. Clara took a cup of tea from the tray and went up to the bed.

"Grandmother, here is your tea. Did you think I had forgotten you?"

There was no answer; no movement of the figure resting on the bed.

"Grandmother, wake up long enough to drink your tea. Tired as you are, it will do you good."

No answer—no movement. The silence seemed unearthly. A nervous movement of Clara's hand striking a teaspoon against the cup she held sounded through that deathly stillness like the first faint clash of a funeral bell.

"Grandmother! Oh, grandmother, do speak!"

The tray began to shake in Betsey Vose's hands. Clara set the cup down from her weakening hold, and bent her face close to that of the old woman. A touch, a gasp, and she started back, her eyes widening with horror.

"She is cold! She is dead! No, no! God help us! it can't be that!"

Betsey set down the tray. Reverently she went close to the bed and touched the little withered hand that lay outside the coverlet.

"It is cold, but that may come from fainting. Oh, if Ben were here! If we had some one to send for a doctor!"

"I will go!"

Wild as a bird set free in the wilderness, stung to new pain by a despairing hope, Clara Anderson went on her errand. She could not believe this new blow real. That slander, Bertha's letter, and now this death—all these things could not happen in a single day. The idea was monstrously improbable.

It was strange how all these troubles mingled and rushed together on her brain. Shame, indignation, solemn grief—all assailed her by turns as she flew breathlessly toward the village. Once there her speed flagged; she drew her veil closely about her face to avoid the curious gaze of the neighbors whom she might chance to pass. The short distance that lay between her and the doctor's house appeared interminable; she felt as if a thousand eyes were upon her; scores of evil tongues discussing her story and mocking her with scorn as she passed along. Even these thoughts crowded in with the terror of her suspense.

The doctor was not at home. No one could tell where he was to be found. Possibly he had dropped in to spend an hour with the minister.

Clara started for the parsonage. She opened the gate with a violent effort, passed through and hurried up the walk. The front door of the house was ajar. Clara did

not knock, but pushing back the door entered the hall. She was familiar with the house, and turned down the passage toward the minister's study with a vague hope that she might find the doctor there.

She went into the little sitting-room through which it was necessary to pass in order to reach the study. The twilight filled the apartment with dusky shadows, which to the excited fancy of the girl looked like human shapes coldly watching her and refusing either encouragement or comfort.

She reached the centre of the room and paused. The murmur of voices was audible from the study; she could look in and see how fruitless her search was. While she remained there, smitten to the heart with disappointment, the tones of the speakers became more distinct. She had no desire to stay so close to her bitter enemy, but was bereft of all power to move. Like some poor Christian forced into contest with wild beasts in a Roman amphitheatre, she stood paralyzed.

CHAPTER XL.

CHRISTIAN CHARITY.

GR^EAT as was the curiosity, even consternation, in the village when that old lady passed out of it, the feeling was nothing in comparison with the effect produced on the two men she left behind in the parsonage.

Shaking off his amazement, the minister arose, went into the next room, and finding no one there, hurried to

the door. Directly he came back looking greatly distressed.

"She is gone, sitting upright on her horse like a young woman," he said; "never in my life did I see such change in a human being."

"Nor I; her face was white like a ghost's, all but the eyes; they were fire," said the deacon.

"It is very painful. She must have heard all that you said of her grandchild," observed the minister, walking the room nervously.

"Well," returned the deacon, with a cowardly attempt to exculpate himself, "I was only repeating what other folks said—I ain't answerable."

"Poor girl!" sighed the clergyman. "I fear that she was terribly wronged."

"That face, those eyes, I shall never forget them," said the deacon, fairly shivering at the recollection.

"It is my duty, I must and will get at the truth in this matter."

"Yes, as a minister I think it is your duty; but just now hadn't we better drop it?"

"No, Deacon Jones, these charges are of too much importance. This old woman has a right to demand a retraction at our hands if, as I hope, her child has been a victim to evil tongues. I am too much disturbed just now, but come to me in the evening. You will excuse me now, brother Jones?"

"Of course, of course; don't mind me; I must go home anyhow, or my wife 'll think I'm lost."

The minister conducted his guest to the door without further apology, and Deacon Jones took his way home uneasy in his mind and divided in his thoughts between certain qualms of conscience, where Clara Anderson was

concerned, and the greeting which he might receive from Mrs. Jones after having delayed her tea beyond the usual hour.

After a domestic lecture from his wife, who had been at a sewing circle that day, where Clara Anderson was discussed with all the sweet charities that commonplace women bestow on their beautiful sisters, the deacon was ready to take up the question, inspired to new vigor by the extra venom imparted by his wife.

The impression made upon him by the sudden appearance of that old woman was swept away utterly by the force of Mrs. Jones' eloquence. So he went back to the minister's at dusk, resolved to press the matter of a church investigation to some purpose.

"I have thought this matter over thoroughly, prayerfully, minister—I and Mrs. Jones—and we are a unit, yes, a unit. These Andersons must leave the place. The ladies have decided on it. Not a stitch of work will she get from a member of your congregation."

"What! before we have had time for proper inquiry? Do you call this justice, Deacon Jones?"

"Justice! If she had that I don't know what would become of the creature. You don't know, of course, that young Lane has been at her house this very day, in open defiance of his father; and threatens to marry the creature off hand."

"That, at least, speaks well for the girl. Young Lane would never do that if he did not know these rumors to be false," said the minister.

"I don't believe they are false," said the deacon. "I always thought there was something wrong about the girl—I don't believe it is the duty of a Christian minister to give sympathy to sinners."

"Nay, they have all the more need," returned the minister gently.

"If they repent, not otherwise."

"But no one has talked to her, no one has tried to bring her out of the error of her ways, if she is indeed in error."

"It wouldn't be of any use; why, she has the pride of Lucifer."

"And pride goeth before a fall," murmured the clergyman, hardly aware of the force of his quotation.

"Of course it does; every child who learned his catechism knows that," replied the deacon, in a self-satisfied voice. "I guess she has found it out by this time."

"I meant to have seen her to-day," said the minister.

"It wouldn't have done any good if you had seen her; she would have been as insulting as possible."

"We can't tell that."

"Yes, we can, I know her! Besides she don't come to meeting once a month—always going about on the hills Sunday. I've seen her myself. If the sisters are hard on her we've no call to take her part."

"Brother Jones, that should not hinder us from doing all the good we can."

"You couldn't do any good there, I tell you."

"She's very young; even if she be as imprudent and wrong as they say, she cannot be hardened."

"Do you call such conduct by names like those?"

"They are harsh enough for men who profess to be Christians, when applied to a young girl."

"No, they ain't; wickedness is wickedness! I tell you that girl ought to be held up as an example. If times were what they were thirty years ago she'd be put out of the town; the select men wouldn't let her stay, but now sin is never punished."

The deacon paused here to groan over the delinquency of these latter days.

"It would be very cruel treatment," replied the minister, more decidedly than he often spoke. "I cannot believe that such harsh measures would be of any avail, they might drive the erring to utter desperation."

"So they ought to," retorted the deacon; "we are warned to hold no communication with the wicked, to flee from the wrath to come—"

"And to act kindly towards all men," added the minister.

The deacon coughed a little, nestled in his chair in a dissatisfied way and finally said—

"The long and the short of it is, the women folks have got this case in hand, prayerfully in hand. This last step of Edward Lane's has aroused them to a sense of their duty to the sex, and to Judge Lane as a pillar of the church. Take my word for it now, the minister that sets himself agin the women of a congregation don't stay in his pulpit long. A queen bee in a wasp's nest is nothing to it."

The minister arose with a slight flush on his benign face.

"The conversation is taking a form that I would rather not listen to," he said. "Excuse me, but I fancied that some one was moving in the next room."

The good man took a light from his table, and standing in the door held it up. All its rays fell on that young girl who had no idea how long she had been standing there, or what she wished, now that no sign of the doctor appeared.

The blaze of light falling strongly on her face aroused her: she came forward at once.

"She is dying or dead; I cannot tell if it is one or the other, but I have been searching for the doctor and cannot find him. Could you tell me where he is?"

"The doctor—dying? Who is it that is ill, Miss Anderson?"

"My grandmother. She was here to-day, and I am afraid it killed her. We Andersons are not used to disgrace, and it hurts us more than people think."

The minister turned a rebuking look on Deacon Jones, who became extremely busy with the hat which he had taken up in haste the moment he became aware of that strange presence.

"Have you been waiting long?" said the minister, anxious that she should not have heard all the cruel things said in the study.

"Long—I do not know. Still, how could I stop anywhere long? Tell me, please, where I can find the doctor?"

"Deacon Jones, you will have the goodness to find the doctor at once. I shall go home with this young lady, and see what calamity has befallen my old friend. God grant that it is not so serious as I fear. Take my arm, Miss Clara, you scarcely seem able to stand."

Clara took his arm, and hurried out of the house, without a look at the deacon, whom she remembered afterward, as we try to outline figures in a half-forgotten dream. The air was heavy with coming storms, and dark with fog. Scarcely a word was spoken between these two; but the girl fairly dragged her companion along. She had forgotten the doctor, and placed all her faith in him.

"This way," she said, leading him through the darkness into her grandmother's room. "She will be glad to

see you. It is better to bring a true friend than a doctor. Oh, God help us, how still it is!"

Still indeed. A white sheet was flung over the bed. Betsey Vose, seeing the minister, turned the linen back, and revealed a locked white face, a scattering of soft hair, gleaming like silvered snow on the pillow, and two small hands folded over the bosom of a night-gown that looked like a shroud.

CHAPTER XLI.

CAST UPON THE WATERS.

CLARA fell down on her knees by that funereal bed. Softly and reverently she turned that white face toward her, and gathered up the silvery hair.

"She loved me: people thought her cross; but she was only old and so good at heart. It was to-day that she kissed me. Dear old grandmother, she wasn't given to many caresses, and it was because I had such bitter troubles falling on me like blows that she became so childlike. I think she died for me. Some one gave her a great wound on the heart, and it killed her. She was very old, you know, and poured all her strength out in an hour, then lay down for rest and died. I wish it had been me. Oh, I wish it had been me!"

These words came out in faint snatches, uttered with indescribable mournfulness; now with her tearless eyes fixed on that cold face, then lifted to the minister with a look of such pathetic misery that his kind heart ached for her.

Betsey Vose sat back in the shadows, weeping, humbly and silently. This was all the help she could give now. Ben hung about the door, sobbing like a child. The minister looked around on these humble people, and remembered with compassionate thankfulness what fast friends they had been to the woman who was gone, and that fair young creature who remained.

Only those two of all their neighbors—only those two!

The clergyman fell upon his knees, smitten to the soul by this reflection, and poured forth his agony of Christian shame in prayer—not for the dead; he knew that she was with God—not for that poor young woman, for he felt that she was nearer to the great white throne than most of those who broke bread, and bathed their lips in holy wine at his altar. No; he prayed with all the force of his nature, that God would forgive those, who, from malice or carelessness, had hunted that old woman to her grave, and pursued that fair, blameless girl, till she could find no shelter save on her knees by that death-bed.

Scarcely had the good man risen from his knees, when a sound of feet and a faint tumult of voices came up from the rooms below. One voice, above all others, smote Clara's ear, and brought back the conversation that had seemed to fall dead upon her when she stood in that dusky ante-room in the parsonage. One by one, as if written upon her brain in letters of fire, the words of Deacon Jones came out in her memory. Now his voice smote her like a blow—his voice dominating over others still more hateful.

Deacon Jones, while seeking for the doctor, had spread the news of Mrs. Anderson's illness over the neighborhood, and with those two came half a dozen women, some

of them ringleaders and slander-whisperers in the sewing circle, that twenty-four hours before had dwelt upon hunger as a sure way of driving the old woman and her granddaughter out of their home.

Clara Anderson heard these voices, and fled from that death-chamber without a word. On the stairs she met the doctor and Deacon Jones. In the shadows underneath she saw a group of women, with eager upturned faces, ready to follow.

These women drew back appalled by the dead whiteness of her face as she passed through them. One more audacious or stolid than the rest caught at her dress, and asked some question.

Clara neither heard her words, nor felt her touch, but passed through the back door, and out into the night.

Those voices, that dark grouping of her enemies who came to mock her with their cruel compassion, had aroused the latent fever in her veins almost to frenzy.

The gentler feelings fostered by her last interview with the old grandmother, whose death-chamber they were about to desecrate, were swept away. Blind with anguish, wild with a feeling that she had been hunted from that death-bed, she rushed on through the gray fog, without aim or resolve, beset only by a wild longing to flee from a home which was full of her enemies.

On she went, through the home pasture, down by the hemlock banks and the clump of elm trees, drawn toward the river by a weird fascination. It seemed to her as if a voice of the waters were calling upon her to join them as they fled away from a place that had been so full of misery.

With a strange idea, that by stillness she might baffle pursuit, she parted the golden willow branches and crept

under them, close down to the water, which seemed to call her away in whispers muffled by the floating fog. As her eyes became accustomed to the gray light, she saw Ben's canoe rocking sleepily by the bank, overshadowed by willow branches, and moored to a sapling that grew close by her.

This little craft Ben had rescued from the stream miles below "the deep hole," after his disaster, and there it lay, peaceful as a bird's nest, giving back a soft responsive motion to the whispers of the waves.

Clara listened earnestly. Why should the waters escape from that solitude, singing as they went, and she sit there so bereft and desolate? Surely they must find some place of rest and quiet.

She stood up in the clinging gray of the fog and cautiously untied the cable to which the canoe swung, drew the little craft close under the bank, stepped into it, and lay down with her arms folded under her head, and her face uplifted to the muffled sky.

How long she rested thus mournfully supine no one can tell; but the mellow singing of the waves around her strange bed, the faint shiver of the leaves, and the fog that enveloped her with its damp gray, had all the fascinations of weird music for her. She lifted up her arms and seemed to gather the mist around her, whispering hoarsely:

"Now I am ready. Now I am ready."

For a little time the canoe lay within the shade of the willows, rolling softly; then it drifted into the stream, took a current, and moved off with ghostly slowness between the black waters and the drifting fog.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE OLD LOVE.

THE fashionable season set in early that year, and Bertha Canfield, whose engagement was yet unknown, except to young Lane, was taken everywhere by Mrs. Wilson Forbes, a married belle and brilliant leader in that ultra set of fashionables which aims at mingling a little of the artistic and intellectual with its high pretensions.

At first, Mrs. Forbes had rebelled against this as a task; but it was impossible to know Bertha well without loving or hating her. To hate her at this beautiful period of her life was simply impossible; the blithe originality of her character would have fascinated a savage, or, more difficult still, a rival beauty. Sometimes this brilliant woman seemed to regard the girl with compassion, as if she saw something to pity in her; and all the time she watched her and Waldon with irritating scrutiny.

One evening she sat watching the pair as they conversed together, at a party, where all others were so engaged that Waldon hoped to escape observation, and, being very restless in his happiness, had stung Bertha into a flash of jealousy which swept like a summer storm across her face.

"The same old story," muttered Mrs. Forbes, darting a swift glance across the room. "He will snare her as I was snared—leave her as he left me! Am I coward enough to sit by, and aid in this? No, no, a thousand times no! The girl is too fair, too good! I will warn her!"

She did warn her—but not then. The old dread was too strong upon her.

That night Waldon asked for a seat in her carriage, and after Bertha was set down, half angry, half sad, at her mother's door, the two had a long drive together, as Mrs. Forbes' residence lay far apart from his hotel. They were in the dark, sitting opposite each other in silence, for it was long since Waldon had cared to interest her. The proud woman felt the sting of all this, and it helped her to be brave.

"Waldon," she said; "one word—are you striving to make this girl love you?"

"And if I am, madam, what then?"

"Only this, it is cruel—it is unmanly!"

"Cruel? Well, you are a judge of that," answered the man, with a sneer that made her white teeth close firmly.

"I will warn her of the evil thing she is taking to her heart."

"No, you will not!"

"But I will!"

"Ha! you will? That is daring a good deal; don't you think so?"

"I am ready to dare a good deal, rather than see that noble girl suffer, as she will—as she must—either by your love or hate!"

"Madam, you have not yet learned what my hate is!"

The man leaned forward, with a hand on each knee as he spoke, and the light of a street lamp, that fell across his face, betrayed a keen, wolfish expression, that would have frightened a less brave woman.

"It cannot be more fearful than your love," she said, shuddering in spite of herself.

"Attempt to interfere in the slightest particular between my pleasure and the girl who has just left us and you shall find the difference!"

"That I certainly will do!" answered the lady, in a low, firm voice.

"If you dare!—if you dare!"

"This is a threat—a most manly threat."

"Yes, it *is* a threat; perhaps you understand its extent?"

"And mine is a duty!"

Again Waldon leaned forward, with a hand on each knee, till his face almost touched hers.

"Then do this duty, if you have the courage!"

Mrs. Forbes made no answer, but leaned back in her carriage, pale as marble, and almost as cold. Not another word was spoken. She knew what his threat meant, and shrunk from it, brave woman as she was.

Waldon smiled to himself, when a lamp they passed revealed the whiteness of her features to him.

The carriage stopped; two bronze and crystal lanterns poured their light over the curving steps which led to the mansion she inhabited. Waldon stood on the pavement watching her. How firmly she walked up the steps, scarcely touching those stone balustrades with her hand, or turning her eyes upon him. She had not seemed to notice that he stood ready to help her from the carriage, but swept by him with slow, imperial scorn. Was his slave about to escape him thus?

"Mrs. Forbes! Alice!"

She did not seem to hear this name, uttered in the old, entrancing voice, but passed upward through the door, and out of sight.

Waldon stood a moment, muttered something under

his breath, and stepped into the carriage again, where he took a tiny, enamelled box from his pocket, struck a light from one of the delicate wax tapers it contained, and slowly kindled a cigar, muttering, between whiffs of fragrant smoke:

"She may threaten once too often. Heavens, what a bore all this is! I would rather sit in a dining-room, amid dregs of wine and stale smoke, an hour after my appetite is gone, than quarrel with a woman I have ceased to care for!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

MIDNIGHT IN MRS. FORBES' LIBRARY.

WILSON FORBES was a studious man, and his wife found him in the library, bending over a book, quite forgetful that the clock had struck two. He looked up as the lady entered, and observed, with some interest, that her eyes were shining like diamonds, while the face they lighted so brilliantly was strangely colorless.

"What has happened? Are you ill?" he inquired, anxiously, laying down his book as she threw the ermine mantle from her white shoulders, sunk down at his feet, and laid her head upon his knee. "What is the matter, child?"

"Wilson, do you really love me?"

The husband smiled at this absurd question, put to him so earnestly, at the dead of night, and passed his hands over the shining braids of her hair, which a few great diamonds lighted up like stars.

"What a question, dear? Was I compelled to marry you?"

"No! no! Not that!"

"Or were you so abundantly wealthy that I was tempted into it?"

"Was I then so dear to you? Am I now?"

"Dear as my own life, Alice. Why should you doubt it?"

"Would it hurt you—would it kill you—if—if we parted?"

"Parted! You and I?" said the husband, looking into those bright eyes in fear that his wife was mad. "The very thought is sinful."

"I know it is, Wilson. Nothing but sin could ever part us. But the past! Oh! if one could seize upon that, and tear months or years out of it!"

"That might well be the prayer of an old fellow like your husband, Alice, because he would gladly bury a great many things; but what has your bright youth to remedy or regret?"

"One thing—only one; but that is so bitter!"

"I can guess it, Alice. You cannot force yourself to love a grave old fellow, fifteen years your senior, as he loves you."

She lifted her head in quick surprise, her lips apart, every feature of her beautiful face bright with eloquent protest.

"I have ceased to love everything on earth but you," she said—"everything!"

Wilson Forbes was a tranquil man, fifteen years older than his wife; but his face lighted up with the joy and beauty of youth as the woman at his feet said this, and a pathos and earnestness that thrilled him from head to

foot, certainly never felt before, took full possession of his soul then.

"My darling!" he said, bending over her, with tears in his eyes; "why did you never say this to me before?"

"I could not; there was something between us!"

"No, no, darling! you imagined it."

The lady shook her head and bent her eyes on the floor, afraid to meet the tenderness in his, that her next words might drive away forever.

Forbes was a proud, sometimes stern man, truthful as Heaven, brave, as good men usually are. Could he forgive the cowardice of her silence? or bear to know that during the short married life, which seemed so pure, another man had controlled her actions and made her a very bond slave, because he had possessed her heart in the first flower of her life?

"Wilson!"

"Well, dear."

The strong man bent down and kissed her neck, but his lips found it cold as marble, and left no red stain behind them. All the blood had centred around her heart.

"Wilson, would you want to kill me? or, what might be so much worse, put me away, if I told you—if you were made certain that I had loved another man?"

"When?"

His voice was low and hoarse. The knee against which she leaned shook ominously.

"Before I ever saw or heard of you."

She spoke with such difficulty that, with his head bent, the man could hardly gather in her words. Even thus they unlocked the deathly contraction of his features, and brought the breath afresh to his lips.

"Who was the man?"

She tried to answer, but could not. It was her doom that she was called upon to utter.

"Give me his name."

"Russell Waldon!"

"The man you have been intimate with since?"

"Yes; that man."

He did not push her from the support she had so humbly taken; but she felt his whole frame grow still. It seemed to harden into stone.

"Go on!" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

"I was young and motherless. There was no human being to care much for me but my brother, and he was away. You have seen this man."

"Curse him!"

In her whole married life, Alice had never heard a harsh word from her husband's lips before. This curse struck through her heart like a sword.

"Well, go on!"

"He was different to any man I had seen. He singled me out, and seemed to worship me."

"So, in return you worshipped him."

The tortured man spoke bitterly, and that gave the woman at his feet a little courage.

"Call it worship, if you will. I was an ardent, romantic girl, with enough talent to look upon a man of genius as a god, and to mistake this wild homage of the brain for love—"

"Mistake it!"

"Then I thought it was little less than adoration—now I wonder at myself."

"Still you loved him."

"Oh, Wilson! Wilson! if I could only make you

understand how different, how wild and puerile it was, compared to—to—"

"Compared to what?"

"To the calm, solemn, beautiful love that I—that a wife feels for her true, good husband."

"Alice!"

She had left his support and was on her knees before him, her eyes lifted to the white agony of his face, her hands clasped in appeal.

"No, no! Heaven is my judge, it was not love that I felt for this man, but an insanity of the brain. Still I thought it love; I called it love. In every line and letter that passed between us, that sacred word was desecrated."

The woman was getting fearfully excited. While condemning herself with those trembling lips, she pleaded with her eyes, and wildly searched her husband's face for some sign of mercy.

Forbes took her clasped hands in his.

"You did not love this man, yet ever since our marriage have held him as a close friend."

"I could not help it. I was the fashion—powerful in society—and an ambition to shine there seized upon him. He bade me open the way for him. I was in his power—"

"In his power! Woman, do you know what these words mean?"

"Yes, I was in his power. Oh, mercy! Do not shrink from me so! He had my letters—silly verses that I wrote—and would not give them up. If I rebelled, he threatened to publish them to the whole world; worst of all, he threatened to send them to you!"

"The infamous villain!"

"By this fear he held me. My whole nature revolted.

I detested him. That which had seemed so beautiful, so god-like, was rank hypocrisy, which I loathed; but he had my letters—he had my letters!”

Forbes grasped her hands with iron force.

“One word. Look in my face, Alice. What was in those letters?”

“I do not know. Wild romance, rash expressions—such as a woman blushes for when she knows that all she has experienced was a fever, in which no feeling of true affection entered—promises for the future. Great Heavens! I cannot tell what was in the letters. He would not give them up, though I begged him on my knees. I only wanted to make them ashes, and breathe again, but he would not give them up.”

“You talk wildly, Alice, and do not answer.”

“Not answer! I do not understand!”

The man hesitated. Thoughts stung him which those manly lips refused to frame into speech. She saw the struggle with child-like bewilderment; then dawning comprehension of a doubt she had not dreamed of widened her black eyes, and a flood of burning red came with a sudden rush over her face, neck, and arms.

“Oh, Wilson! you did not think that?”

The reproach in those eyes, the sudden uplifting of her figure, the proud astonishment in her voice, might have convinced a less disturbed man that he was wronging an innocent woman; but the tempest raging in that usually calm nature blinded him, heart and brain. The pride of her accused womanhood seemed like audacity to him. As she held out her hands with a protest which had pathos in its very pride, he put her from him, and she fell, like one dead, at his feet. He bore her to the couch in her own room, and, when a struggle of returning life came back, left her there alone.

CHAPTER XLIV.

BURNED LETTERS.

THE library in which Russell Waldon sat, the next morning after his unpleasant interview with Mrs. Forbes, was like the man himself, a splendid incongruity. The shelves of those tall rosewood bookcases were loaded with contrasting volumes. Heavy treatises on political and social sciences, ponderous histories, quaint manuscript, emblazoned tomes, light poems in blue and gold, library editions of great novelists, pamphlet novels—that flit *through* each year like autumn leaves, perishing like them—French memoirs and novels appealing to the coarser part of his nature, political pamphlets—all had their place on those shelves, as fine taste, sensuous appetites, sublime aspirations, fierce, selfish will, and wonderful power, struggled and burned in both heart and brain of the man himself.

In a great luxurious easy-chair—one mass of springs, and soft, silken cushions—this man sat, by a table covered with articles of rich bronze, glittering crystal and precious marbles. His velvet slippers were sunk deep into the thick plush of an Oriental carpet, and the loose sleeves of a soft cashmere dressing-gown swept the table whenever he carried his pen to the inkstand.

Near him, on the table, a bouquet of freshly cut flowers sent their perfume across his face. Just beyond them stood a mosaic card-receiver, running over with notes and letters, most of which he had not yet troubled himself to open; for he was busy with a fierce political article, and wrote with great rapidity, as if the words burned under his pen.

After this was completed, he leaned back in his chair, breathed heavily, like a tired race-horse, and taking up the bouquet, sank down among his cushions and idly inhaled its fragrance with half-closed eyes, and a sensuous smile on his lips. After resting thus a minute, he drew the card-receiver toward him, and opened one or two of the most dainty notes, smiling as he broke the crested seals, and unfolded the creamy paper with infinite satisfaction, which more than once ended in a faint sneer.

As he laid one of these missives down, a sudden and unpleasant thought seemed to strike him. He turned over the remaining letters with his hand, flung them down impatiently, not finding what he wanted, and frowning heavily, fell into thought.

"No line from her—no apology, and she fierce as a she-eagle last night! What does this mean? Surely the woman will not attempt to brave it out. That *would* be inconvenient just now; but the flowers—they, possibly, were from her."

Waldon rang the bell, which was answered by a trim, velvet-eyed young servant, who seemed to be on very confidential terms with his master.

"Scipio, I forgot to ask where these flowers came from."

"Don't know for certain, sir, but the straw-colored note there, just under your hand, came with it."

"I have not read it yet," said Waldon, carelessly taking up the note. "What, only her! How the creature loves me—as if one cared to remember a ball flirtation forever; but then the flowers are of use. Here, Scipio, attach my card to that, and have it sent at once to Mrs. Forbes."

Scipio took the bouquet and went out, breaking into a mellow laugh as he closed the door.

"That's so like Mr. Waldon," he said; "gets bouquets from old loves and sends 'em round to new ones, after he's smelt on 'em long enough hisself—cute as a razor; he! he!"

As Scipio followed his messenger to the door, a gentleman came up the steps.

"Is Mr. Waldon in?"

"Not sure about it—oh, Mr. Forbes—certain sure he's always at home to you. This way—we shall find him in the library."

Waldon started from his seat as Scipio flung open the library door, and a quick flush shot over his face.

"What! you, Forbes, at this time in the morning! Come in, come in! How is the mad—"

Waldon was intending to ask after the health of Mrs. Forbes, but a strange expression, that stirred the calm of his visitor's face, checked the half-uttered word on his insolent lips.

Forbes did not take the seat to which Waldon pointed, but, with his hat in one hand, paused by the library table until Scipio had left the room.

"Sit down—sit down, my dear fellow; there is the mate to my own chair, with its arms wide open."

Forbes took no heed of this half-jovial, half-nervous invitation, but, leaning one hand on the table, looked Waldon sternly in the face.

"Mr. Waldon, you have some letters addressed to you by my wife."

A red flush shot across Waldon's forehead, and a vicious glitter came into his eyes.

"I beg your pardon; I have no letters written by Mrs. Forbes."

A swift, contemptuous smile stirred the husband's mouth, and the words he uttered were full of scorn.

"This is subterfuge. I know when the letters were written, and whose signature they bear. When Miss Lane became my wife, she did not change her identity."

"But what if I still deny that such letters exist?"

"It would be a falsehood; or the threat you made my wife, last night, that of a coward, who did not possess the power he boasted of!"

"Ha!"

"I am waiting for those letters, sir!"

"I will not give them to you, or any other man—would not if they existed. A lady's letters can only be surrendered to herself."

"My wife has already demanded them more than once, and you dared to refuse."

"I dare do a great many things. It does not require much courage to refuse the demands of any woman; but tears and entreaties, such as I have resisted in a beautiful young creature we will hold nameless, bear hard upon me, I must confess."

"You confess this to *me*?"

"I confess to no man or woman alive!"

The face of the husband was locked like iron. He drew a step nearer to Waldon, who shrank a little among his silken cushions, while the pupils of his eyes dilated with what, in a small, weak man, would have been called cowardice.

"The letters, sir! The letters!"

"Why—why, Forbes, you—you look ready to murder me."

"I *am* ready to murder you!" answered the ashen-faced man.

Waldon turned his eyes from that threatening face to the hand, clenched like a vice upon the table. It looked

hard and cold as marble—a thin wiry hand, strong enough in itself to take a man's life.

"Turn that diabolical look away, Forbes, and let us talk this thing over. After all, it amounts to nothing."

The hand upon the table was slowly lifted, thrust into a pocket, and drawn forth again grasping a pistol.

"There is no argument or explanation here. I want every line my wife ever wrote to you!"

This man was not to be trifled with. Waldon saw that with a strange thrill which he would not recognize as cowardice. But he struggled to maintain some show of dignity.

"I will send them to her," he said, eying the pistol nervously. "You cannot, as a gentleman, ask more than that of me."

"Very well—I will be your messenger!"

"But it was you she most feared."

"I will be your messenger!"

These words were repeated with a sharp click, which made the stalwart man in that easy-chair catch his breath.

"Put up your pistol. We are neither cowards nor bullies, to settle our difficulties in this way. Trusting to your honor as a gentleman not to read these letters, I will deliver them to you."

"I make no promise!"

"And I demand none. The honor—"

"We will not talk of honor here!" interrupted Forbes, sternly.

"Besides," persisted Waldon, "if she authorized you—"

"I am waiting for the letters!"

"You shall possess them at once. I have no wish to

continue an interview in which all rules of ordinary politeness are ignored," answered Waldon, struggling hard to maintain some show of dignity.

He arose from his chair and opened a drawer of the library table, which was half full of daintily folded notes—cream-colored, rose-tinted, and pale blue—from which a faint confusion of perfume stole out, sickening to the man who waited for his share of the hoarded correspondence.

Waldon took from this mass a package neatly tied with white ribbon, for he was an orderly man in such matters. This he extended to Forbes, who reached forth his hand for it as men shrink from serpents when compelled to touch them.

"They are all here?" he demanded.

"Every one—and much good may they do you," Waldon added, in a fierce undertone, locking the drawer with a jerk.

Without a word or a gesture of all the contempt he felt, Forbes turned and left the room firmly, till he closed the door; then with slow, wavering footsteps, for he had thrust those letters in his bosom, and their perfumes made him faint.

"Is your mistress in her room?" he inquired of a French maid, in a pretty morning dress and butterfly cap, whom he met in the hall, after letting himself into his own house.

"Yes, sir, she is there, but not well; her head aches terribly, and her eyes are heavy."

Forbes did not wait to hear more, but went at once to the pretty room in which his wife lay suffering upon that couch of pale blue silk, as if it had been a rack of torture.

She knew where her husband had gone, and shivered as the sound of his footsteps smote her from the stairs.

He came into the room quietly; but it seemed to her as if his footsteps shook the house.

"Alice!"

Her nerves were so strained that even this gentle word brought a cry from the woman's lips.

"Look up, Alice; here are your letters."

She sprang to her feet, took the letters between her trembling hands, and broke into a low, hysterical laugh, which was shaken with sobs in its first utterance. Then she lifted her eyes to his, and saw the expression that had crushed her still there.

"Read them!" she said. "For my sake—for God's sake—read them, every word!"

A flash of lightning seemed to burn across the husband's face. He snatched the letters from her hands, went to a wood fire that blazed behind its fender of glittering steel, and cast them into the flames. Then he turned, fell down upon his knees by the couch she had left, and the passion so long suppressed shook him like a tempest.

The woman stood as he had left her, pale and terrified. Was this the agony of an eternal parting? Had he read those letters, and found, in their mad, girlish enthusiasm, words which his sensitive nature could not forgive? Surely, surely they could not contain anything so false to the truth as that! Oh, if he had not burned them!

She looked from her prostrate husband to the fire, which had seized upon the package and was curling around it in sharp threads of flame. With a single leap she sprang to the hearth, snatched her letters from the hot, red coals, and stamped the fire out from them with

her feet. Then she threw herself down by her husband, clung to him with both arms, and besought him with many tears to read the letters before he condemned her so bitterly—before he left her forever.

Wilson Forbes started from his knees, lifting up his wife in his arms as if she had been the little child she seemed like in her pathetic pleading and passionate tears.

"Leave you forever—leave you forever, my wife! Did you not know—could you not feel—that the thought had left my heart? I was thanking Almighty God that He had taken that bitter cup from me."

Forbes drew her closer to his bosom as he spoke. His trembling lips touched her forehead. He smoothed back her hair with his hands, and gazed into her eyes tenderly, as if she had just been given back to him from the brink of the grave.

"But you did think of it!" she said, with a thrill of pain in her voice.

"When I had those letters in my hands, Alice, and could have read them, I forbore. The fear of what I might find there took away my strength. I could not thus read your heart. 'I will give them to her,' I said. 'If she falters, or hesitates, I shall understand that she can henceforth be no wife of mine. By her own acts my wife shall accuse or defend herself.' It was a fearful ordeal, and deep, deep is my thanksgiving that all doubts, like those miserable papers, are in ashes."

"But they are not entirely burned, Wilson. You will read them yet."

"No! Let them perish out of our lives, never to be thought of again."

Forbes seized the half-burned letters as he spoke, and

thrust them deep into the flames. As they were consumed, his wife felt like a prisoner from whose limbs a ball and chain had dropped.

CHAPTER XLV.

BERTHA AND FLETCHER.

BERTHA entered the parlor with hesitation, yet the man waiting so anxiously there had saved her life, and, in the first flush of her gratitude, might have been her plighted husband but for his own generous forbearance. He had kept his word faithfully, and left her free to study the heart that had been offered to him, and which he had put aside for a time with heroic self-abnegation.

Now, she was afraid of this man; ashamed of herself—of her ingratitude and inconsistency. In what way could she meet him, with the image of another burned into her heart, and the kisses of another man almost warm upon her lips?

She stood a whole minute, with her hand on the door-knob, longing to run away and hide herself. She went in at last, looking pale and harassed, feeling as if her heart would never beat freely again.

Fletcher was scarcely less agitated when he came forward to receive her. The first glance of her face, he thought, would reveal his fate; but when he saw it so pale and downcast, drooping with strange embarrassment, the change puzzled him.

Had love made this proud, frank girl timid, and almost awkward? Surely, something more than gratitude had been at work here!

This sweet, new-born hope brightened his face as he came forward and took her hand, which lay, for one moment, like cold lead in his clasp, chilling him to the heart, then dropped away.

"You are ill! Oh, tell me that you have been ill—very ill!" he said, alarmed.

"No, not very ill," she answered; "in fact, scarcely at all; but—but your coming was so sudden, it brought back that awful scene upon me so vividly, that—that I have lost all power to receive you as I ought."

"I should not have taken you by surprise. It was thoughtless; but, after all, this reception punishes me. Don't you think so?"

He smiled a little painfully, and, seating himself by her on the sofa, sought out her hand again. It was warmer now and trembled a little, as if the life were coming back.

"Bertha!"

The girl lifted her heavy eyes to his face, like a dumb animal pleading for mitigation of a threatened sentence; but dropped them again when she saw the hope shining in his.

"Bertha, have you nothing to tell me—no sweet assurance to give, after all these months of separation?"

This passionate cry of a heart searching for hers with such faithful constancy struck the girl as a sharp reproach. She began almost to hate herself as an ingrate.

"You cannot think—you must know that I am grateful."

The young man started up impatiently.

"That word again! I want no gratitude—I will not have it!"

"But you must! Because—because I have nothing else to bestow."

Bertha did not blush saying this. On the contrary, her lips turned white, and her teeth were set as if each word she uttered gave her pain.

"I hoped to love you," she continued, desperately. "I tried to love you; but—but something happened, and it became impossible."

"Something happened, Bertha! May I ask what?"

"I met another person, and, being only a woman, could not help what followed."

"Another person!"

"I have told no one as yet; but you have a right to ask. His name is Russell Waldon. You have seen it, I am sure."

Bertha looked up now, expecting to startle him into surprise by the glory of that name; but the black cloud upon his face startled her.

"*That man!* I hope not—I pray not!"

"Hope not—pray not! Mr. Fletcher, you surprise me!"

"Not as I have been surprised—not as I have been wounded. Oh, Bertha, Bertha, this is terrible!"

"What is terrible, Mr. Fletcher?—that I should have met one of the noblest, the most brilliant men on earth—one who can chain and thrill millions with a dash of his pen—hold multitudes by the spell of his voice—lead thousands by a thought, as great generals command armies! Is it strange or terrible that powers like these should be felt by a poor girl who has worshipped genius from her cradle up?"

The girl was animated enough now. No peach ripening in August sunshine was ever so richly red as her cheeks. She had feared young Fletcher a little while ago. Now, she was ready to defy him. What right had he to insinuate aught against the man she loved? Did he mean to take such liberties because he had saved her life? What were fifty such lives as hers compared with Waldon's genius?

"Let me make myself certain. You speak of a man who is known as an author—sometimes as a politician; a man remarkable for keen wit, which too often verges into satire?"

"Yes—yes. I do not know about the last, but it is probable."

"I fear it is the same man."

"'Fear!' Mr. Fletcher—'fear!'"

"Yes, Bertha, I fear it; for to love him would be greater peril than you and I were in when the bridge parted and left a yawning gulf for us to pass. I ask no gratitude for anything done there; but in this other and greater peril, which you will not see, and I cannot show you, let me at least step in between you and a future that I tremble at."

Bertha arose. In her anger she forgot all that this man had done for her; that he came there by her own invitation, and had a right to question her as he had done. Only a few months before, she had looked upon him as the best friend she had on earth; but that seemed a long time ago—years and years—for she had only begun to live since then. He had no right to come so far out of the past, and rake up the ashes of a selfish hope—no right, because of keen disappointment and bitter jealousy, to malign, even by a look, the man she loved.

"I cannot hear these insinuations against a man so great that neither you nor I are likely to understand him," she said, with dignity; "because that would be treason to—to my future husband."

Fletcher, too, arose, greatly agitated.

"Then you are engaged to this man?"

"Yes. You are the first, except one, to whom I have confessed it, but we are engaged. It is a secret as yet. Will you consider it as such?"

Fletcher smiled a little. With that dead, heavy pain at his heart, was he likely to talk of its cause? The request was not worth answering.

"You are about to leave me, I hope not in anger?" said Bertha, smitten with compassion by the anguish in that face. "It was not my fault, but my fate."

"No, I am not angry," answered Fletcher, "but surprised and pained beyond anything I ever expected to feel."

"And it is my evil fortune to bring this pain upon you—you, the bravest and—and—"

Here Bertha's pride gave way, and, covering her face with both hands, she burst into a passion of penitent tears.

"It was not my fault! it was not my fault!" she sobbed. "For the whole world I would not have given you a moment's pain!"

"I am sure of that," answered Fletcher, gently. "Do not grieve about it. I had no right to hope so fondly. But remember this, Bertha—nothing but death can change my love for you—"

"Oh, do not say that!"

"Or my friendship for you."

"You are too good! I do not deserve it," sobbed the girl.

"I may be mistaken about this—this gentleman."

Bertha looked up, and the tears in her eyes began to sparkle.

"You are! you are! Oh, believe me!"

"But if it should prove otherwise? You are singularly alone, Bertha—without protection."

"I know it! I know it!"

"Fatherless, brotherless—only that good old man at the farm-house."

"Don't! don't! You are wrong to speak of me as desolate now. What defence against the world is better than the love of a strong, brave man?"

Fletcher winced at this, but answered her cruel words firmly, as became an unselfish nature under suffering.

"If the time should come, Bertha, when this faith is broken—when you need a friend—I shall be near—I shall be ready. Farewell!"

"Farewell! No, no! You have not seen my mother. She pines to thank you for the life of her child."

"Not now. I could not bear it. Oh, Bertha, Bertha, if we had gone down together!"

The next moment Bertha was left alone, with these words ringing through her brain. There was a force of anguish in this speech that wrung the girl's heart. Why was it that she was doomed to offer only ingratitude for the love he offered and the great service he had rendered her? Not even the miserable boon of "hope deferred" was left for her to give. He had come after months of waiting to find her pledged to another.

No wonder the girl cast herself down and wept.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A DOUBLE EXPLANATION.

IT was over—painful as the interview had been, it was over. The one apprehension which had marred Bertha's perfect happiness was swept away in the little half hour that left Fletcher a wretched man. But the pain which this explanation left behind it was deep; for Bertha was sympathetic and generous; she hated to inflict suffering, if impatient in bearing it. Besides, she owed to this man the very life that Waldon found so precious. How had she rewarded him? By blasting the hopes she had herself rekindled—by almost reviling him, because he could not fall down and worship the idol for whom she had ruthlessly pushed him aside.

Bertha was generous enough to accuse herself bitterly after Fletcher left her. For half an hour she lay sobbing on the sofa; then her tears subsided; her thoughts wandered away to that other man, whose love had become the glory of her life, and remembering how Fletcher had dealt with his name, she began to exonerate herself, and doubt the motives of the faithful lover who had gone away, as it were, with a fiery arrow in his heart.

The girl had been expecting Waldon that day, as Lydia knew well enough, when that trailing dress of dark blue silk, with its garniture of soft, frosty lace, was put on so early; but in the excitement of that meeting, she had forgotten all about it, and wept her grief out in the twilight of that little parlor uninterrupted.

After that, as I have said, she fell to dreaming of the man she loved. This brought a rich, warm color back

to her cheeks, and slumbrous softness to her eyes, exquisitely sweet and childlike—a phase that often came over her, and was altogether at variance with the usual proud brilliancy of her character.

A step on the pavement—a ring at the door. Up the young girl sprang, catching the glad breath that brightened her parted lips, and placing a hand to either cheek, ran to the mirror, feeling terribly disarrayed and unfit to be seen.

It was not exactly a presentable figure that reflected itself in that broad mirror. The crimped hair was tangled in flossy brightness about her face; the long curl, tumbling in waves down her shoulder, was lengthened out of its crisp curves, and roughed like the plumage of an angry bird. The lace on her bosom and loose open sleeves was matted here and there, like cobwebs that a careless hand has touched. A pair of languid eyes looked on all this and kindled up a little. Two white hands shook out the wrinkled folds of her dress, and were trying to wind the curl over their trembling fingers, when Waldon came in and found the girl standing there, making a lovely picture of herself in the glass.

All at once her face became crimson, her long eyelashes drooped, and she stood before him like a guilty child caught stealing fruit.

The sensuous nature of the man was aroused by this living picture. With a bright glow of admiration on his face, he crossed the room, stole his arm softly about her waist, and bade her look up and assure him that the heavy languor about those eyes had not come from weeping.

Bertha lifted her eyes, saw his face smiling on her, and instantly her own lighted up. Thus they stood,

looking at each other in the glass, when the door opened, and Mrs. Canfield, with some colored worsted in her hand, paused upon the threshold. Seeing that man's arm encircling her daughter, she stood paralyzed, with the gorgeous worsted dropping from her pale hands, and thus the two saw her standing behind and apart from them in the mirror.

"My mother! Oh, mother!" cried Bertha, breaking away and running to the door. "She will fall! She is dying! Oh, mother! dear, dear mother! it is because he loves me—because we love each other! In a little, very little time, he would have told you of it, and asked you to let me marry him. Mother, mother, look up! Open your eyes and say that I am not killing you!"

But Mrs. Canfield did not speak; her face was deathly white, and she lay heavily in her daughter's arms.

"Oh, Waldon! help me hold her! She is falling! she is falling!"

True enough, before Waldon could offer help, Mrs. Canfield had sunk to the floor, and Bertha, going down with her, sat with that pale face in her lap.

Waldon offered but cold help. He was a man of resources, and could do a great many brilliant things, but in an emergency like this high genius does not avail much—in fact, if Bertha had been in a condition to regard her lover, she would have seen the shadow of a frown on his forehead. He was the last man on earth to forgive an interruption like that; besides, it involved a declaration which he was not prepared to make just then. So it was a stormy face that bent over the mother and daughter as they were grouped in a heap at his feet. Certainly the picture was a contrast to the one which had burned itself in the glass a minute before. Lydia

did not make it at all less striking when she came running through the door with a toilet bottle in one hand, a carafe of water in the other, and half a dozen crooked pins in her mouth; for Bertha's cry had found her mending an old dress, and at such times she was sure to thrust all the needful pins between her lips, as if they had been red pincushions.

"Lift her up higher, Miss Bertha. What! trembling so you can't? Why don't you take hold here, Mr. What's-your-name?—a standing there like a monement! But most men ain't worth their salt, and you're a man. Hold that bottle while I pour a drink down her throat. What's come over her, Miss Bertha? anything particular?"

"Don't talk, Lydia, but bring her to. How still she is! Can this be death?"

Bertha lifted her face to Waldon, craving some comfort from him; but the gloom in his eyes discouraged her. Did he think her mother dying?

"No! no! nothing of the sort!" said Lydia, darting a sharp glance at the man. "What's the use of frightening a soul to death with blounging looks, Mr. What's-your-name! Flowers is flowers, and I don't say anything agin'em; but potatoes are most needed in the long run, which means that help is better than poetry. There, she's winking her eyelashes, and coming to just like a baby waking up. Another drink of water, marm. I put a little on your face, but not enough to spoil your cap. How do you feel now?"

Mrs. Canfield took Lydia's hand, and attempted to draw herself to a sitting posture.

"Mother, are you better?"

Bertha's voice seemed to startle her mother. She

lifted a hand to her head—then arose slowly, and walked to the sofa, leaning on Lydia rather than her daughter's.

"You may go now," she said, gently, to the girl.

Lydia gathered up her bottles, thrust the pins into her mouth again, and left the room. When she was gone, the lady turned her still pale face upon Waldon.

"You had something to say to me, I think, sir."

"Oh, mother, do not speak so coldly," whispered Bertha.

"Something that I ought to hear," continued the gentle lady.

"It can be said in a few words, my dear madam," answered Waldon. "I love your daughter dearly, and have asked her to marry me."

There was a shade of annoyance in the man's face—a tone of bitterness in his voice—as if he had been entrapped into this confession against his wishes.

"And my daughter?" rejoined the lady. "What did she say to you?"

"Oh, mother, I said that I loved him dearly!" whispered the girl, trembling all over.

"And this is so? God help us all! Sir, do you come here to break up my home? Cannot you understand that she is all the world to me—that you ask me for my life when you claim her?"

"I know that she must be the light and life of any home!" said Waldon.

"But you will not separate us! Tell her that, Waldon. I could not live without my mother, even with you."

Then Bertha *did* become aware of the dark frown which completely transfigured her lover.

"Are you offended with me, Waldon?"

Instantly the man's face changed. He was a good actor, and having taken his part, resolved to carry it out well.

"Offended, Bertha! I am never offended with you!"

"And it is impossible you can be angry with mother."

"Quite impossible. My dear madam, in giving your daughter to me you lose nothing, but, I trust, obtain the care and protection of a son."

The gentle lady drew a deep breath, and placed her little hand in the soft white palm held out to her.

"Forgive me—there will be much to say between us before it comes to that."

"Fortunately, there need be little question of my fitness to become your daughter's husband. My name is not so obscure that you will not easily learn all my faults."

Mrs. Canfield bent her head. She was evidently thinking of something far away from his eligibility. At last she arose, and turned in her old sweet way to Waldon.

"This has come upon me suddenly. It is natural, I suppose; but we have lived so quietly, and Bertha is young yet. When we meet again, I shall be more able to converse with you."

"Meantime you will not interfere?" said Waldon, eagerly.

"I could not interfere against the happiness of my child," answered the lady, with pathetic quietness. "Now, if you please, I will go up-stairs. No, Bertha, I can walk alone."

With a slow, noiseless step Mrs. Canfield left the room; but the moment she was outside the door, those small hands clasped and wrung themselves, and in creep-

ing up-stairs she sat down twice, moaning faintly, as if each motion gave her a pang.

"Now," exclaimed Waldon, the moment he was alone with Bertha—"now we indeed belong to each other, and our engagement must be no secret. The whole world may know it for aught I care. We can defy all mischief-makers."

"Mischief-makers, indeed! I trust we have nothing to fear from them," said Bertha.

"I do not know. It is impossible to say what the jealousy and craft of a disappointed woman can accomplish."

"A disappointed woman, Waldon! I have no idea what you mean."

"Of course not. How can a creature so innocent and honorable dream of the craft and malice which make some of her sex so dangerous? I speak harshly, but even you cannot always escape."

"What can you mean?"

"Sit down, dearest. I ought not to have mentioned this; but it has annoyed me, and hereafter we must keep nothing back, even though a revelation may touch one's delicacy a little. You have known Mrs. Forbes intimately, Bertha?"

"Yes; she has been very kind to me."

"Not near so kind as she would gladly have been to the man who loves you!"

"How—what—Mrs. Forbes?"

"She was not always Mrs. Forbes, Bertha, and never would have been if I had consented to give her the name that is pledged to you. There was a time when this lady almost persecuted me with her love. Even now, married woman as she is, the news of our en-

gagement will drive her wild. She half suspects it already."

"But why? You never loved her! Oh, say that you never loved her!"

"No, heaven is my judge, I never did! In that lies my offence. So long as I remain single she will rest content; but when she knows the truth, she may hate you and ignore or persecute me, gentle and proud as people think her; so be on your guard, my beloved."

CHAPTER XLVII.

AMONG THE FLOWERS.

THE conservatory in which those two lovely women stood was a perfect arch of rolling glass, lifted so high that the golden-haired acacias, and fruit-laden orange trees, grew almost to their full stature under it. Underneath was a forest of Japan lilies, with their snow-white feathery leaves; seeded ferns, and yet more stately plants, in gorgeous bloom; japonicas, in white blossom; fuchsias, laden with purple and crimson bells; twining jessamines and passion flowers—crowded all that was delicious and sweet in the tropics around their feet and over their heads.

Mrs. Forbes had drawn Bertha out from the gay throng of dancers, whose tread could be faintly heard among those blossoming plants, rolling like a dull bass through the joyous music of a waltz. They had been standing a few minutes under the ground-glass lamps that swung like mammoth pearls among the plants, talk-

ing of the ball, of the flowers, of everything but the thoughts that were preying upon them both.

These young women had been together a great deal within the last two months, and had learned to love each other well; but they now seemed almost afraid, and looked down shyly, talking of things that did not interest them, because one did not wish to ask, and the other shrank from explaining what had brought them there.

At last Mrs. Forbes spoke, and her words brought a strange smile to Bertha's lips.

"Do not be angry with me, Bertha, if I say something that seems intrusive; but I have been so anxious about you of late."

"Of me—and why?"

"Because you seem to me in danger."

"Danger, Mrs. Forbes! I am aware of none."

"You are so much with Mr. Waldon, and he is not a safe man. Oh, Heavens, it is too late!"

Mrs. Forbes might well start back and fling out her arms, for the hot fire smouldering in Bertha Canfield's eyes broke through the drooping lashes that had almost touched her cheek as she listened, and a smile of withering scorn shot across her red lips.

"Forgive me, Bertha, it may be too late to save you from a peril that makes me tremble; but though you are angry, I shall not regret having spoken. It was a painful duty—you will never know how painful."

"Why undertake it, then? Mrs. Forbes, I have asked neither protection nor counsel from any one."

"Because I love you, Bertha, and feel for your unprotected condition—because silence in me would be criminal."

"There exist more criminal things than silence," said Bertha, scornfully.

"True, perils that an innocent girl never dreams of until they overwhelm her. Do be warned, Bertha, before this bad, bad man, wins a heart of which he is utterly unworthy."

"This advice, madam, whatever your motive may be in giving it, comes too late."

"Oh, Heaven forbid!"

"I am engaged to Mr. Waldon—you malign my future husband in what you are saying."

"Is this true, Bertha?"

The evident distress with which the question was asked aroused Bertha to something like sympathy for the woman who had failed to interest the noble being who was so truly hers.

"Yes, it is true; he loves me; and oh, how could I help loving him!"

"Then God help you! I have no more to say."

"It would have been better if you had not said so much. As it is, I will endeavor to think the motive friendly, and forget it. Indeed, I am too happy for anything but kind thoughts, even for you, Mrs. Forbes, who have almost frightened me."

While Bertha was speaking, a crimson curtain that shut out the conservatory from a boudoir leading to the picture gallery was drawn back, and a gentleman stooped under it, looking in among the flowers.

"Alice, Alice, are you here? The carriage is waiting, and we promised Mr. Forbes to get home early."

"A few minutes more—only that, brother. I am engaged just this moment."

The crimson curtain dropped suddenly, and the man went away.

"Who was that?" demanded Bertha.

"That—my brother—I thought you knew him a little."

"If it is Mr. Fletcher, I do know him; but until now I had no idea that he was your brother."

"His name is Egbert Fletcher, and he is my half-brother—my mother was married twice; but we have seen but little of each other, he being of the South, and I living North, most of the year, ever since I was married."

"I begin to comprehend," said Bertha, indignantly. "You were my friend, and supposed to influence me."

"What is this? I do not understand you, Bertha Canfield."

"Perhaps not—it will suffice that I understand everything; but I had a higher opinion of your brother."

"My brother! what has he done to offend you? Only a single week in New York, during which he has hardly left my house. You must not speak unkindly of my brother, Miss Canfield. I cannot bear that, even from you."

"Unkindly—unkindly of Mr. Fletcher! No, let him deal with me ever so darkly, I cannot do that. Do you know that he saved my life—stood with me over an awful whirlpool of waters—a gulf before us, death all around us—people shrieking, and flinging up their hands on the shore; but he saved me! he saved me!—and you are his sister. But why should you both try to make the life he gave so little worth having as it would be if I believed you. Never speak to me against Waldon again and we may always be friends, if it is only for your brother's sake."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

GOING AWAY.

THERE was considerable excitement in high fashionable circles when it became generally known that Waldon, their pet and idol, was engaged to Bertha Canfield. Popular and beautiful as she was, people would not quite reconcile themselves to the idea that she had made a conquest of the most brilliant man of their various sets, for Waldon was received in all with open arms.

Two or three things threw a little eddy of scandal into the news. Mrs. Forbes, who had formerly been on the most intimate terms with Waldon, scarcely spoke to him now—indeed, swept by him, when he had Bertha on his arm, with calm and imperial disdain, which created comment not altogether favorable to the lady. If this disaffection happened to be mentioned before Waldon, he said nothing, but that mobile face took an expression which was too eagerly read, and without a word this strangely gifted man set the idea afloat that, on the announcement of his approaching marriage to another woman, he had found it imperative on his honor to break off all acquaintance with Mrs. Wilson Forbes.

Brilliant as this match was considered for Bertha, it certainly gave no feelings of exaltation to the mother, who almost worshipped her. From the hour when she became convinced, beyond all hope, that her daughter loved the man, Mrs. Canfield had drooped visibly. The fainting fits, to which she was so liable, became more frequent. She was often found on her knees, praying or weeping bitterly. Her delicate nerves were all unstrung. A door hastily closed would set them to quivering; a

strange footstep on the stairs filled her eyes with affright. Even in her own room she sometimes seemed like a wounded deer hunted to its covert.

Happiness is often both selfish and blind. Bertha, in the whirl and glory of her new life, saw this change in her mother without understanding its significance.

"She is timid, poor, dear mamma! and Waldon's wonderful greatness overpowers her. She does not feel at home with him yet; but when we are married—when she is with him all the day long, and learns to worship his genius as I do—all this will be different."

But something was preying on this little woman, and her health broke down utterly. She needed change of air, the doctor said. That might set her up. At any rate, it must be tried.

This opinion terrified Bertha. She forgot everything—even Waldon—in her mother's danger, and began to reproach herself bitterly for the blind neglect which had sprung out of her happiness.

"Where shall we go, mamma, dear? Back to the New England home, where grandmother and I can pet you into health again?" she said, with tears in her eyes, after the doctor had left them.

"There? No! no! no!"

It was strange, Bertha thought, but Mrs. Canfield seldom spoke of her old home in those days that a shudder did not creep over her. Now a gleam of terror broke into her great eyes, and she shrank from her daughter as if trying to escape a blow.

Bertha was disheartened. Where could they go?

"Anywhere," said Mrs. Canfield, desperately, "so that we are away from here and left alone."

A sudden ring at the door made the poor woman start and listen.

Lydia came in with a letter, which she was examining closely with a cross fire of her two eyes.

"Can't make it out—letters all slurred together," she said, discontentedly, giving up her examination of the post-mark. "But here it is, Miss B."

"From Mary Noel!" exclaimed Bertha, joyfully. "Dear, dear girl! it is so long since I have heard from her!"

She tore open the envelope, and read the letter—a pleasant one, doubtless, for her face brightened all over.

"Oh, mamma, this seems providential. Mary wants us so much. Her home is beautiful, she says, and her father anxious that we should start at once and watch the spring which is budding hyacinths and crocuses out already. Shall we go, mother? Isn't this a chance?"

"Yes, yes," answered Mrs. Canfield. "It is a good way off; I shall have time to breathe there. Of course, Bertha, we will go."

The little lady started to her feet, snatched up her handkerchief, and looked around eagerly, as if she expected to start that moment; but the bell rung a second time, and she dropped back upon her couch as if a bullet had gone through her.

"It is Waldon!" said Bertha. "How he will hate to part with us!"

The girl flew down-stairs, and found her lover in the little drawing-room, walking up and down.

"Well, my bird of Paradise," he said, drawing her toward him, as she held out both hands, "you have been crying. What is the matter?"

"Oh, Waldon, the doctor has been here. He says mamma is very ill, and that she must go away somewhere."

"And you are going?"

That heavy frown, which Waldon did not guard against so much now, darkened his face. In his supreme egotism he could hardly forgive the feeble little woman up-stairs for claiming anything that he desired.

"Oh, yes, we must, you know. But you will miss me—I hope you will miss me."

"Miss you? Does a man miss his health when taken from him? But is this settled, that you look so earnest? Surely the old lady will not go so far that I cannot come to you?"

"And will you? Oh, will you?"

"Tell me where I am to go, before I answer."

"On the James river, below Richmond. I can scarcely tell more; only it is a lovely place, and my friend, Miss Noel, lives there."

"On the James river!—the Noels! Why, they are in the neighborhood of John Hyde!"

"Indeed! oh, that is splendid! Can you come?"

"Can I? Of course I can. An author has only to put his favorite paper in a trunk, a gold pen in his pocket, and business travels with him. So it is decided that you are going?"

"Yes, yes. I never saw mother so eager about anything."

"And you are just as eager."

"Oh, yes, now that all I care for on earth will be near us—before, I would not let her see it, but my heart was very heavy."

"It will be a pleasant trip for us all. You will not have been on the James a week before my friend Hyde will have a guest. I will write to him at once. But tell me about your friend. Who is she—a native of Virginia?"

"Yes; but she has spent half her life north. At school we were like sisters."

"Tell me something about her, as we are doomed to meet. What kind of a girl is she? Languid and lazy, I dare say?"

"No, no; she is bright as a bird—full of life, generous—"

"There, there, no more praise, or you will make me hate her—school-girls are always more enthusiastic than discriminating. I dare say your pet classmate is a plain, commonplace little thing—two beautiful women seldom cleave to each other."

"There—mistaken again! I—I don't mean about myself, but Mary Noel is perfectly—that is, very handsome; and as for being commonplace, no one can say that of her. Everybody admires Mary."

"Indeed! then she must be an heiress. Nothing like great expectations for making a girl popular—but I hate heiresses."

"She is an only child, if that is being an heiress, and mistress of her father's house."

"Then her father is a widower. Be careful, lady-bird, that he does not cast somebody we know of into the shadows."

Bertha's voice rung out in a mellow laugh, as if it had been rioting among flowers.

"The idea!" she said, dragging the phrase out of her school-girl days, with a fling of the head which Waldon might have criticised in another, and rather disliked now.

"Not a very extraordinary idea. The gentleman is fine-looking, and not so very much older than I am. I saw him when he took leave of you on the steamer, and caught a glimpse of his daughter."

"Did you? Then say if she was not beautiful?"

"I did not think so, for you were standing by."

"Flatterer! But I must go up-stairs—that is mamma's voice."

Bertha ran up-stairs the moment her lover disappeared, and struck all the returning life out of Mrs. Canfield by telling her that Waldon would follow them to the James river.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LYDIA'S FIRST LETTER.

THE postman's knock! Lydia ran to the door, swung it open, and reached forth her hand.

"Miss Lydia—Lydia—"

"That's for me my own self!" cried the girl, snatching at the letter in an ecstasy of excitement.

"Well, I hope you can make it out," said the postman, laughing, as he went down the steps, "for a crooked hand I never got hold of."

Lydia tore off the envelope from her letter and began to read it in the hall. It began, "Dear Liddy;" but that was crossed out, and the substitution was:

"MISS LIDDY:

"I take up my pen hoping that you are well and enjoying good health, which I am, with Nancy and the rest—all sending love but myself, which is respects. Miss Liddy, the reason of my writing this is that things are going all wrong over to the brown house. Miss Clara is pined down to a shadder, with eyes that scare

you when you look into them—scare you and make you cry at the same time. She don't have no work to do now. The people here have got mad about her riding out with young Mr. Lane, and won't send her any. Mother does her best, and so do I; but trout isn't plenty, and it's a sin to kill birds so near nesting-time.

"Miss Liddy, she won't go out to ride or get into the dug-out, but wanders off and off alone sometimes, and comes back white as a ghost; but sometimes with her cheeks a burning like hot coals. She is sick, I tell you, and going to die; that's my opinion, and it's mother's too, saying nothing of Nancy. I've seen her faint clear away more'n once, and the old lady is growing so sweet and pleasant that it scares me half to death. Something is a going to happen in that house; I know it is.

"Can't you think of something as ought to be done? You allus could plan things better than anybody. Do try now; for if something isn't done right off, Miss Clara will be dead. Since the time you know of she hasn't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Couldn't *he* be coaxed back some way? Your true friend to command,

"BENJAMIN VOSE."

Lydia's face was a study as she read this letter. It flashed, it frowned, and grew tender with grief, all in a moment. During Waldon's visits to the house she had been full of smothered indignation, kept in check only by her promise to Clara Anderson. At first this astute man had recognized her with some apprehension; but she never seemed to remember him, and, like most egotists, he regarded persons of her class more as automations than human beings. That this singular girl had suspected him from the first, and read his arts with the

keen acumen of a critic, never once entered his imagination.

Waldon was waiting in the parlor when Lydia got her letter. She knew nothing of his engagement to Bertha, but saw with anger that the young lady was treading closely in the footsteps of Clara Anderson, and resented it in many ways, especially when she happened to be for a minute alone with Waldon. With the open letter fluttering in her hand, she walked into the parlor, marched up to its rather impatient inmate, and held the missive out to him.

"There, read that and see what you think of yourself for being here!" she said in a voice that snapped like her eyes.

Waldon put the letter aside with his hand.

"Take the scrawl away. Some one in the kitchen will read it for you," he said.

"No, they won't. I promised Miss Clara Anderson never to mention your name, and if this letter don't do it right out it's just as bad."

"My name—Miss Clara Anderson!" said Waldon, struck with absolute amazement.

"Just that and nothing more. I ain't blind if I am cross-eyed, nor deaf neither; but I've promised, and that's enough. If I hadn't, as sure as you're alive Miss Bertha would have known all about your readings, and eating up all the strawberries, and looking at Miss Clara while she made believe work. Don't look so mad! I'm not a going to tell her because of that promise; but only try that same thing on here, and there'll be such a tussle as you never heard on between you and this girl. Now read that letter. I want you to see your own tracks."

Waldon took the letter and went with it to a window. He was so astonished by the girl's energetic language that the paper fairly shook in his hand. More than once, when some slight noise arrested him, he would turn anxiously toward the door, as if fearful that Bertha might come in and find him in this questionable position.

Lydia stood in the open door watching the man and the stairs with equal vigilance.

As Waldon folded up the letter and was about to put it in his pocket, the girl flew upon him.

"No, you don't! Give that letter here!" she said, snatching it from his hand. "Now do you mean to go up to Connecticut and set things right or don't you?"

Waldon clenched his white hand, sorely tempted to knock the girl down; but she neither flinched at the menace nor the wrathful flash of his eyes.

"Do you or don't you? That's the question."

To her astonishment his face changed to its usual open, if not bland, expression, and he answered her—she thought to herself afterward—as if she had been a born lady.

"Of course, little girl, I will do anything to prove my friendship for the young lady. Do not trouble yourself any more about it. You were very kind to show me that letter. Take good care of it."

"That's just what I'm a going to do," said the girl, greatly mollified by his manner. "But here comes Miss Bertha. Mind you say nothing to her."

Waldon bent his head, smiling, and Lydia darted out of the room.

Once in her room, the girl took out her letter and fell to reading it again. It was the first she had ever re-

ceived, and brought Ben kindly back to her remembrance.

Slowly and very earnestly she gathered in its sense line by line, brightening over the "Dear Liddy" which had been crossed out, and wishing in her heart that he had left it so. When she came to the signature, which was ended with a flourish that looked like a coiled whiplash, she discovered a word that had escaped both herself and Waldon—one little word, "over."

Turning the paper on the other side she found this:

"P. S.—The old lady is dead; so is Miss Clara, drowned in the river. Amongst them all they have driv her crazy. Oh, Liddy! Liddy! how I wish you was here."

When Waldon was going out he found Lydia in the hall; her face was red with weeping, and she leaned against the wall in an attitude of great dejection.

"Read that," she said, drawing the paper from behind her, and pointing out the paragraph with her finger. "Read that, if you've got the heart. Then go home and kill yourself."

Waldon took the paper in silence; he dared not speak, for Bertha was in the next room.

Lydia watched him keenly. She expected to see his eyes fill with tears, and his face clouded with sorrow.

Instead of that he handed back the letter with no visible emotion, and without a word.

Bertha was standing by the window, as usual, watching to see him go out, for the most precious thing on earth to her was this stolen glance at her lover's face.

"How splendid he looks!" she whispered to herself. Ah! I must have made him very happy when he smiles so.

Still I thought him a little troubled, and wondered what made him so anxious that we should begin our journey at once. In fact, it seemed to me that my answer disturbed him, when I said that mamma would not hasten the time. Of course I was mistaken, for never in my life have I seen his face so lighted up."

Bertha was mistaken. That awful paragraph had relieved Waldon of a great apprehension. Instead of remorse or horror, he felt absolutely elated that fate had swept one more old love from his path.

CHAPTER L.

THE TOLLING BELL.

THE bell slowly swaying in that high steeple rung out the solemn announcement that the oldest inhabitant of the village was lying dead in that brown house, with moss on the roof, and trees rooted before she was born, bristling with dead limbs in front of it.

Eighty-six times that iron tongue tolled out the years of her age. Up and down the valley its voice was heard, penetrating those pleasant-looking houses, like a cry for judgment, hoarse with denunciation.

Mothers heard it, surrounded by their families, and, conscience stricken, lowered their eyes beneath the questioning looks of their own innocent children.

Judge Lane heard it, and, bowing his face to the table before him, began to wonder if he had, indeed, done well in seeking his own interests at a price like that.

Deacon Jones heard the iron voice, in the counting-

room far back in his store, and observed to a neighbor lingering there, that the old woman, Mrs. Anderson, had fallen like ripe wheat before the sickle; but said nothing of the cruel sweep of his own hand that had cut her down.

A group of females, who met to finish their work left incomplete the day before, looked in each other's pallid faces, as the bell tolled above them, and whispered that the old woman was not only dead, but the poor young girl, whom they had always sustained and done so much for, was drowned.

Her footsteps had been traced down to the river, where she had been driven in frenzy by the wicked reports that only reached the grandmother's ears a few hours before she died. Reports that they, as Christian women, had never encouraged, and felt it a solemn duty to put down, having daughters of their own.

No one of these women remembered, or admitted that she remembered, the chorus of condemnation that had been swelled by her own voice the day before. Yet the heart in each bosom quailed, under the iron blows of that bell, in terror of the falsehood she was acting.

You might have searched that village from end to end without finding one soul that would admit of belief, or personal share, in the slanders that had driven that poor girl to the desperate act she had committed. Nay, those who had been most industrious in hunting her down were now among the first to denounce the calumniators, who were fast growing intangible, and creeping out of sight, like rattlesnakes, slinking from the shadow of a white-ash tree.

But they could not escape the iron voice of that bell.

Upon the road coming up from the river, two horse-

men riding toward the town at a rapid pace heard the first heavy swing of that death-bell. They both had known the bright girl whose character had been so ruthlessly assailed, and one had loved her dearly. That first iron blow smote them both to the heart. Lane uttered a single cry, and stopping his horse sat motionless counting the years as they were tolled forth; at every vibration the heart shrank grieving down in his bosom and his nerves tightened, holding him in mute agony until twenty had been slowly measured off, each bringing new anguish with it.

"She is dead, and I have come too late," he said, looking at his companion. "I might have known that she would sink under—"

This sentence was broken up by another clang, which held the very breath suspended on those white lips.

"Again, again!"

"Twenty-two. Oh, thank God, she was not of that age!" he cried out. "Fletcher, Fletcher, there is hope yet." Here the bell strikes again. "It is not she—it is not she, my love is not dead."

A lad on horseback came over the bridge and rode toward them. Lane recognized him, and pushed forward close enough to know that the lad's eyes were red and his face downcast.

"That bell; who is it tolling for, Ben?"

"Old Mrs. Anderson. She died last night. I don't suppose they will toll for the other, till she's found."

"The other—the other? What do you mean?"

Ben burst into a great passion of tears.

"Don't ask me—don't ask me. I am trying and trying not to believe it, but the canoe is gone, and so is she."

"She—who? for mercy's sake speak out, boy!"

"Miss Clara. Oh, sir, she's gone!"

"Gone—where?"

"Dead—drowned. I don't know where. The canoe hasn't turned up yet. I'm going to ride down the river till I get to the Housatonic, searching all the way. That's what I'm starting for now. If I don't come across nothing, that seems like killing me afore then, I'll just foller on down to where the two rivers jine, and keep a going clear to the sound, nobody has thought of that but me; why should they, anyhow? didn't I think more of her than any one else in this wide world?"

"Let us go with him," said Lane, turning to his half-brother, who had shared his distress as if no trouble rested on his own life, and had come with him into the neighborhood when he determined to make that last appeal. "Let us go with him."

There was a gleam of hope in the young man's face that the brother's heart answered.

"Yes, we will go," he said; "anything is better than this suspense."

"And suspense itself better than what seemed to be a certainty ten minutes ago," said Lane.

The two young men had been startled by a vague rumor of Clara Anderson's death, which reached them at the Stone Tavern at daylight, and had set forth at once to learn the truth. The news that Ben brought them was a relief, for with it came the possibility of a hope.

Down the banks of that beautiful stream along the larger river till it received the Naugatuck in its embrace, those three most anxious men rode; sometimes leaving their horses to search the banks more closely, and going at a slower pace after each pause, as disappointment settled more heavily upon them.

From the mouth of the river they returned up the other side, making their search complete, and long after dark rode into the village worn out and heavy-hearted.

Lane could not go to his father's; the wound on his heart was too deep for that, but he rode up to the minister's door and asked for shelter for himself and brother there.

The clergyman, filled with pity, supported the young man into his house. It was touching to see how heavily that strong frame leaned on the good old man, and with what thankfulness that proud spirit received the little cares which fall so gently on the weary-hearted.

The next day and the next, these two young men pursued their search, but no trace of the unfortunate creature they sought could be found; like a shadow she had drifted away.

Among old Mrs. Anderson's papers a will was found, giving that old house, the few acres of land with all their poor belongings, to her granddaughter, and in case she should die first, to Benjamin Vose, that it might be a home for his mother and sister.

Poor Ben had ridden, and walked on foot, up and down those rivers many a weary time, before he took possession of that humble inheritance. When he did at last move into the brown house it was more as a custodian than an owner.

"Some day Miss Clara might come back," he said, "and she should find everything just as she left it, only things might be mended up a little. People needn't call the place his, any way."

CHAPTER LI.

THE FIREFLY AND KATYDID.

A LARGE stone mansion, covering much ground, built before the Revolution, but modernized by French windows opening upon broad verandas, balconies, with stone steps, leading down among the flower beds, and orials overlooking the broad bosom of a noble river, full of historical associations, to which a velvet lawn sloped greenly, like a carpet of fern-moss.

This was the house in which Mrs. Canfield found herself, a few weeks after the doctor ordered her to try change of air for a malady which his skill could never reach.

The day was fresh and balmy. Honeysuckles and twining roses clambered up the posts of the verandas, and matted the balconies with blossoms, from which a soft, sweet fragrance stole over her, enervating but delicious.

A group of young people had been playing croquet on the lawn, but wearying of that, had sauntered down toward the river, where some boats lay rocking on the shore.

Mrs. Canfield watched this group with wistful, longing eyes, for the very life of her life was there, strolling down to the river in advance of the rest, and looking back a little anxiously, now and then, toward a pair that loitered on, apart from the company, seemingly engaged in earnest conversation.

Mrs. Canfield, from her pretty white room over the front entrance, had found all the pleasure she was capa-

ble of, in watching the movements of her daughter, and seldom left the low couch or cushioned easy-chair, drawn up before the broad window. More than once, during the last month, she had seen Bertha walking thus alone, and, seemingly, dejected, while those two were occupied with each other. This sight brought more color to that wan face than all the balmy atmosphere had imparted to it. The little woman had fire enough in her heart when any evil thing threatened her child.

It was true Bertha had flung down her mallet and moved toward the water, hoping that Waldon would follow her, but he had not seemed to observe the movement—was busy knocking the balls about, and occupied himself in this way until Mary Noel came from a distant part of the lawn with a blue ball in her hand, which had been knocked to the centre of a rose thicket, ever so far off.

Waldon took the ball from her hand, bending toward her, while Bertha was looking back, with her head lifted as if in wrath, or amazement, at finding herself left alone. This was the tableau Mrs. Canfield saw from her chamber window.

Others of the party had gone, in a bright, fluttering group, to the river, where they hovered upon the bank like a flock of tropical birds, while the young man and Hyde were busy about a barge, whose white and scarlet awning seemed to burn like fire against the cool blue of the water.

Bertha saw nothing that was going on at the barge. Her eyes were turned on the croquet ground, where her betrothed and her friend stood talking. What were those two saying to each other?

This is what the man said:

"Let them go. If there is anything on earth I hate utterly, it is a crowd of girls."

"But they will put off," said Mary Noel, blushing a little: "and there is Bertha, waiting. What will *she* think of us? Besides, we cannot stay here alone. It would look so strange. Don't you think so?"

"I haven't the least idea of it," answered Waldon, tossing the ball he still held to a distance. "I think you must take me in that pretty shell I have seen you rowing about, when you and Bertha are together."

"What, in my little 'Firefly?' The idea!"

"An excellent idea, I think. It will hold two. I have seen you and Miss Canfield in it many a time."

"But she is a lady."

"And I am a gentleman."

"There! there! the barge is putting off."

Waldon laughed.

"Now you must!" "By Jove!" he added, under his breath, "she is waiting."

Yes, Bertha was waiting. She had not heard those clear young voices calling to her from the barge, or seen the gay craft put off, when she took no heed, leaving her behind.

"They will follow in the little boats," said young Hyde, standing up and waving his hat to Waldon.

That moment Bertha looked around. She was alone. All that crowd had seen her waiting for a lover who, knowing it, could thus amuse himself. Heavens! had she come to that?

Two little boats, light and graceful as the tiny caiques which skim the Golden Horn where it cleaves the city of Constantinople in twain, lay moored in a curve of the river, over which a cluster of great willows dropped their

branches till they rippled in the current. One was the "Firefly," which Mary Noel owned exclusively; the other she called the "Katydid," and that was free to any guest who chose to monopolize it.

Burning with indignant shame, Bertha darted under the willows, unmoored the "Katydid," and, with a wild push against the bank, shot it into the stream. The girl felt strong as a giant and swift as a bird, escaping those two. They should never think she was watching and waiting for them. With fire in her heart, and burning sunshine in her eyes, she cut down stream like an arrow, chasing the barge, and sending up a shower of diamonds with each lift of her oars. She was laughing in wild glee, when a puff of wind took the red plume from her hat, and carried it off like a glitter of flame, and never once looked back, though a sound of oars began to keep time with hers, and she knew that the "Firefly," loaded with all that was precious in her life, was following in her wake.

"So you ran away from me—left us all in the lurch!" Bertha cried out, as her little craft swept down on a level with the barge. "All right! I have played a like game with them!"

She gave one oar a little sweep backward, thus indicating the couple that followed; then bent with a motion full of powerful grace, and, with a sweeping curve, flew around the barge like a bird, sending back snatches of ringing laughter as she went.

This brought her across the bow of the "Firefly."

"Take care," cried Mary Noel, "or I shall run you down!"

It was an innocent speech, uttered with mellow laughter; but a flash of lightning from the superb eyes of her

friend, as she cut across their path, struck all the glee from her lips.

"What is the matter? Is Bertha angry?" she inquired, looking wistfully at Waldon.

"I think she is jealous," answered the man, smiling blandly. "It looks like it."

"Jealous! And of me—of you? How can she? How unjust!"

"Unjust! So far as I am concerned, I cannot say that," answered Waldon, bending toward his companion, and speaking in a low, penetrating voice, which brought a flush of roses into her face.

"Give me the oars, Mr. Waldon. I want to catch up with her. She must not be allowed such thoughts a single minute."

"No, I cannot consent to a chase like that. I was dreaming so sweetly, so wildly, only a moment ago."

"Dreaming in the broad daylight! The idea!" answered the girl, dropping her hand from the oar she had seized upon, and allowing it to ripple the water on her side the boat.

By this time the barge, with the "Katydid" lingering near it, flying off in advance, or rocking in its wake, made for a little island, set, like a vast emerald, in the heart of the stream.

CHAPTER LII.

DOWN BY THE SPRING.

A TENT was erected on the highest swell of Diamond Island, and a little group of hampers lay half buried in the tall grass around a spring, where a squad of champagne bottles was sunk in the cool crystal.

Directly the tent, with its swaying fringes and festoons of glowing worsted balls, was filled with a throng of young people, full of fun, and keenly ready for enjoyment; but it was some minutes after they had settled that the island, with its soft greensward, its wreathing vines, and magnificent old forest trees, was the loveliest spot on earth, before the young hostess appeared, coming up from the "Firefly" with Russell Waldon by her side.

Up to this time Bertha Canfield had been rather quiet, everybody thought, though her cheeks were of a richer red, and her eyes brighter than usual; but now she flashed out like a meteor. Of all that festive crowd, her laugh rippled sweetest, and rose with the most jubilant ring. Her step grew wonderfully elastic, her air carelessly defiant. More than once she fairly danced alone on the grass that had been closely shaven for dainty feet like hers. Wherever a group paused to converse, her wit charmed and sparkled. She neither avoided nor sought Waldon, but accepted his attentions with careless grace, and flung pretty compliments at Mary Noel, as a naughty child pelts its enemies with flowers.

That bright revel was kept up on the island all the afternoon. The table in that breezy tent was loaded

with fruit, daintily cooked birds, and such rare delicacies as might, in those prosperous days, be found most abundant and delicious in a Southern mansion. There, feasting in the tent, or laughing in the open air, couples wandered off dreamily, and, seated on the emerald turf, talked in low voices as they eat their fruit, and touched their wine-glasses with unuttered wishes.

The servants came trooping up from the spring, armed with champagne bottles, from which the corks flew like bullets, and the amber fluid gushed and foamed till all the goblets overflowed, and dropped melted topaz and pearls over the white hands that held them.

Then more couples dropped away into the wild-rose thickets, and under the tender-leaved grape-vines, exploring the island. In their empty places came the servants, seizing the half-drained goblets, and pouring all that was left of the wine down their thirsty throats—breaking bird and chicken bones between their white teeth, and bathing their lips in the juices of half-eaten fruits. All this was accompanied by laughter, mellow as over-ripe pears; compliments, bows, and elaborate gallantry toward three or four slender maid-servants present, which lifted both adorers and the adored into the seventh heaven of fashionable life, and scarcely abated in its elegant intensity, until every goblet was drained, and every champagne bottle had lost its neck.

Then this mellow hilarity began to subside a little, and those who were musical being reminded of their duty, clambered into the elms and willows, flushed and glorious, from which they sent out bursts of exhilarating melody, that called the young people together like a war-trumpet. The rose thickets, the magnolia trees, and the velvet banks, were instantly left to their own rich leafi-

ness, while the soft grass near the tent was trodden down by a troop of light-footed dancers, among whom were the two persons whose hearts were so full of terrible unrest.

"Will you dance with me, Miss Noel?"

"What, before Bertha! I beg your pardon, I am engaged to Mr. Hyde. Ah! here he is—Mr. Hyde, I have not forgotten my engagement to dance with you."

"Ah! I am too happy!" exclaimed Hyde, who was thus adroitly informed of an engagement that never existed—a fact which Waldon understood just as well as the parties, and resented accordingly.

"They are a splendid couple," said a young Virginian who had joined the party, "Hyde will be a happy man if he is permitted to get the heiress. Don't you think so?"

"Permitted by whom?" exclaimed Waldon, almost fiercely.

"She will be rich enough to please herself, so Hyde's money counts for nothing in the contest. If you were opposed to him he might despair; but being almost a married man, you could afford to help him a little."

"A married man! Ah! yes, there is Bertha—I must go and speak with her. But this girl—Bertha's friend, I mean—is she so very wealthy?"

"The girl will have more than she can know what to do with; besides, she is lovely in herself," was the answer.

"Lovely! Oh, yes, very—I have been talking with her."

"About Hyde? I thought so. You must have seen how deeply he is in for it. That was kind."

"About him?—oh, yes. Excuse me, Miss Canfield is alone—I must be on duty."

With these brusque words, Waldon walked off, muttering:

"Confound his cool impudence!" Waldon was one of those men who would gladly monopolize both sides of a noble street at once, or keep that portion empty which their feet cannot tread.

"Bertha, will you dance with me?"

Bertha's hand trembled as she laid it on his shoulder, and a thrill, half joy, half pain, ran through her when his arm lightly circled her waist.

"Bertha, do you love me yet?"

He whispered this secret question as her form swayed toward him.

"Love you?" she answered, almost with a sob, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Well enough to give me up if I were to ask it?" he whispered again, tightening his arm about her waist, and drawing her close to his side, while he wounded her with cruel words.

The poor girl lost her breath, and, in this first agony, he whirled her into the dance, smiling down upon the whiteness of her face.

After a while they stopped to rest, and he saw, by the scarcely perceptible flutter of her bosom, that she was faint rather than out of breath.

"Come with me. They will all wonder what it means."

Waldon's arm was still around her waist, and half-supporting her, he left the dancers, making the best of his way to the spring, where he seated her on a fragment of rock, and went down to get some water in a silver cup which some one had thrown upon the grass.

As he stooped with the cup in his hand, it struck a bottle which the servants had overlooked.

"Ah! this is better still," he cried, knocking the neck off on a stone, and pouring a deluge of the frothy wine into the cup and over his hand, from which it rained down upon the grass. "Drink this; I cannot bear to see you look so white."

She took the cup and drained it eagerly, while he stood by ready to fill it again. But the fluid seemed to choke her after the first swallow or two, and she held the cup toward him with a faint attempt to smile.

Waldon took the cup in his hand, and throwing himself on the grass by her side, held her with one arm and lifted it to her lips.

"Drink more—more! You are faint and cold."

She tried to obey him, but drew her trembling lips away.

"What did you mean?" she said, in a sharp whisper, and he felt her shrink against his arm as if she feared another blow.

"Mean?—when? Oh, I remember. Nothing on earth, only to try you a little. I wanted to make myself sure that you were not a jealous little goosey, who could not permit a man to look in another woman's eyes without going into spasms."

"But I did not! I—I—"

"Acted like a proud, brave girl as you are, Bertha. Come, 'smile again, my bonny lassie,' and let us make up."

She took the wine now, and drank it. The constriction had gone from her throat; her bosom heaved, throwing off a weary load in one long sigh. Back to her cheeks came the rich red blood, and beneath her drooping eyelids, soft, sweet tears rushed, to be broken and crushed with a sudden effort, which left them glittering like dew on her lashes.

"Now you are my own proud Bertha again!" cried Waldon, glad to escape a scene. "Let me 'fill the cup to one made up of loveliness alone.'"

Half singing, half reciting these words, he poured out all that was not already drunk or spilled of the wine, and tossed the broken bottle into the spring again.

"Now kiss the cup, and then kiss me!"

Bertha leaned forward, and bathed her lips in the foam of the wine.

Instantly the sparkling draught was lifted to Waldon's mouth, and almost as quickly the cup was thrown aside.

"Now," he exclaimed, "kiss me, and swear that you will never be jealous again!"

She gave her mouth to his kisses, and clasped her trembling hand over his neck.

"There, now, wipe those tears away, or let me; then run down to the spring and bathe this tell-tale face in cold water, or your friend Mary will think we have been quarrelling."

"She has no right to think—no right—"

"Hush! hush! She is coming. Go down to the spring, and I will meet her."

Bertha took the silver cup from the grass, and went down to the spring very quietly, determined that Mary Noel should not see tears upon her face, or dream that she had any feeling of discontent.

"Bertha! Bertha!"

The girl did not turn, but bent over the spring, which gave back her image like a mirror, that she dashed into quivering silver by a plunge of her two hands.

"Bertha, we are going now. Everybody is tired, and it is getting late. I shall row up in the 'Firefly' alone.

You must take Mr. Waldon. He *will* keep the oars, and I like pulling them myself."

Bertha was offended at what seemed to her forced magnanimity in her friend. Of course, no one living would be expected to give up Waldon's company, except as a great sacrifice, and that she would not permit. Her heart sank a little under the effort, but she would neither take Waldon into her little boat, nor suffer the arrangement of the morning to be disturbed. For this once Mary Noel might take possession of her betrothed; but after that he would be wholly hers. That very morning, her mother had promised that the wedding-day should be named. Waldon had urged it eloquently, again and again, but the poor lady shrank away from the subject with nervous terror. Since she had been a guest at Mr. Noel's, Waldon had become more patient in his importunities. Mrs. Canfield remembered this, and resolving, like a martyr, to face the most painful duty of her life, had promised Bertha that she would ask for no more delay.

All this made Bertha strong. She took her hands, dripping with water, and passed them over her eyes, thus making their redness general.

"No, indeed, I will not have it so! The 'Katydid' for me. You must take the 'Firefly' and Mr. Waldon. He will be constantly tormenting me about my management of the boat. I mean to have a long independent pull up stream, so will have no gentleman to criticise."

CHAPTER LIII.

THE CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.

THE party broke up, brilliant with fun, and but half subdued by the merriment of the day. A boat full of household servants, hampers, and well-worn musical instruments, had already put off. Then up the James river swept the barge, flinging gleams of quivering scarlet on the water as she went. The men who pulled the oars accompanied the soft movement with one of those touching negro melodies that thrill the very air with pathetic simplicity. Lower down—for the laden boat had drifted astern—came answering voices, the ring of banjos and the strains of a violin, to which the flowing waters and shivering leaves whispered a low symphony. Above the noble barge two graceful little boats, scarcely larger than swans, cut through the waves, seemingly chasing each other through the misty purple which began to float upon the river.

One of these tiny boats contained a man and a woman; in the other sat a woman alone, rowing vigorously, as if fierce exercise were a relief to her. Now and then she would almost reach the other boat, then fall back and drift a little while. A deep manly voice and clear soprano took up the floating music from down stream, and sent it on, refined and glorified.

Thus the sunset came down upon the river, and the boats floated on through purple and gold, which seemed like the atmosphere of Paradise, and filled those young hearts with pleasant sadness.

Two or three plantations stretched down to the banks

of the river, at which some of the young ladies in the barge wished to be landed. Thus the boats at last parted company, and those two little crafts were left alone, with the music broken up and stars twinkling over them.

Bertha watched the other boat as it cut away from her, turning to a shadow in the purple mist which had swallowed her friend and her lover, leaving her quite alone. She let her oars drag: a feeling of unutterable sadness came upon her. The disappearance of the boat seemed like a desertion. Her head drooped on her bosom, and finding herself alone, she began to cry, drifting away from her friends all the time.

A great, rushing noise aroused her. A steamboat, that had been stopping for wood, swept around a curve in the river, and bore down on the very spot where that shadowy craft had just disappeared. There was still some dying crimson on the water, through which that monstrous boat plowed ruthlessly, its lights glowing like great bloodshot eyes, and its prow dipping deep, as wild boars root for food.

"Oh, my God! oh, my God!"

Uttering this cry for help, Bertha plunged her oars, with mad strength, into the water, and shot her craft forward, until it rocked in the very foam of the passing steamboat, which gave a shriek from its pipes, and rushed on, roaring hoarsely.

Bertha looked up the river. In that broad pathway of foam she saw a dark object, heaving up and down. With this came a cry, sharp and cutting—that of a female in mortal terror; then a wild, fierce shout from the lungs of a strong man, afraid of death—the voice of her lover.

"Oh, God! God help me!"

Bertha's face was lifted upward—white, impassioned,

resolute. Her arms wielded those oars as heroes strike with their swords. She would save those two, or die with them.

"Hold firmly!" she shouted. "I am coming! I am coming!"

Her voice rang over the drifting boat to which those human lives were clinging, and it reached a man on the shore, who was sitting dreamily in the gloom.

On she went, flying like an arrow from its bow, through the melting foam, up the blackness of the settled waters, crying out as she went. She saw them plainly at last, the boat keel upward, two dark objects holding to it, all drifting with the current.

True bravery is calm and quick as lightning. Bertha slackened her oars, and met the drifting boat cautiously, drawing nearer and nearer the path it must take—then pouncing on it as a hawk strikes its prey, she drew back with a woman in her arms, and a prayer on her lips.

"Lift yourself up—one arm around my neck—the other on the boat. Now! now! Oh, thank Heaven! thank my God! she is safe! she is safe!"

In her terror and her gratitude, that half-dead girl would have clung to the young creature who had saved her; but Bertha pushed her off.

"Have you forgotten? *He* is there yet! You seized upon me first, and now cling to me while he is drowning. Russell! Russell! Oh, my beloved! my darling!"

The boats had drifted apart. That white face was turned upon her with a terrible appeal. She cut the water with her oars, reached out her arms, and drew them back empty, with a cry that cut the air like a knife. Then she tore the outer garments from her person, and

lifting both arms, plunged into the water, diving downward where that face had disappeared, like a pearl-fisher.

In the black depths of the water she found him, given up to death, his brain vivid with ten thousand memories, his hands uplifted with a faint struggle for life. That brave girl seized him, wound her arms around him with superhuman strength, and dragged him up through the buoyant waters, till they were cleft apart, and the stars shone down upon two drifting white faces, lying close together.

One of those faces turned wildly in search of the boat. It had drifted on, with that half-lifeless girl lying in the bottom. Those two were alone, with the cruel waters drawing them down, and those calm stars shining upon them without help or pity.

When he came to the surface, the man drew in a breath of life, and clung madly to the brave creature who toiled to save him, dragging her down with the power of his grasp. She felt herself sinking, and struggled no more. They were together. In those arms death seemed sweet to her. His clasp was welcome, though it did drag her down to perish.

As the water closed over those two heads, a great black shadow struck it like a tempest. Bertha's hair—which floated upward, as sea-weed drifts in a storm, when she sunk—was fiercely entangled and drawn back—back into the light of the sky, to which Waldon was also lifted, senseless, but still clinging to her.

With the breath dead upon her lips, and water blinding her eyes, Bertha knew that some strength not her own dragged her into a boat, that her arms never once lost their hold of the man she loved, and that her kisses

seemed to warm the cold lips to which she gave the first glow of her returning life.

Then his lips answered hers very faintly, as those of a sleepy child stir to the caress of a loving mother, and his arms tightened around her a little, while the boat rocked them like a cradle, and the flowing waters hushed them dreamily.

A face bent over Bertha—one that shot a vague sense of pain through her confused thoughts, and a voice that aroused her like a trumpet asked if the man was strong enough to move, or help himself on shore.

Some other person was in danger. Cries that had come sharply up the river were growing faint now, and a moment might be life or death to the poor creature.

Bertha understood it all, and struggled first to her knees, holding by an edge of the boat, then to a sitting posture, where she parted the dripping hair from her face, and lifted her eyes to the man who had saved them.

Egbert Fletcher stood dumb for a moment, then he seized her two hands, and wrung them.

"God be thanked that I was in time! How—how—But this man—who is he? Great Heavens! that cry!"

"It is Mary Noel. Go to her! go to her!" cried Bertha, forgetting everything but the poor girl she had cast away for that more precious life. "Waldon! Waldon! Mary is drifting to her death!"

Waldon made a weary effort to lift himself up, but his hands fell from the side of the boat, and he lay helpless in the bottom, muttering that he had not strength to rise.

"That man!" groaned Fletcher, between his teeth—and, for one moment, he was tempted to leap on shore, and escape the pain of looking on his rival; but a nobler impulse followed swiftly, conquering the other. With-

out a word, he took Bertha in his arms, left her on the bank, and leaping back into the boat, raised Waldon, and tottering under his weight, laid him down upon the grass at the girl's feet.

Before Bertha could speak, he was in the boat again, had flung a brandy flask out upon the bank, and was pulling down the river, with a long, powerful sweep of the oars, that sent his craft forward like the flight of an eagle.

Bertha sat down on the grass, and taking Waldon's head in her lap, held the brandy flask to his lips. He drank greedily, and in a short time the strong, hot liquor threw its fire and warmth into all his veins; but the pangs of returning strength seized upon him, and he grew keenly conscious.

"What! what! is it you?" he said. "I thought—I thought—"

"Who did you think it was?" inquired Bertha, with a terrible chill in her voice.

He did not answer her at first, but sat up, releasing himself rather violently from her arms.

"Who did I think it was, Bertha? Why—why, some man. Surely, it was the strong arms of a man that lifted me from the boat."

Bertha breathed again.

"Yes, it was a man that saved us both—a strong, brave man. We were down in the black waters together, Russell—you and I. But for this man, we should have been dead!"

"But how came it that you were there? Surely, I set out with another. Is she dead? I mean Mary Noel. Tell me, Bertha Canfield, what have you done with Mary Noel?"

"I think she is coming now," answered Bertha, in a cold, hard voice, that aroused Waldon to something like caution. "She was in the boat when I left it, sensible, and, I hope, strong enough to guide it. But the man who saved us has gone after her. He heard her voice crying out for help. That was why he left us here."

"Heard her voice crying out for help! And you left her to that?"

"You were sinking, and I followed you. If the last breath of life had been on Mary Noel's lips, I should have done that!" answered Bertha. "What was she, that I should give your life for hers?"

"What is she? Oh, nothing but a young, helpless girl, set adrift in her extremity by one who pretended to love her!"

"Are you blaming me, Waldon—blaming me that your life is saved?" said Bertha, with mournful bitterness.

The anguish in her voice aroused Waldon to a sense of his cruel ingratitude, and, more important still, to the imprudence of his own speech.

"Blame you for saving my life—for thinking it of greater worth than that of a girl like Mary Noel! If I seem to have done that, it is because the water or the brandy has crazed me."

Bertha drew a free breath.

"I think you are a little wild," she said, shivering in her wet garments.

"Wild? Yes—no wonder. What with the chill of the water and the heat of the brandy, I hardly know what I have been saying. The stars reel over my head like drunken things. So you saved my life, Bertha?"

Waldon drew close to the girl as he spoke, and took her icy hands in his. They both shuddered a little

under their wet clothes, and Bertha felt cold at heart. His words, though he disclaimed them, chilled her worse than the water.

"Hark!" he said, listening; "that is the dip of oars."

He had heard them first. Was it because he had been more earnestly listening?

The boat came up rapidly, towing the "Katydid," and bearing Mary Noel, who was on her knees weeping with gratitude for her deliverance.

Fletcher pushed his boat close to the bank.

"Miss Canfield, and you, sir, pray get in. We have a mile to row, and the ladies in their wet clothes. Toss me that flask of brandy. Miss Noel is shivering."

Waldon got up, staggering, and taking Bertha's hand, got into the boat. The moment Mary Noel found Bertha by her side, she flung both arms around her.

"But for you, Bertha, I should be dead now!"

Bertha made no answer.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE MOTHER'S STRUGGLE.

WALDON slept at Willow Bend that night—have I told you that such was the name of Mr. Noel's place—and stayed there a day or two, loitering around the verandas in snow-white garments, and slowly recovering from the effect of an accident that had threatened his life. The young men came up from Hyde's plantation and made hospitable efforts to win him back

to them, but he still claimed to be an invalid, and would not go.

He spent half the time swinging lazily in a hammock, reading to the girls, or reciting poetry—sometimes his own—in a deep, rich voice that disturbed more hearts than the one that loved him. Sometimes Bertha would spend hours with her mother, who saw that she was unhappy, and reproached herself as the cause. During these filial visits, Waldon kept on reading, and Mary Noel listened, feeling strangely guilty all the time. Sometimes he lay idly looking at her, while she was busy with her dainty attempts at work, and his glance made her cheeks hot, as sunshine forces a flower into blossom. At such times she thought of Bertha, who had saved her life and his, almost with dread, wondering why that dear school-friend would not let her speak all the gratitude she felt.

As for Waldon, his pride was hurt that a woman, born, as he solemnly thought, to worship him, and him alone, should have saved his life. It wounded his self-love; but he wrote an exquisite poem on the subject, in which he alluded, in faultless measure, to something far more precious than his own existence, saved to him by her heroic conduct. Was it her love that he held so priceless? Bertha buried the poem in her bosom as something too precious and sacred for the knowledge of any one out of Heaven, but Waldon had read it to Mary with an emphasis which brought the blush of incipient treason all over her shy countenance.

One morning Bertha left the poem under her pillow. Lydia, who acted as ladies' maid to the mother and daughter, found it, and having no scruples on the subject, read it more than once. Now, Lydia, looking two

ways, seemed to see double, but even she did not discover the subtle underdrift which gave this poem a distinct meaning for two persons. To her it was brimful of gratitude and impatient love.

"I will lay it where she can't help but read it. If that don't spur her on to set the day, I'll give her up. What is she a putting it off for? All the things bought and made, it could be done in no time, but she won't come up to the scratch. He's got mad, I reckon, and won't ask again, and Bertha is just pining away like—like—no matter about that. She's pining, and that's enough. There she's sure to find it."

Lydia dropped Waldon's poem by the dressing-table, where Mrs. Canfield found it ten minutes after, and read it through with a wildly beating heart and shuddering nerves.

"He loves her! he loves her! and it is only I who stand in the way!" she cried, wringing her little white hands, that seemed too childish for such agony of motion. "My Bertha is miserable, and I am killing her! To hold back longer is worse than cowardice. What am I that her heart should break while I tremble upon the verge?"

While the poor woman was pacing the floor, like a leopard in its cage, her eyes wild with a painful resolution, her delicate lips set firmly to stop their craven tremor, Lydia came into the room, and began to look up and down the floor. Mrs. Canfield stopped short in her walk, and spoke sharply:

"What are you doing here? Who said I wanted you?"

"Nothing and nobody," answered the girl, taking her mistress in with a sharp cross-fire of the eyes.

"Only I dropped a paper, and want to put it under Miss Bertha's pillow afore she misses it. Meant to give it to her with my own hands, and after hunting her all over the house, haven't got the confound—I beg sixteen hundred and two pardons—but I'm bound to find that paper, or catch it."

"Is this the paper?" said Mrs. Canfield, holding out the folded poem with a shaking hand.

"Is it? I should think so! Miss Bertha has been a reading it over and over, in corners and places, ever since day before yesterday; so I reckon she prizes it considerably. I'll tuck it back again under her pillow, and no harm done."

Mrs. Canfield did not hear her. She had begun to pace the floor again, clenching and unclenching her hand, while drops of strong agony came out and stood, trembling, on her white forehead, which was clouded and deeply wrinkled between the eyes—a sign of unusual perturbation in the little woman.

At last she turned, missed Lydia, and drew a deep breath, thankful for the reprieve of one little minute. She would do the thing at once, for her daughter's sake—for the sake of that man who loved her so fondly, so proudly that he would forgive anything; but oh, it was hard! How could her lips ever frame what she had to say?

In a minute Lydia came back again.

"Cruel!" thought the unhappy woman. "Could she not have given me ten minutes?"

No; the girl was relentless. She glided up to her mistress, and said, in a low, confidential voice:

"Didn't you want me to do something or other?"

Mrs. Canfield stood still, looking at the girl with her quailing eyes.

What good or evil spirit had sent the girl there to hound on her purpose?

"Yes," she answered, in a hoarse undertone. "Where is Mr. Waldon?"

"Swinging in one of them ham—hammocks, ma'am, reading with all his might out of a poetry book, with pictures in it."

"Are the young ladies with him?"

"Yes'm; both listening."

"Tell Mr. Waldon that I wish to speak with him, here in my room."

"Yes'm," answered Lydia, darting off like a lapwing.

Mrs. Canfield stood still, listening, as a condemned criminal listens for his executioner.

"I must—I will!" she muttered. "While there was a doubt of his devotion—of his entire devotion—it was different; but after that poem I need not fear—"

A knock at the door made her start like a shot animal. She tried to say, "Come in," but no sound came. Then the latch turned, and Waldon entered.

CHAPTER LV.

DID HE LOVE HER?

WALDON was always suave and courteous with Bertha's mother, who regarded him from the first with sensitive reserve, which he had mistaken for the awe which his genius imposed on an intellect only appreciative. But there was something in her look and manner now that astonished him. A fever of dread in her

eyes, and a shrinking of the whole person, as if she feared some bodily harm.

"You sent for me, dear madam? But you look ill; I hope it is nothing serious."

The lady did not notice this courteous address, but motioned with her hand that Waldon should seat himself. Then she arranged the blinds nervously, filling the chamber with shadows, and shrank into a corner of the high-backed couch, looking at him like a child that dreads some cruel punishment.

At last she spoke.

"I sent for you, Mr. Waldon, because you have urged me so often to give up my child, to fix a time when she might go from me to you."

"Yes," he said; "I have sometimes thought it a little strange that you should hesitate so long."

"But I will hesitate no longer. It was wrong, selfish, cowardly, I admit that; but now I will tell you everything. Knowing how you love my daughter, how tender and great your heart is, I should not have been silent after you first claimed her of me, but my task was a hard one, and I never was strong."

There was something pathetic and helpless in this plea that would have touched most men. Waldon seized upon it eagerly.

"Does it distress you so much to give Bertha up? If so—"

Mrs. Canfield silenced him with a nervous movement of her hand.

"Don't mistake my meaning. Her happiness is tenfold dearer than anything I can ever hope for. I only care to insure that, and if dying would do it, rather than what I am going to say, I would gladly rest my head here and never breathe again."

"There can be nothing that you should hesitate to say to me, dear lady. If I have importuned you with over-zeal for an early time, forgive the selfishness, as I will endeavor to conquer it."

Mrs. Canfield started out of her faintness.

"You love my child yet?"

"That is a strange question to ask of me. Why should you doubt a love that seems to have driven you wild with its impatience?"

"What right have I to question it?" she said, anxiously; "but so much depends on that—so much!"

"What new protestations can I make?" said Waldon, with a touch of impatience.

"Protestations—I ask none, only certainty—only certainty!"

"Is Bertha doubtful? Has she troubled you with her own suspicions?"

"Bertha doubt you? That is impossible!"

"Then, for Heaven's sake, tell me what all this is about?"

The lady shrank back from him, startled. He saw it and smiled, took her hand and kissed it, hoping that caresses would make her speak out.

"Ah! it is because I am her mother that you think so much of me!"

"Yes," he answered, soothingly, "because you are her mother."

"And you love her dearly?"

"Who can doubt it?"

"Better than all the world beside?"

"What strange questions you ask!"

"Better than your life? You should, for she saved that."

"Who told you this—Bertha?"

"Bertha? No, she denies it; says that you were striving to help her; but the gentleman who saved you both told it at Hyde's, and Miss Noel saw my Bertha plunge into the water when you went under."

"It was a wild scene—all confusion and struggles. I doubt if any one knows the truth of it; but we were talking of Bertha."

"Yes—of her wedding-day, and of your love for her. Tell me, is it rooted deep—is it capable of great sacrifices? Would you rather be a beggar than lose her?"

She spoke breathlessly, and her fingers wove themselves closer around his white hand.

"You ask such strange, wild questions," he said, curbing his impatience. "I have courage for great sacrifices. But tell me what this means? Is it that your child is poor?"

"Poor! No."

"That she has ceased to love me?"

"Ceased to love you!"

A faint little laugh came with these words, protesting against their possibility.

"That you wish to break the engagement?"

"Break the engagement! No! no! no! It would break her heart and yours, loving her so much!"

"In Heaven's name, then, what is this all about? I cannot conjecture, and not being gifted with more than divine patience, am getting anxious."

"Yes, you must know; but she—my child—promise me that what I say shall never, never be told to her?"

"I will promise that, if the thing seems important enough for a secret. Well, well, do not turn so deathly white! I promise."

CHAPTER LVI.

MRS. CANFIELD'S SECRET.

"DRAW nearer to me. Is any one there?" Mrs. Canfield looked at the window, which was open, with closed blinds, through which the light came faintly, in bars.

"They are all on the other side, as I left them," said Waldon, moving his chair softly.

Mrs. Canfield got up from the couch, tottered across the floor, and looked into the next room, to see if Lydia was there. She came creeping back, white and shadowy like a ghost, having found the room empty. She settled herself in the couch again, and Waldon could hear her breath come hard and quick, as if she had been walking up-hill. After a little she spoke, but her voice seemed that of a child, coming from a distance.

"Mr. Canfield—the Reverend Mr. Canfield—was my husband. Bertha bears his name and owns his property; but she is not his child."

"Not his child?"

"Hush, sir! Do not interrupt me. I have a hard task before me, and a sad story to tell—a story known to only three persons on earth. You have a right to hear it, but no other human being must. I tremble to give it to you, for—ah, me!—secrets are weary loads to carry through life. Such suffering! such suffering!"

"I lived with my parents—quiet New England Quakers—on the farm their parents had owned and left. They were good people, and had been, so far back as any one could trace them; and good people suspect no evil.

I might tell you of my school-days—of the years I spent away from home—of the beauty which so many gave me credit for; and all this would gain time—spare me a little before I come to the one hard fact which it is right that you should know. In these details I might, perhaps, work out some excuse for myself, and take a little hold on your compassion; but I will not dwell upon them.

"In the city, once—New York, I mean—I met a young Englishman who had been travelling over the country, and settled down afterward as the agent of his father, who was a rich manufacturer in England, and imported goods here. This man was noble, generous, good. Yes, he was good. I will hear no friend or enemy contradict that. He was incapable of meditating wrong to any human being. He never meant to wrong me. Never, never, never! With my last breath I will say that! He loved me dearly, and I loved him so well—so well that even now I am impenitent, and would not, if it were possible, tear his memory out of my life.

"I went home. My school-days were over, and after a time he came to the old farm-house. Those dear old people were loth to give me up, for I was an only child; but he was accepted by them as a son, and welcomed always with cordial love when he came to the house. At last he became impatient and I cruelly anxious. With the eloquence of great earnestness, he won those good old people to give me up at last, and in the autumn after my seventeenth birthday it was settled that we should be married. My betrothed would have hastened the day, but there was firm opposition to that, and he went from us, bitterly disappointed.

"'Come with me into the open air,' he said, on the night before he left us. 'These close rooms are oppres-

sive. It seems as if a funeral were mustering in the house!

"My parents had left us to our leave-taking, and it was getting late; but I threw a veil over my head, and went out, with his arm around me, and his heart beating against mine for the last time on earth. Forgive me! I shall find breath in a moment. It is only a nervous spasm."

For some moments the silence in that room was only broken by short gasps for breath, while that delicate woman writhed among her cushions, both hands pressed against her bosom. Waldon stooped forward to aid her, but she put him back. The iron band that seemed to gird her chest gave way at last, and words came to her lips again:

"We wandered on across the meadows and down to the banks of a river that skirted our farm. Up and down, up and down we walked that night, for it seemed impossible for us to part. Oh, sir! parting was like death. It was death.

"In two months," he said, "only two! Nothing shall part us again. Keep up bravely till then—write me every day. Ask God to bless me—to *forgive me!*" he added, in a low, broken voice that made my heart ache.

"I could not answer him, my throat was so full of sobs; but I clung to him, and wept upon his bosom, asking him to forgive me. So we walked together till the morning dawned, and there, in the gray mist that fell upon the river and the meadows which lay around us, all filmy with cobwebs, and golden with lilies, we parted.

"He wrote to me by every mail—long, comforting letters, full of hope. The time drew near. My wedding-clothes came home, and the guests were invited. Then

I counted the time by minutes, and each one, as it went, left a sigh of thankfulness on my lips.

"It was October. The first week of that month would be my Heaven on earth. We were a quiet family, but well off in the world, and a good many people were invited to see us married. It had been a stormy week, and the mountain streams were swollen. The earth was carpeted with ripe leaves, wet and gorgeous. Within doors, a half dozen young girls were busy about the house, merry as birds. My sweet mother would steal from among them, now and then, to sit with me alone, every moment being precious as a grain of gold, now that I was going so soon, she would say; but I was very sad. It seemed to me that this cheerfulness was unreal—that God would never permit me to taste the supreme happiness which appeared to be drawing so close.

"The morning broke—my wedding morning.

"A glorious day!" the girls cried out, knocking at my chamber door. "The woods, washed by the storm and flooded with sunshine, are gorgeous beyond anything. Your mother has had splendid luck with her cake, and not a flower has withered on the altar we built for you."

"I arose and went to the window. The river had broadened, and swallowed up half the meadow. I could hear the mountain torrents thundering over the mill-dam, and see every timber in the old wooden bridge below quaking; but these floods were common in our valley, and I thought little of that.

"Come," cried the girl, still knocking at my door, "or you will hardly find time to see how we have arranged the flowers your lord and master sent from the city last night."

"I went out eagerly—the coming of those flowers had

been kept a secret from me; but he had sent them, 'as stars come trooping skyward, just before the moon is born,' I whispered to my heart, in glad surprise, and went down to the parlor.

"They had draped a marble console in white lace, looped and wreathed with the snow-white flowers he had sent to me. My mother, clothed like a dove, in soft, pale gray, stood before the altar with folded hands, regarding it tenderly.

"So like my child!" she murmured, and a sigh stirred the kerchief on her bosom; 'pure and white as she is.'

"I heard the loving words, and fled to my room. Disturbed by the rustle of my dress, she followed, that dear, good mother!

"My child!" she said, moving gently across the room, 'why did thee run away? Come back, and see how white and sweet are the flowers thy husband sent.'

"The arms of my mother closed softly around me, my head fell upon her shoulder. She thought that I grieved at parting with her, and soothed me while tears trembled in her own voice.

"Hush! hush, child! it is not so far, and thee will come to us now and then. He has promised it. Come, now, thee must be brave, and look happy, or it will seem strange to him.'

"I kissed her, and begged to be left alone.

"Mother left me with a slow, faltering step, wiping her eyes furtively, a motion I saw dimly through my tears.

"Some one opened the door, and an eager voice cried out:

"The minister is here, and he is in sight, on the other side of the river.'

"I gathered my veil around me, and ran to the window. A group of horsemen was moving up the opposite road. The swollen river was between us, but I could see him waving his hand, as he rode ahead of the rest.

"I looked toward the bridge; it seemed to move and reel. Was it safe? In my terror I flung up the sash, and tearing off my veil, waved him back from the danger. He did not understand it, but dashed on to the bridge. Oh, my God! I cannot tell you the rest. I saw little more—the faintness of death fell upon me. Through it I saw a man sitting on a maddened horse, that obeyed neither bit nor spur; then a crash of thunder seemed to smite me down, and I fell into utter darkness; but the beating of the waves, and the hoarse shout of distant voices, reached me even in that deathly swoon.

"I was not altogether insensible—God was not so merciful as that. All night long I knew that some one was praying over me—that something strange and heavy was brought in at the front door. The next morning, when a gleam of gray broke through the shutters, I crept shuddering, as it were, out of my grave. I went to the window. There I saw a great yawning gap in the old bridge, and a turbid ocean of water whirling through it. I looked down upon myself, and became aware that, instead of a widow's black garments, I had on the crushed whiteness of a wedding-robe, the fragments of a torn veil matted to my hair with orange blossoms.

"My mother came to the window, and led me down stairs into the darkened parlor. He lay with those ghostly white flowers gleaming at his head, and there, kneeling by his death-couch, I told our secret to my mother.

"Do not move, do not leave me; I have more to tell,"

said Mrs. Canfield, almost sharply, as Waldon moved restlessly on his seat. "In my whole life I shall never have power to speak of this again. The effort would kill me. There is no pride equal to that of a pure lineage and of honest action—no charity equal to that of real goodness. My parents were broken-hearted, but merciful. They had loved me, before this, with a little pride, perhaps, in the beauty that *he* thought so perfect. Now, almost divine compassion took the place of pride. Being good and generous, after the example of our Saviour, they folded me closer to their hearts, because I needed them so much, even as Christ loved Peter after his cruel denial, and forgave me tenderly, as he forgave the Apostles who slept while drops of agony gathered upon his brow.

"My parents were not the only Christians in that peaceful valley. The clergyman who came to perform the ceremony which death turned to a funeral was taken into their council. He was a rich man, who gave his time to God, and shared his wealth liberally with God's most forsaken and helpless children; not young, but wise and learned—a minister of God, who thought for himself. I cannot speak of this man without tears. When he left that household of mourning, we went with him, my mother and I. He lived, in a quiet way, in the city with a sister older than himself, who kept his house. My mother left this house, a week after we entered, weeping with gratitude. I remained longer, not there, but in the neighborhood, seeing no one, and never going out; but I suffered—oh, how I suffered! Widow's garments never covered a more desolate heart, and more bitter tears never fell upon coffin or cradle, than rained over the little helpless creature they laid in my bosom, one sorrowful day, and called my daughter.

"All the friend or confidant I had, in these days, was the minister, who sought me out the more frequently because of my desolation—who began to love me a little, I think, in spite of all that had brought it upon me.

"Sir, it came in time that this good, good man wanted to marry me, not from pity alone, but because he loved the woman his mercy had saved—loved the child that lay in her lap, reproaching her with its dimples and its smiles.

"I married him. He gave me and my child his own honored name—the only one she ever bore. When he died, all the wealth that his munificent charities had left was divided between us. Only three persons living ever knew that Bertha was not his child; but, on his death-bed, he bade me reveal this secret, as I have, to the man my child might marry—for that man would have a right to know it.

"I have kept my promise."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE HEART OF STONE.

FOR a minute there was a hard, dead silence in that room.

Mrs. Canfield leaned back exhausted, her eyes closed, her face trembling all over, while Waldon sat with a bar of sunlight striking through the blinds across his face, through which his eyes shone with sinister brightness.

The lady opened her eyes at last, and turned them wistfully upon him.

"Is it contempt or pity that you feel for me?"

"Pity!" he exclaimed, with ruthless sincerity; "what pity can be claimed for a person who forgets all dignity, and disgraces her own womanhood?"

A cry broke from the poor creature who was bending toward him, and she fell back upon the couch as if crushed down by a blow.

"Don't! don't!" she gasped, holding up both her shivering little hands, as if to ward off a second assault. "I think you have killed me with this!"

"You have told the truth, I suppose, and I thank you that so much of honor, at least, has been left. Your daughter is ignorant of her disgrace, and I am forbidden to tell her why our engagement is broken. I can pity *her*."

"Broken! broken! No! no! You write such beautiful, generous things—it cannot be in your mind to break her young heart as you have crushed mine? She is noble, good, white as an angel! My sin has not touched her—my sorrow has only fostered her tenderness. Oh, sir, think of me as you please, but you will never find another like her!"

"But you, who have sinned, are her mother."

"I cannot help that! God let her live and grow beautiful—so good and beautiful that it seemed as if He were blessing me when I deserved only punishment. He scarcely sent me a trouble till you came and made her love you. Then I suffered. She will never know how I suffered; for it was my duty to give her up, and I was pledged to tell this to the man she wished to marry. It was hard—cruelly hard; and now, instead of pity, you threaten to break up her life. But you did not mean it. No wonder you hated me at first—I sometimes hate myself—but you are generous, and you love her."

"But she has been associated with you all her life, and, ignorant of any reason why she should not, will continue to crave your society."

Mrs. Canfield started up, and, supported by her elbow, searched his face for the cruel meaning of those words.

"You mean—you mean—"

"Yes, I mean that no wife of mine shall ever associate with a woman who has degraded herself!"

"You would take her entirely from me! Sir, I am her mother!"

"You have just told me as much."

"And I love her better than my own life—better than my hopes of salvation—from the morning when he lay dead before me until now, she has been the one object in which my poor life has centred; but if you demand it, if it will make you love her better, I will give her up utterly—will go away back to the old farm-house, and all alone mourn the sin you have hurled upon me like a rock. You shall never be troubled with the sight of me. I will never leave the farm. Mr. Canfield left me well off, and very soon you will have everything, even to the farm. I would give it up now, only the will forbids it."

The poor woman saw a change come over the man's face—he was relenting. She started to a sitting posture, and held out her clasped hands, imploringly.

"You will think of this—deprived of her I shall not live long, then you will have everything. Only now and then—once in a year or two—she might come to see her grandparents. Not me—I will not ask that; but they are good old people, and love her so—or, perhaps, you would let me dress like a servant, and come through your basement, as if I wanted a place—just to look at

her in her happiness a little, as the years creep along. It would not hurt you, and I shall be so desolate."

"That you might be seized with a fit of weak penitence, and tell my wife of her own disgrace. No, madam, I will not marry a woman who has a mother living whom I cannot openly receive in my house. That you have no right to ask of me."

The woman fell back with a piteous moan; her hands trembled apart, and dropped down limp and pale, one dragging on the carpet.

Waldon took that poor little hand in his, and laid it on her bosom. Some small touch of compassion seemed to possess him at last, but while she lay, with broken moans on her lips, his footsteps, as he paced the room, shook the floor and the couch.

"Oh, if I were dead! If I could only have dropped down and died without telling him," moaned the poor woman.

"Dead!" repeated Waldon, unconscious that he was speaking. "Yes, if she were dead, there would be a difference."

She heard this cruel speech, and stopped moaning. It had entered her heart like a rusty arrow, and rankled there. Waldon still walked up and down the room, but she lay motionless, turned to marble as it seemed. At last the stillness struck him, and he went up to the couch. Her eyes were wide open, her lips parted till he could discern the edges of her still perfect teeth.

The deathly pallor of that face frightened Waldon. Was the woman dying? Had he killed her? It was an unpleasant thought. He looked around for some restorative, but the room being a pretty summer parlor, contained no perfume flasks or water, save that in vases,

which newly-plucked roses were drinking. He tried a door which was unlatched. Some heavy substance leaning against it moved, and at the second push it swung open, revealing a bed-chamber dimly lighted, and cool as a snow-bank. On the marble slab of a dressing-table some toilet bottles glittered. He seized one and went out, leaving the door unlatched.

Mrs. Canfield was still lying motionless, but her eyes were closed, and under them lay soft, purple stains; the lips that he had left apart were closed, and were firmly pressed like the cold marble mouth of a statue, embodying resolve and pain.

Waldon poured some cologne water into his curved palm, and bathed that forehead with it tenderly; for this man combined in his singular being the delicacy of an angel and the coarseness of a brute. Sometimes these contrasts chased each other through his nature so swiftly that you could hardly make sure which he was, a seraph or a fiend.

After a long time Mrs. Canfield opened her eyes, and looked into the face bending over her—not wistfully, as she had a little time before, but with a fixed, steady gaze, as if she had nothing to hope or fear from the man's compassion or wrath.

"Are you better? I am sorry that my words wounded you so deeply," he said.

"Yes, I am better. It is all over."

Waldon was surprised. There was no appearance of weakness in the woman now.

"That is well," he said, throwing away the flowers from a tall champagne glass, into which he poured some water that he had brought from the next room, and a little of the cologne. "Drink; it will give you strength."

Some other time we will talk this matter over, and you will understand better how impossible it is for me—"

The poor lady interrupted him by seizing upon the glass with both hands, and eagerly swallowing its contents. Then she sat upright, and spoke with considerable steadiness.

"There is little more to be said. I have a question to ask. Russell Waldon, do you love my daughter for her own sake, wholly, entirely?"

"Love her! yes—wholly, entirely!"

"But for me you would marry her?"

"But for you, and what you have told me, I would marry her to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" repeated the woman, with a wan smile. "No, that would be giving me so little time—to-morrow—only twenty-four hours. You are in haste, sir."

"You are confused," he said; "but for what you have told me—"

"No, it is you that misunderstand; but tell me this once again—you love my child?"

"Yes! Why ask me to repeat it?"

"I had a little—just a little doubt once; but now that she has saved your life, things seem different. That was a brave act. You should love her dearly for it; so should Mary Noel, for she saved her, too. But all that has not won you to forgive a poor sinful woman, who—"

Here that pale face began to quiver again, and tears swelled under the almost transparent eyelids.

"We will not speak of that," answered the man.

"No, it is useless, and troubles you; but I had something to add. Give Bertha a little time—a month—perhaps you would not begrudge me six weeks. Do not

let her guess that her mother is so much in the way. Something may arise—of course, the past never can be changed; but sometimes a great deal happens in a month—say six weeks—that is so little out of your life. Let everything rest as it is between you till then. Make no resolutions; be in no haste to strike her down; and I charge you, never let her know that for one moment you thought of giving her up—that is, after you are married, if it comes to that. You promise?"

Waldon took the hand she held out to him, with some real feeling.

"Yes, I promise to change nothing in our relations during the time you mention."

"Thank you. But remember, under no circumstances are you to tell her what I have revealed to-day."

"My promise is already given."

"True; I had forgotten. The time seems so long since you came into the room here. How swiftly pain hurls one forward! Hark! that is Bertha's voice, and she is laughing. How can she laugh? how can she laugh?"

There came another sweet peal of merriment, and a voice cried out:

"Waldon—Mr. Waldon! Come to the window; mamma must keep you no longer! You only asked ten minutes, and here it is an hour!"

Waldon pushed a leaf of the blinds open, and through the opening came a rose-bud, heavy with moss, which just grazed his face, and fell into the room.

"Hand that to mamma as a compensation for giving you up. She will find a kiss in the moss. Then come, for we are getting tired of each other here."

Waldon waved his hand from the window, laid the bud in Mrs. Canfield's lap, and left the room.

The moment he was gone the woman he had tortured to death arose from her couch, and hiding herself back of the blinds, looked out upon the two girls, who waited together on the lawn. How fresh and beautiful they were! How full of life—the bright, sweet life she must never know again! To her they seemed as angels in a heaven, from which one sin had shut her out.

This thought gave the poor woman a little gleam of hope, but she shook it off as a weakness. Bertha loved the man. Every look, every word betrayed the depth and strength of her devotion. With what a proud sense of appropriation she leaned upon his arm, clasping both hands over it, and almost touching his shoulder with her cheek, while Mary Noel paused to tie the little straw gypsy, from which a purple corn flower had just fallen.

"She loves him! she loves him!" sighed the poor mother, and stealing back to her couch, she turned her face to the wall, and lay there in dead silence, grasping Bertha's rose in her hand so closely that it was crushed out of all shape.

While that wretched woman had dropped down in her despair, the girl Lydia stood in the next room, peering through the blinds, and shaking her clenched fist at Waldon, who was passing, with the ladies, on his way to the river.

"You Ishmaelite—you puffed-up Moab—you grass-fed Nebuchednezzar! You—you—oh! if I only had a fist full of hard names to pitch at you! That might keep me from bursting out and telling them all I know, that I've been peeping through key-holes and door-cracks, and hearing things that make my blood run cold! Oh, my poor mistress! why didn't she tell me, if it must

come out, and not that—that handsome beast—that stony-hearted cuss? There! I've sworn, and it's done me good!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

SEARCHING A HEART.

AFTER a while Bertha came indoors and ran up to her mother's room, a little curious to know why Waldon had been summoned to it. Had her mother at last relented? Was the time arranged when she would be Waldon's wife, and all her weak unrest swept away forever? Had her mother discovered how foolish she was, and how unreasonably she suffered at times? Not often of course; but when Waldon spoke to her friend in that caressing way, and looked at her so, how could any one help feeling it? Being engaged did not make a woman more than human.

Mrs. Canfield was lying on the lounge, with her face to the wall. She shrank together when Bertha came in, and closed her eyes.

Bertha was not surprised by her pallor, nor by this effort to avoid conversation. These things only confirmed the belief that Waldon's face had impressed on her. She had seen him come out from the interview with bright eyes and a smile of satisfaction on his lips. What could have brought these signs there but the consent he had so often pleaded for?

"Mother, what makes you look so strange? I have

not seen you smile in a week. It makes my heart ache. Have I done anything wrong?"

"No, my darling—you never do wrong."

"Now, that's just one of your own precious little fibs. Don't I know that it was awfully wrong to leave you alone, as I did the other morning? And am I ever here only like a humming-bird, flying in and out among the flowers, staying nowhere long, because there is so much honey dew about all of them? But, then, *he* is here, and will be going away soon. There is no use denying it; I cannot stay content even with you when he is about."

"Do you love him so well—more than your mother, Bertha?"

The pathetic mournfulness of that poor mother's voice went to the girl's heart. She kissed her lips and forehead, in mute apology for loving any one but her, then gathered up her courage and said:

"Better than you, mother? No, I cannot say that—not better, but different. It is impossible that I should ever love any one better than my own, own mother."

"But you do love him?"

"Oh, yes! dearly, mamma; forgive me, indeed I do!"

"But if I were to ask you to give him up, Bertha?"

"Ah, mother dear, I could not do it!"

"Not if your mother's happiness, forever and ever, depended on it?"

The poor woman could hardly make herself heard, her voice was so hoarse.

"Mother, how can you ask me?"

"But, to save my life—my life—could you give up

this man, who was a stranger to us only a few months ago—to save my life?"

"Then, mother, I would give Waldon up, and die in your place."

"No, no, Bertha; you would not die. It might sadden you for a time—a long, long time, perhaps; but death is not always merciful to the unhappy. I have known people pray on their knees, hours and hours, in darkness and tears, but death would not come to them for praying."

"That is hard, for so I should pray, mother. What would life be without him?"

"You would have your mother, Bertha."

"And she would break her own heart in watching mine wither! Dear, sweet mother! why are you questioning me so? Has Waldon done you any wrong? If so, he shall make it up, or I'll never speak to him again. There now; is not this foolish talk? Never speak to him again! Why, that would kill me! But what has he done?"

"Done—nothing."

"Then why ask such cruel questions? Is it that you doubt my love for him?"

"Not that, Bertha, but your strength to part with him. Could you find enough for that, if he wished it?"

"If he wished it, mother! Oh, mother! has he wished it?"

"Bertha, Bertha, you frighten me! No—I say he has not wished it; but if he should?"

"Mamma, you are cruel—awfully cruel. I would not have believed it of you. I would not torture any one so. If Waldon were to break with me—but I *cannot* think of it. Sometimes it has come across my mind

when—when it ought not to, for that would be touching his honor. And I have felt as if a snake were coiling about my heart. Mother, if this ever happens, I shall perish, or become a revengeful, wicked woman, whom you would not know for your child. If God would not let me die, then—then—oh, mother! mother! in that case death would be a mercy!”

“But my Bertha used to be proud and strong.”

“That was before I knew him, mother.”

That poor woman was strangely persistent, probing her child's heart cruelly, as she had never done before in all her gentle life.

“But if he wished it, the old pride would come back?”

“Mother, you make me angry. What has pride to do with love? Nothing, nothing; when a woman talks of that, she only gives selfishness another name. I tell you I love this man, fondly, madly, with my whole being! Now talk to me of parting with him, in this idle way, if you can find the heart to do it!”

“I cannot! I cannot!” answered the wretched mother. “It would be easier to die!”

She sank down upon the couch, that had witnessed so much anguish, after saying this, and turned her face to the wall.

Any one who had seen Bertha Canfield, as she stood in the middle of that room after being so questioned, might well have believed her when she said that desertion would make her a revengeful woman. Her eyes fairly burned, her cheeks turned white, and her mouth quivered with intense passion. So keenly had those questions tortured her that her heart writhed and her bosom panted with the pain of it. She did not heed the dead

silence that had fallen upon her mother, or know when Lydia entered the room.

“Please to go out now, if you've come near enough to killing her, which you and that cu—excuse me, but I won't see her murdered yet, being a girl with something besides stones in my bosom.”

Lydia was in solemn earnest. She now considered herself in duty bound to listen, and had heard everything, and understood far more than Bertha dreamed of.

Bertha pushed the girl aside, dashed into the next room, and flinging herself on the bed, burst into a passion of sobs.

“Why did she question me? What good did she find in dragging up those miserable doubts from the bottom of my heart? She might have known—she might have known how I had tried to strangle them.”

“Miss B., your mother is cold as a stone, and you here.”

Bertha flung the hair back from her face, and followed Lydia to the couch, where her mother was lying.

“Oh, mamma, forgive me! forgive me!”

Mrs. Canfield turned slowly, held out her arms, and the two clung together, one weeping passionately and the other still as death.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE HOUR OF PARTING.

THEY were sitting together on the shore of the river. A great willow threw its fountain of leaves over them and the grass around its roots was blue with violets, which breathed a delicious perfume as Bertha plucked them one by one, forming a cluster for Waldon's button-hole.

"You will not be long in following us?" she said, in a low, half-timid voice, breathing a kiss on the violets before she fastened them in his coat. "It will seem so strange, so lonely, not to have you with us every day. Mother, I know, will miss you, though she leaves her room so seldom."

"But she will have you entirely to herself; and that, I think, she will like better than anything," answered Waldon, gazing out upon the water in a vague, thoughtful way, which she had noticed frequently in him of late. "I doubt if my coming will make her happy."

"But it will make me happy," said the girl, leaning forward, and kissing the violets she had just placed over his bosom. "So you will not linger here, and—and make me impatient of the dear old farm? It is not so grand and park-like as this place—which is princely—only a nice New England farm, where grandfather sometimes works himself, as you know very well, but when you come it will be paradise to me. So Mr. Hyde must not keep you long."

"He will not keep me long. Within a few weeks I shall follow you, and then everything will be settled. Your mother understands that."

"Ah! I thought you had settled something with her. She has seemed so miserably sad of late. Poor mamma! It breaks her heart to let me go, even for the few weeks we shall be travelling about. After that we shall be all together, with a beautiful life before us. Promise me, Waldon, that you will always be good and sweet to mamma—for if ever an angel lived she is one. But I need not ask that. You cannot help loving her any more than you can avoid the breath of my violets. What are you looking at so earnestly, Waldon?"

"Nothing but the landscape. What a glorious bend the river makes just here! How grandly those oaks loom over the bank, and float—a grove of shadows—in the water! Noel calls that a bit of woodland. Why, there are three hundred acres on the point alone. But it is only in proportion with the rest, I suppose."

Bertha laughed a little.

"Oh, it is not the only timber in Willow Bend; but the estate stretches so far out of sight that the pines and beeches are five miles from here. Some day Mary Noel will have it all. What an heiress she will be!"

"But that is nothing to us," answered Waldon, a little sharply.

"Nothing in the world, only as Mary is interested. Still, do you know, Russell, I am afraid she will come in for this sooner than any of us expect. Mr. Noel is not a healthy man. The doctors do not give him a long life."

"What do they think is the matter with him?" said Waldon.

"Heart disease, I believe," answered Bertha, under her breath. "He told mother of it in New York. But you must not hint this to Mary. He was very anxious that she should not know. There he comes now!"

Sure enough, Mr. Noel came sauntering down the lawn, and Waldon regarded him with keen interest, remarking the dull whiteness of his face, and a certain languor in his walk, which had never struck him so forcibly before.

"Do you know I have been thinking that your friend Hyde is a little fascinated with Mary?" said Bertha, who was busy plucking more violets, which she tossed to the water at her feet, and did not observe the searching look of her companion; "and she likes him very much indeed. No wonder—he is so handsome and talented. Besides, he is your friend, and that is—a great recommendation."

A flash shot into Waldon's eyes. He thrust his hand down among the violets, and tearing up grass and all, tossed them into the stream ferociously, as if they had been stones thrown at an enemy.

"How can you!" said Bertha, with plaintive reproach. "I am sure such rough handling hurts the poor flowers. Besides, you are so cross and silent to-day. What have I and the pretty violets done, that your face clouds so?"

"Clouds, does it? Is there not reason enough, when you are going to leave me so soon?"

"Ah, that! Well, then, let us make the most of our time. Here is the "Katydid," with all those willow branches sweeping over it. Shall I row you down stream? The oak branches look inviting."

"Not this morning; the sun is too warm. You will get a headache. Besides, there is your friend on the croquet ground."

"So she is, and Mr. Hyde with her. Of course, we must give up the "Katydid" now. But this afternoon? To-morrow is our last day, Waldon. It takes my breath to think of it!"

"Yes, our last day," answered Waldon, with mournful gravity, that brought tears into the fond eyes of his betrothed. "Even I feel such partings."

"Go forward; I will come in a minute," said Bertha, feeling the tears swell beyond her control. "Just now, I would not like them to see what a baby I am!"

Waldon obeyed her, and she went to the water's edge, and flinging herself down among the violets, sobbed like a rebellious child.

"Why will she make me go? Why will she, when I want to stay so much? It is cruel, cruel, cruel! And they all so happy!"

"Come, Bertha, come, or we cannot make up the game," Mary Noel called out from the croquet ground.

Bertha sprang to her feet, looked at herself in the water, which was still as a mirror under the willows, smoothed back her hair a little, bathed her eyes, and waiting a while for the soft wind to cool her face, went up to that portion of the lawn where her friends were waiting.

"Come, hurry up!" cried Mary, who was impatient for her game. "You and Mr. Hyde against Mr. Waldon and the most reckless partner he ever had. Don't look sullen, Bertha. Married and engaged people must not play together. They are sure to forget everything but themselves. Here is your mallet, and there is your partner."

Bertha took the mallet, with a rebellious look.

"Now, Mr. Waldon and I against you and Mr. Hyde. This will be a desperate game. The red ball for me. Now for it!"

The next moment, a red ball came rolling down from the post, and took the first two wickets with lazy ease, and the game commenced in earnest.

All this time Mrs. Canfield sat, like a ghost, in the window, unconsciously watching her daughter's defeat.

CHAPTER LX.

AT THE OLD HOMESTEAD.

AN old lady hovered with unusual impatience around the front door of that low-roofed farm-house, waiting for her only child, who had never crossed its threshold without a welcome. She had seen her husband set forth, an hour back, with his farm-horses and double wagon. She had seen a long train of cars rush down the valley—had heard a bell ring, and an engine shriek. Then she went out on the door-step, shading her eyes with one hand, and saw a great, fiery-eyed monster plunge along the road, and cut through a distant piece of woodland, leaving a cloud of smoke behind. When that cleared away, she could just discern two or three persons standing in front of the station, and said, in the gladness of her heart:

"They are coming—my own, own child!"

Then she clasped her wrinkled hands softly together, and went into the house, with a quivering smile upon her face, to make sure that all was ready there.

In the house room a table was set forth with china of dainty whiteness, old-fashioned cut glass, and quaint silver, bright as sunbeams; and in the kitchen a girl was busily at work making gravy for a fricassee of chickens, which was simmering deliciously over the fire.

The old lady took the bowl gently from her.

"Thee does not understand exactly how my daughter likes it. How should thee, never having reared her? I will attend to the chicken while thee gets the dishes ready. Then step to the door, and tell me when the wagon comes in sight."

The girl, burning with curiosity, ran to the door, heard a distant rattle of wheels, and waited till the wagon came in sight, with a man and three women in the seats.

"They are coming! they are coming!—three on 'em, besides the old man!" she cried in excitement, running into the kitchen, where her mistress was busy over the stove, with the empty bowl in one hand, while with the other she stirred up the fricassee.

"Thee can take care of it now!" exclaimed the little lady, untying the snow-white apron from over her silver-gray dress; "but take care that it does not burn."

Never had that servant seen her mistress in such haste before. Her apron had dropped on the rag carpet, and she never paused to pick it up. The great spoon she had been using stood upright in the uncovered pot, from which the simmering gravy now and then gave out a rich, bubbling sound, that made the girl's mouth water. But she tore herself away, and gave surreptitious peeps into the house room, where a pale little lady, so like the mistress, but more delicate and younger, was lying back, as if faint from her journey, in a great rocking-chair, while her mother hovered around her in a soft flutter of delight, and Miss Bertha, who had filled the house with sunshine in the autumn, was untying her bonnet.

"Fathër, she has grown just a little older, don't thee think so?" said the old lady, with a soft flutter of delight; "but like herself—very like herself. How does thee feel, my daughter? Is thee glad to get home again?"

Mrs. Canfield lifted up her arms, and laid her head on the old mother's bosom.

"So glad, mother! But it will not be for long—remember, it cannot be for long."

The soft moonlight joy faded out of the old woman's face.

"We thought, dear, that perhaps, when Bertha was married, thee might like to live with us?"

"Oh, how I should like it!" cried the woman, casting a wild look around her. "But it can never, never be!"

"Mother is nervous, and worn out with our journey," said Bertha, smoothing the soft hair from which she had removed the bonnet. "Besides, she is low-spirited. But you and grandfather will cheer her up. The old place is so beautiful! Come, mother; I know where your room is—"

Mrs. Canfield arose from her chair, and smiled faintly when the old lady came forward, offering her frail arm for support.

"Father is stronger," she said, turning her eyes wistfully on the old man; who circled her waist with his arm, and almost carried her up-stairs.

She cast the same wistful, almost wild look around her chamber when Bertha closed the door, but said nothing. She permitted her hair to be brushed and her face bathed, in gentle silence, while she looked wistfully out of the window.

There was something pathetic in the efforts this woman made to share in the joy which her coming had given to those old people; but the piteous smiles that came to her lips were more touching than tears, and her voice was so laden with melancholy that its vibrations struck those fond old hearts with tender commiseration.

"She has not forgotten it all yet; that tender conscience will never rest. Thee must be more than a father to her now," whispered the old lady, when she had got her husband at a safe distance from the house room, to which

the servant girl was carrying dishes whose very scent was a repast.

"Everything is ready, ma'am," called out a mellow voice, "if ye please to walk in."

"Yes, Bridget. Come, father. Thee will remember to say nothing that can remind our child of that day."

"Nay, wife, thee is over anxious to think I would. There, now; let's go in," said the old man. "Our child is tired, and wants food. A cup of warm coffee will make her strong. When she has once looked around the old place, it will be pleasant again. Come!"

Together those old people went into the house-room, and took their places at the table.

"This is thy place, daughter," said the old man, caressingly, as he patted a chair next his own with one hand.

The poor woman, so petted and loved, made a brave effort to eat the food placed before her with such loving bounty, but it was impossible. Everything reminded her of the past, and the future was so dark, how could she ever seem cheerful, knowing all that was to come?

"She will be better to-morrow," promised Bertha, throwing her arms around her little grandmother, that night before she went to rest. "Being here with you will make her bright again. I think she is sleeping now."

But Mrs. Canfield was not asleep. She seldom did sleep now; and as the weeks rolled away, the tone of her mind grew more austere in its melancholy. She no longer struggled to seem cheerful.

CHAPTER LXI.

A GLOOMY HOUSEHOLD.

THE old friend and his wife moved about their house, during the next week, as if some person at the point of death lay in the chamber Mrs. Canfield occupied. Yet she was not really ill, but so mournfully self-absorbed that the family spoke in undertones when she was near. The festival of quiet joy those old people had promised themselves on the coming home of their child had turned almost into a funeral. Even Bertha, who had filled the whole house with sunshine, a few months before, seemed to be changed and thoughtful.

There was no ostensible reason for all this. Mrs. Canfield was not in danger certainly, and Bertha had parted with her lover only a few days before, with a sweet hope of meeting him at the old farm when the wedding-day was fixed, and her mother spoke as if that would be very soon.

Before leaving Willow Bend Mrs. Canfield had asked an interview with Waldon, at which Lydia would gladly have been a private auditor; but the door was closed fast, and she could only hope to hear by climbing on to the roof of the veranda, which she did, and crept like a cat to the window of Mrs. Canfield's room, where she dragged the trailing masses of honeysuckle vines over her, and lay in wait for any stray word that might penetrate them. But the conversation had exhausted itself, and she only gathered up a sentence or two that, joined with what she had heard before, were full of grave significance.

When the vines settled around her, Mrs. Canfield was speaking.

"It is not that you love my child less—toward her you have not changed. Oh, sir, be frank with me! Is it for want of love that you threaten this cruel act? Tell me, if you would not have the guilt of an awful crime on your soul forever and ever!"

"Why should I repeat this, madam? It only wounds you when I say that, to her, I am unchanged."

"But *can* you love her so, and not be willing to forgive, for her sake, the mother who—who—"

A faint sob broke up the words she was trying to utter, and Waldon silenced them with sharp impatience.

"Feelings like mine are neither to be changed nor intensified," he said. "To separate Bertha from her mother would be cruel, and render her miserable; to allow any association between that mother and my wife would be a degradation of my home. The thing is impossible. You have demanded perfect frankness, madam, and I give it, not willingly. I would have avoided this whole conversation had you permitted me; for if there is anything on earth that I would escape, it is a scene like this."

"It is I—I alone that stand between my child and you!"

The dull, heavy agony in her voice disturbed even that hard heart. Waldon arose to avoid the better feelings that would sometimes rebuke him with their angel whispers.

"I cannot speak more plainly or more positively, madam."

"But you will not tell her—you will wait until—until—the time?"

"I have told her nothing. On the contrary, I wish

to spare your daughter and myself a scene that can bring only distress to us both."

"Thank you!"

The words were simple and meek, but oh! how full of desolation!

Waldon arose to go. He had the cruelty to reach forth his hand. She shrunk back with a moan. Lydia, in her covert, thought of a poor little lamb she had once seen come up to the butcher, and lick the hand which held the knife ready to slay him. Neither of those persons heard it, but a sob shook those clustering honey-suckles, and frightened by it, the girl clapped a hand to her mouth, over which great tears rolled and fell upon the leaves like rain.

When Lydia had subdued herself and bent to listen again, Waldon was gone, and Mrs. Canfield had fallen upon her knees, and the voice of her bitter agony broke through the window:

"Oh, my God! my God! is it in this terrible form that my sin comes back again, now that I am weak and getting in years, with no strength to bear it!"

Lydia dared not stay longer. Her whole frame shook with sobs; her teeth ground together; both hands were clenched; but she could not subdue them, or force herself to listen where a human soul was thus pleading with its God.

This scene had happened on the day Bertha and her mother had left Willow Bend—one with terrible woe and foreboding—the other carrying away that traitor's kisses on her lips, and hoarding their very memory as a consecration. Was it strange that all the pleasant sunshine left that farm-house when these two entered it?

Even Lydia went about the house like a broken-

winged bird. The poor girl was bearing about with her that most intolerable of all burdens—a secret. She knew how hollow were the hopes which still kept Bertha's cheek blooming, and her eyes bright, even in that solemn atmosphere. Every day, after the train came in, she was sent to the post-office for letters. When she saw that man's writing, her hands would tremble with an angry wish to rend the paper to atoms. Sometimes she would fling such letters on the ground, and appease her wrath by stamping down the grass all around them.

"Oh, if I could only bury them out of her sight!" she would say, in confidence to herself, the only creature she could confide in or take counsel of. "But what's the good? She'd cry her eyes out longing for 'em; and they'd sprout in the ground like Canada thistles, and come up lies! Let her love on. Some people live on poison—and she's one—thinking it honey! Haven't I seen it before?"

After a soliloquy like this, Lydia would take her letter from the ground, with the ends of her fingers, as if afraid of contagion, and deliver it to Bertha, who was sure to come along the road to meet her, and sit down on the first stone to read the precious missive, which was the very breath of life to her; for Waldon kept his promise; besides, he wrote letters with a sense of artistic pleasure, enriching every thought with poetry, which this bright, beautiful girl believed that love for her had inspired. Thus a few days rolled on at the farm-house, over which clouds were gathering with slow, steady blackness.

CHAPTER LXII.

DESPAIRING PRAYERS.

ONCE more Mrs. Canfield questioned her daughter, and again Bertha declared, with rising impatience, that she loved Waldon with all her soul, and nothing on earth should ever separate her from him, if she could help it. The girl spoke quickly, and with decision, as persons of strong purpose and nervous temperament are apt to do when harassed, without visible reason, by the importunity of a weaker nature.

Bertha loved her mother dearly, but this persistent desire to fathom her heart was so inconsistent with her usual delicate reserve, that the girl grew restive under it, and answered her sharply, almost for the first time in her life, for every word which conveyed a doubt regarding the man she worshipped stung her like a wasp.

"I love him, and—but why ask this question over and over again, mother? Is it that some one has been slandering Waldon? If so, tell *him*. He is a man to defend his own honor."

"I have heard nothing," answered the mother, in a voice that struck the girl, even in her excitement, as almost unearthly.

They had been walking together up and down the road, and the twilight, which threatened storms, came upon them as this disturbing conversation took place. A stone wall ran along the highway, on which a tier or two of rails completed one of those fences so common to New England. On one of these jutting stones Mrs. Canfield sat down, looking so white and still that Bertha was stricken with compunction.

"Mother! mother! don't look so deathly! I did not mean to speak so. For the whole world I would not do it again. Do—do say that I haven't hurt you so much!"

Mrs. Canfield looked into her daughter's excited face with a vague, yearning gaze, but said nothing.

"You know, mother, this is the first time I was ever cross to you, so you might forgive it."

"Forgive!" said Mrs. Canfield, in that slow, far-off voice. "I was thinking to ask forgiveness of my own child; but what good—what good!"

"Forgiveness of me! Dear, dear mother, do not break my heart. I know that it was wrong to answer you like that. Come, now, sweet old darling, let us kiss and make up!"

Bertha put down her fresh young mouth, quivering with penitence, and touched the white lips her mother neither offered nor withheld.

"Oh, mother, how cold you are! It is a kiss of ice!"

"Am I? Yes, it is a little cold."

Bertha took off her white summer shawl, and wrapped it tenderly around the woman, who began to shiver.

"There! there! don't act so strangely when I am trying so hard to make up."

"Strangely! Can a mother be strange to her own child? Bertha, I have been a stranger to you all my life."

Bertha tried to laugh.

"I am glad you can joke, mamma, for that looks as if you could forget how hard and saucy I was. Come, now, let us go home. Grandmother will have a good, strong cup of tea ready, and I'm sure you need it."

Mrs. Canfield looked wearily around, as if she longed to escape, but yielded to Bertha's arm, and went into the house. Seating herself at the table, she drank a cup of tea without appearing to notice how bitterly strong it was.

Bertha had no appetite. She thought that her mother was still wounded by the manner in which her questions had been repulsed, and grew painfully repentant. The old people tried to get up a pleasant conversation, but it died out in monosyllables; and when they arose from the table, a weird gloom had fallen upon the whole family.

At last Bertha went up-stairs, threw herself on the bed in her room, and thinking of her abrupt words, cried bitterly. The old lady was busy washing up the tea-things in the kitchen, and her husband went there to read the county paper by the lamp she was using.

Mrs. Canfield had watched these movements with silent vigilance. The strong tea strung her nerves with unnatural tension. She must be alone, and must have action. Bertha's white shawl lay across a chair. She took it up, and glided out of the house, wrapping it around her head and shoulders. The valley was full of floating mist; through it came the distant fall of a mill-dam, with an undertone of waters flowing away softly beneath the veiled star-light.

Into this mist the lady plunged, bearing directly for one point on the bank of the river—a point she had never visited or looked toward since a young man was dragged from the whirling waters, and laid, stark and dead, on the grass her feet were now treading. Why did she seek that place? It was dark almost, and the stars that looked down upon her were pale and feeble, as if they, too, had committed some fault years before, and

were striving to hide themselves among the floating gray of the clouds. She paused on the very spot where they had reverently laid him, and settled downward, groveling to the earth, which her hands grasped, and her face touched. Then her moans arose, and broke the monotonous voice of the running waters, with a sound of woe that mastered it like a dirge. She called upon him—the idol, the lover of her youth—for help and forgiveness.

"It is for her sake—your child and mine—that I come to you. Oh, give me mercy and give me help! If the angels ever have compassion on a woman who sins, ask them to forbear this once, and let me come to you—come to you, my beloved, wherever they have placed you. Though the dreariest spot in all God's universe, it will be Heaven to me!"

There were no sobs, no tears—only these dry, broken words pleading to one who had been sinful as herself—for that wretched mother, lying there upon the damp earth, wrapped in the gray mists that covered her like a pall, was afraid to ask help or mercy from the living God.

Full half an hour that miserable woman lay upon the earth, beseeching it, in her anguish, to open and swallow her up before another sin, from which all her being recoiled, came between her and all hope; but the merciless earth only chilled her to the vitals, and, when she lifted her eyes to heaven, the moon plunged under a cloud and hid itself, leaving only a few pale stars to look down upon her despair.

But all at once a voice broke through the night, calling her home. The very voice, and the girl's name heard so often when she had wandered away from home,

a little child. She arose from the earth obediently, wound the white shawl closer, and walked with a heavy, dragging step toward the house, which an old man was leaving in great anxiety. A white object, drifting through the mist, checked the cry upon his lips, and turned it into thanksgiving.

"Thank God thee has come to no harm; but grandmother was dreadfully frightened," said the old man, supporting his daughter across the road with his arm.

"She was always tender and good to me. You also, father: remember I have said that. No parents ever lived who forgave and loved so kindly. I have been silent, but not ungrateful, father; and never on this earth did I love you better than now. Do not forget to tell mother so in the morning."

"Dear child, there is no need of this; but why not tell her yourself? It will be pleasantest to her so."

"I! Oh, I may have forgotten it!"

She drew herself from his arm, and leaned heavily against the door-frame. The lamp shone upon her from the house room, and he saw that she was deathly pale.

"Come into the kitchen, child; grandmother has a fire there," he said, tenderly.

"No, if you please, father, I will go to my room; there is something for me to do up there."

A strange smile crept over her face as she spoke. He had seen such looks in the faces of patients in an insane asylum, and it brought a painful idea to his mind.

"Well, then, if thee had rather; but go to bed at once, and grandmother will bring up some hot drink. Thee shivers like a leaf."

Mrs. Canfield was moving toward the stairs; but when her father followed her, she turned back, put her arms around his neck, and laid her cold cheek to his.

"Good-night, father."

The sad pathos of her voice touched the old man. With infinite tenderness he kissed her again, and laid his hand on her head.

"Father, bless me! I want it—oh, I want it so much!"

"The God of Heaven—"

She interrupted him with a sharp cry.

"Not that—He cannot—He will not! Father, it is your blessing that I want. Give it me before I go."

"Bless thee, oh, my child!"

The woman bent her head reverently, and without looking at her father again went up-stairs.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE MOTHER'S LAST SACRIFICE.

LYDIA was in the room, moving restlessly about. Sometimes this faithful creature grew tyrannical with her mistress, and out of the depths of a great love scolded her with affectionate violence. She saw the lady come in, pale as a ghost, her dress draggled with dew, and a damp white shawl trailing down it, sweeping the floor.

"This is just one thing too much, marm—such a night."

"Hush!"

Mrs. Canfield lifted her arm, with the white drapery of the shawl clinging to it, and the gesture was so ghostly, in its slow motion, that Lydia's very breath was hushed before that one word reached her ear.

"Well, hush it is, marm," she said, recovering herself; "but do go to bed at once, or it'll be death you've caught. I've got the bed all fixed, and your mar is making a smasher of hot drink, though how you could do it—out into the wet grass—but you said hush, and hush it is."

The damp shawl dropped from Mrs. Canfield's shoulder. She made a feeble effort to unfasten her dress, but sat down when it was half-unbuttoned, and with her eyes on the floor fell into thought.

The door opened suddenly.

"Mother—oh, mamma, have you come in? How cruel of you? Precious old darling—her hair is wet as if it had been rained on."

Bertha smoothed the hair tenderly with both hands, and kissed her mother, in all the fervor of her penitence. Her own eyes were heavy with weeping, and her voice shook, for she had been seized with great terror when told that her mother had gone off toward the river quite alone. While her grandfather had searched one way, she took another, and had just come in, distracted with strange fears.

"And her poor little feet cold as stones. Come, rub them, Lydia, while I get off this tiresome dress."

Lydia dropped on her knees, took the tiny white feet in her lap, and began to rub them; but no pink flush answered to the friction of her palm, and all her kindly efforts seemed spent on marble.

"There, I have got these things off at last," said Bertha; "now for burying her in a snow drift."

Lying across the bed was a long garment of white linen, frosted at the sleeves and bosom with delicate lace, all so spotlessly cold that the girl took it up with a chill at the heart.

The woman allowed herself to be buried in this garment for a moment, and then sat, with a faint smile gleaming over the solemn whiteness of her face, while Bertha fastened the night-robe about her throat and wrists.

"Now be a good old darling, and take your blessed rest," said Bertha, turning down the bed-clothes and smoothing the pillows.

Mrs. Canfield sat a moment, gazing upon the snowy folds of her night-robe, then she lifted her eyes to Bertha, with a look that went with the girl to her dying day.

"Bertha, you will never know how much I have loved you," she said, in a low, pathetic voice, which seemed to struggle against some strong pressure of feeling.

"Yes, I do—I do! No sweeter mother ever lived."

Bertha threw both arms around her mother, and kissed her with passionate tenderness, as her head touched the pillow; but this loving warmth fell on a locked face, which seemed turning to absolute stone; for one instant those frail arms were clasped around the girl, with a strain which seemed to break rather than loosen itself, but the hands fell down like dead things when they did unclasp.

"Good-night, mother; sleep well!"

No human lips answered Bertha's sweet good-night, but a pair of wild eyes, black with agony, followed her from the room.

"Lydia!"

"Did you say Lydia, marm?"

"Lydia, you have been a good, faithful girl."

"Yes, marm."

"I can trust you?"

"Marm, don't be angry but I'm true as steel, having tried myself."

"You will stay with me till morning, Lydia—alone, quite alone?"

"Yes, marm, I will, with the door locked."

"There is a folded paper—after I am sound asleep you will find it under my pillow—read it then, but never tell any human being what is in it."

"Mistress, I never will."

For what seemed a long time to Lydia, Mrs. Canfield lay upon her pillow, motionless and silent: then she spoke again.

"Is Bertha asleep yet?"

Lydia arose, opened the door of Bertha's chamber, and stole in on tip-toe. Directly she came back again.

"Yes, marm, she is, with one hand under her cheek like a baby."

Something like a sob broke from the bed, but when Lydia went up to it, the face upon the pillow was locked and still as before.

Again some long minutes passed, and everything was quiet in the room; then a faint movement on the bed, and that same low voice:

"Lydia, go down and get that drink now."

Lydia hesitated, something seemed to hold her back; but those large, wistful eyes were turned upon her, and she went away, heavy in her step, and heavy at heart.

The moment she was gone Mrs. Canfield arose, and, moving softly, like a ghost, stole into Bertha's room and sat down on the bed, looking at her beautiful child as she slept. A smile was on the girl's lips—those aching eyes saw it as the moon came out from under a cloud and threw a silvery veil down upon the sleeper. Could she

smile, then, even in slumber? Then came to the heart of this poor woman a vivid memory of our Saviour, when he came from that place of agonized prayer and found his Apostles sleeping tranquilly, and at first her soul cried out against it with infinite compassion; but, by-and-by, she bent down, kissed those smiling lips and glided away. Human suffering had reached its climax then—something like calm fell upon her.

With her bare feet upon the carpet, and her long night-dress trailing over them, she went to a bureau and poured some water into a glass, which she placed on a little table within reach of her hand. Then she took from one of the drawers a tiny vial, touched with gold, such as bring our attar-of-rose from the East, which she held close in the palm of her hand while getting into bed again.

Lydia had been gone some time now. She might come back at any moment.

The woman rose to her elbow and listened, then fell back with a dull horror on her face. The door opened softly, and a shadow filled the open space.

"Thee is not to be disturbed, daughter. It is only I, going to bed. Good-night and sleep well."

Sleep well! Did that sweet old voice, like the rest, lure her on? The same good-night from mother and daughter. Sleep well!

She arose to her elbow again, uncorked the tiny bottle with her teeth, and reaching for the goblet, emptied a few drops of some liquid it contained into the water.

This was done with slow deliberation. Feeling itself had grown numb in that motionless bosom, since that last look upon her child. Her only sensation was an intense longing for rest. The perfume of bitter almonds that came up from the goblet was pleasant. She lifted the glass to her lips.

"Here it comes, smoking hot, with a slice of lemon floating on the top."

With the words came a crash of glass upon the floor, a leap, such as frightened panthers give, and the goblet was hurled from Mrs. Canfield's hand half across the room.

Too late—too late! That poor woman was dead!

CHAPTER LXIV.

ALL ALONE WITH DEATH.

STUNNED almost into insensibility, Lydia had fallen across the bed as that glass left her hand. Lying there helplessly, with her eyes fixed upon the open orbs that looked so icily into hers, she besought her mistress to speak, to move, or turn those eyes once, that she might know that it was not death. But the eyes stared coldly on, the limbs stiffened, the hands turned to marble, and the awful stillness of death settled down upon the chamber.

Then Lydia arose, trembling in all her limbs, and was half way to the door, thinking to arouse the household, but a thought of the charge that had been given her flashed through her brain.

"Alone—I was to stay with her all night, and *alone!*" she thought, looking back to the bed, where those eyes seemed to plead with her. "There was a reason for that—something she wanted me to know and do. The paper—that will tell me!"

Some noble inspiration possessed this simple-hearted

girl. She had made a promise, and that promise must be redeemed.

Up to this time Lydia had been timid and superstitious. Death to her was something terrible. She had none of this dread now, but was possessed of a strange, wild desire to carry that frail form off in her arms, and shield it from all question.

No mother ever curled the ringlets of her child with more gentle touch than this girl smoothed the silvery-brown locks of the dead, and laid them softly back from the brow on which some undying trouble was still locked, as genius embodies sorrow in marble. She closed those haunting eyes with a reverent pressure of the finger, beginning to cry piteously when the cold, white lids partly opened again, as if no sleep was ever to settle on that haunted spirit.

"Oh, if God would only forgive her, and let her sleep!" she moaned. "Day and night, day and night, since that man broke her heart, she has been like this—half asleep, half awake, as if she dreaded something, and took no wholesome rest. Oh, our Father, which art in Heaven, forgive her, do—do forgive her, as we forgive those who trespass against us! At least she did, oh Lord! But I can't! It isn't in me to forgive that man!"

Lydia fell upon her knees as she uttered this strange prayer, and tears fell like rain from her eyes.

"Give us this day our daily bread—only I couldn't eat a crumb; it would choke me—lead us not into temptation—as she was, poor, dear, darling mistress—but deliver us from evil—especially from that awful man, Lord, for he is all evil, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot—for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

Lydia arose from her knees, relieved a little by her tears and this strange effort to ask help of God. She smoothed the pillow, settled the folds of the night robe, brushed down the lace over those waxen hands, and folded them lovingly over the heart that had ceased to beat forever. After this, she stole her hand under the pillow, and drew forth a thick package, which she carried to the lamp and examined, holding her very breath with awe.

The package contained two letters. One was directed to herself, the other to Russell Waldon.

Lydia turned up the lamp a little, and began to read :

"My friend—my faithful, kind girl—God only knows what a comfort you have been to me ; God only knows how I have needed that comfort. But for you, Lydia, I should have been utterly alone, for it was my curse that Bertha, my child, could not know of the anguish which you seemed to understand. Lydia, I have loved you, and trusted you in everything your tender age permitted you to understand. Had you been a little older, my good girl, I might have yielded to this longing for some human support, and told you all that hurries me on to the death-bed where you will read this. I have had great sorrows, Lydia, which my lips have never spoken of to but one person on earth. These sorrows would have killed me in the end ; but they work slowly, and drag me through a living death so long, that suffering is threatened to those I love. Now the end must come.

"Lydia, I have thought of this, for weeks, with terror, for I am neither brave nor strong—only a poor, weak woman, who would gladly live and suffer if that could be permitted. But it cannot—it cannot. This

very day I made a last effort to save myself, but it failed. To-night I shall die. You will be with me, and discover more than any other human being must know. In your hands I leave my memory—in your hands I leave the peace and good name of my only child. Guard that, and guard the sacred grief of my old father and mother. Let them weep for me, but not with the bitterness of shame. Whatever my fate may be hereafter, let them think of me as among the pure and happy.

"Again, Lydia, I charge you keep the manner of my death a secret from every living soul. One other person will know it, but he hates me, and is beyond all pain from the knowledge. Stay with me, after I have passed into the presence of my God. Many a time, my good girl, have you watched my sleep when it threatened you with no more harm than you need dread from the sleep of death. Watch with me now. Your hands shall close my eyes, and fold the garment which wraps me for the grave around my form when this heart ceases to beat. It is lying now across the foot of my bed, for I have thought of everything.

"Books tell me that the drops I shall take leave no time even for a pang, but a perfume betrays their presence hours after their work is done. Be careful about this. When the day dawns, to-morrow morning, there must be no sign—only a poor, dead woman, lying tranquilly on her pillow—a miserable deception to the last. I can trust you in this, Lydia. To fail me would bring misery on all that I have loved—all that you have loved, since the day you wandered into my presence with that little bundle under your arms. Since then you have been a blessing to me and mine. Be faithful now, I charge you, with my dying breath.

"Do not leave my child. She will have need of you. When she marries, go with her; for I think then, more than ever, your faithful help will be wanted. She will have sorrows; she will sometimes pine for the poor mother who loved her so well. She is doomed to pine for many things that my affection has given her. I know what a mighty thing it is to ask one human being to give up life and strength to another; but you are capable of this, and I ask it of you—dying, I ask it of you. Be to my child that which a daintily reared sister never could be; let her friends be your friends, her enemies your enemies. For her sake and for mine, love those that she loves; guard her; if needs be, die for her as I have.

"I am writing wildly. Who could ask this, and expect its fulfilment? Yet I do—I do! In my soul I know that you will hold this behest sacred. Watch over my Bertha; keep her from temptation; stand by her faithfully.

"With this you will find a letter directed to Russell Waldon, the man who will be my daughter's husband. Take it from under my pillow. Tell no one of its existence, but mail it at once. I think he is yet in Virginia.

"Lydia, I have done. These are the last words I shall ever write. But if I have been good to you, be faithful to my child.

"ELLEN CANFIELD."

Lydia tried to stifle her sobs and shake the blinding tears from her eyes as she read this letter, but that writing, made woefully pathetic by the presence of the dead, filled her eyes again with trembling water, and she would drop her face on the table, where the lamp stood, dis-

turbing the awful stillness with her sobs. Then she would lift her head and look piteously at the death-couch, asking forgiveness for the grief she could not check.

At last the letter was read and gathered into her heart of hearts. She folded it reverently, and kneeling down, laid her clasped hands upon the cold bosom of her mistress.

"All that you have asked of the poor girl who came to you from the street, when she had no friend, no home, nothing but just a little castaway, shall be done, if she has life and strength to do it. Your child shall be my mistress. I will be her slave. If she wants me, I will answer; if she is wronged, I will be revenged for her; if she has an enemy, I will be on his track; if she has a friend, I will lie down and let that friend wipe her feet on my hair. To her I will be faithful as a dog, and watchful as a cat. If one of us must sin, it shall be I; if one of us must die, it shall not be your child. Mistress—mistress—are you satisfied with me?"

No answer, nothing but solemn stillness, though the earnest, simple pathos of this speech might have wrung recognition from death itself.

When Lydia arose from her knees, her face, so common and even ugly, was transfigured.

"There, now, I have promised. If I break one word of it, mistress, come back from any place where you have gone, and look at me with your mournful eyes, and I shall die at your feet. Now let me begin."

Setting the lamp upon the carpet, the girl went down on her hands and knees, carefully picking up every piece of glass. Then she went to the bed again, searched carefully, and found the tiny vial. With these in her hand, she stole out of the room, down-stairs, and through the

front door, moving softly, and drawing the bolt with caution.

Once in the open air, she went swiftly toward the river and flung the vial and fragments of glass out into the stream. Then she hurried back to the house, stole into the death-chamber, and noiselessly opened all the windows, through which came a light wind, laden with the breath of dewy flowers, which swept through the room all night, carrying away every vestige of the poison that had for a time hung heavily about the room.

When this was accomplished, Lydia had nothing more to do but sit, in dreary silence, by one of the open windows, looking out into the night, where the clouds drifted and shadows moved over the face of the earth gloomily, as if armies of spirits were marching and counter-marching in search of a soul that was lost.

At last a soft line of gray crossed the horizon, then a gleam of pink shot over it, and a flush as of opening roses stole up the sky and shed its rich bloom upon the river.

Then Lydia arose, shut all the windows, and drew down the snowy muslin curtains, folding them gently over each sash like the wings of a white dove, after which she stole through the soft twilight, and went to each sleeping-room, knocking gently, and telling the inmates that there was death in the house.

• It was a pitiful sight, that old couple, so still, so patient, moving about the house in noiseless grief, now and then meeting each other in that darkened room, and gazing down upon the poor vestige of a woman outlined there, as they had looked together upon her cradle; but oh, with what different faces!

It was not thus that Bertha Canfield took up her first great sorrow. She could not comprehend it—refused to

believe that the thing told her as she came out of that sweet sleep in the morning, could be true. Why, only the night before her mother was well—a little nervous, perhaps, and depressed—but that was nothing unusual of late. Such things did not kill. She was in one of her long fainting fits. Lydia knew no better than to think it death; but how could she know?

Half-dressed, and with her hair floating wildly over her shoulders, the terrified girl rushed like a storm into the stillness of that death-chamber, but halted in the midst of it, almost as cold as the form upon the bed. The chill of a dreadful conviction struck to her heart. She threw up her arms, calling out, "Mother! mother!" and fell forward upon the floor, not insensible, but writhing there as if a bullet had passed through her.

Of all the persons in that old farm-house, Lydia was the most self-sustained. She made no attempt to soften Bertha's despair, but hovered near her, said a few roughly kind words now and then, answered all her wild questions with steady patience over and over again, but kept the terrible secret in her heart with fidelity, though the pain and burden of it was eating there like a vulture. No one was surprised. The girl had been a most devoted servant, useful far beyond her years—an impulsive child and an ardent friend at the same time. It was natural that she should move about with heavy eyes and a step of lead, for her benefactress was gone, and her heart seemed to have been buried with her.

Toward night, Lydia stole away and posted Mrs. Canfield's letter to Russell Waldon.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE NEW LOVE.

WALDON still remained at Willow Bend: for, though he was nominally the guest of young Hyde, half his days were spent at the Noel mansion. Occasionally Mary observed signs of gloomy depression toning down his brilliant spirits after Bertha had left, and this threw a shadow over her own bright life, which he saw and comprehended far better than she could. As the first ardor of his love for Bertha began to wane, which was not till she had been some weeks in Virginia, Waldon had made her friend a study; for his supreme vanity, always on the alert, was forever craving new devotees, simply for its own gratification. No coquette that lives ever hungered and thirsted for admiration—adoration, if he could get it—as this man did; no humming bird ever tore honey more ruthlessly from a flower, than he wrested love from the heart of a woman.

At first he had no object beyond this craving vanity in attempting to interest Mr. Noel's heiress. Bertha was beautiful, tolerably rich, and had been the supreme belle of a New York season. She loved him devotedly, and until certain of that, the vivid ardor of his own passion had been unparalleled in all his changeful life; but once certain of her, the craving serpent in his bosom crested itself anew, and cast the glamour of its eyes on this other girl, who was Bertha's friend, and whose life the brave girl had saved. Could she be won to love him, against womanly faith to her friend—against common gratitude to the girl who had saved her life? She seemed a sweet,

conscientious girl, whose good heart it would be hard to move, thrall'd in, as it was, by all these obligations; but if she could be won to forget them, that triumph would be a crowning one in his life, and Bertha would not love him less because he had proved irresistible to her friend.

At first these vain, selfish thoughts were all that led Waldon into such nameless attentions as brought rosy blushes into Mary's cheeks, which sometimes deepened to a vivid glow. As a serpent watches the bird it charms, he loved to see the white lids droop over those soft blue eyes until something that he said filled them with sudden light. It was sunshine to the man's vanity—nothing more at first—but afterward, when Hyde, his friend and literary satellite, gave indications of an ambition to win this girl and possess himself of an estate and fortune that was scarcely less than regal, the intense selfishness of the man blazed out. At any rate, this presumption should be frustrated. What right had any man to aspire like that and he present? Neither this fair girl nor her great wealth should go to another so long as he could lure her to himself. Bertha might be jealous; but then she must get used to his little innocent conquests—they were amusements she could not exactly expect him to throw off with marriage. In fact society would hardly permit the sacrifice.

Well, Bertha was jealous, and flamed out, in her haughty pride, after an amazing fashion, that day on Diamond Island, where Waldon strove to appease her, not being prepared for an outbreak, which might alarm her friend. Then came the accident, in which the noble girl saved his life, and, in doing it, humiliated his manhood. After that Mrs. Canfield's confession gave him a traitor's excuse and the means of emancipation, if he should desire it.

But did he desire it? Could he give Bertha up so readily? Did Mary Noel really care for him? Fortunately, he was not called upon to decide these questions at once. Mrs. Canfield had pleaded for six weeks—why he did not imagine—but the time was quite as important to him as it could be to her. When it expired, he might be obdurate or relenting, as circumstances determined—at any rate, he had the secret of that poor woman as an excuse for breaking his engagement, if that should be resolved upon. If not, it would make her his slave forever, and rest a power in his hands by which Bertha's pride might at any time be brought down.

"Did Mary Noel love him?"

The snake had charmed, and the bird had fluttered nearer and nearer to those open jaws. Would he yet have a choice between these two girls—and, if so, which?

The time was up that that poor lady had implored of him. On the very next day Waldon could fling off his shackles, if it so pleased him. He looked abroad, that morning, on the Noel estate. With one sweeping glance, he could gather in more wealth than Bertha possessed. True, she was a queenly woman—gifted with rare intellect—wonderfully beautiful—but the fervor of her haughty spirit might become troublesome; and the mother—.

This man really hated Mrs. Canfield, as coarse natures will hate those to whom they have been unjust or cruel. It was not in any degree the frailty of this woman that disturbed him. At first his dilettantic tastes revolted at her frailty, and he was really shocked; but her meekness, her pleading and distress were a homage to his authority, and in no sense had his principles been dis-

turbed. The fearful agitation and agony of spirit with which she had flung herself upon his mercy suggested a means of escape to him; and he used it ruthlessly, still with infinite caution, giving no sign of the project that grew and throve in his bosom, each day, as he rode from Hyde's plantation over miles and miles of Mr. Noel's property.

Waldon was not a rich man. He made money rapidly with his pen, and scattered it, with prodigal haste, for his own sensuous and intellectual needs; but men sometimes grasp with one hand while they sow gold like wheat with the other. Those broad acres, stretching so far and so richly down the James river, would make him potent in his wealth as he was powerful from his intellect. But then, where would he ever find another woman like Bertha? Her bright intellect mated his so grandly—her beauty was so unlike that of any other woman. Even at the last moment there was a struggle in that man's selfish bosom as he flung his bridle to a boy, and walked down to the clump of willows where Bertha had plucked violets for him.

How different the two girls were! Bertha, graceful in every sweeping curve of her person, and splendid with rich coloring, sat upon that violet bank, like an Empress upon her throne, full of sweet womanliness, but grand, also, in the passionate strength of a being who would, if the necessity arose, act out her own will. Waldon remembered her vividly, just then, as a creature of wonderful contrasts, to whom the fair young girl, on whom the sunshine was glinting through the willows, was a pleasant child, pretty to look upon, and nice to protect.

The gypsy hat which Mary had on shaded her face, and she was only conscious of Waldon's approach when

he threw himself on the grass at her feet. She gave a little cry, and turned scarlet, like a child caught stealing bonbons, or rooting up some lady's pet flowers.

"I—I did not think of you being near," she said, pulling the straw gypsy down low over her burning forehead. "I heard a step on the grass, but thought, perhaps, it was Mr. Hyde."

"Did you expect him—were you waiting out here for Mr. Hyde?"

"Waiting? No; only he mentioned coming, and there was no one else. They don't come quite so readily now that Bertha has gone."

That name stung Waldon like a reproach; for one instant a swarthy redness swept his face.

"Have you heard from her again?" questioned Mary, giving him a wistful look from under her hat.

"Yes; but it will be my last letter."

Mary started, and looking keenly under her hat, he saw the color fade from her face, leaving it white and changeable.

"Are you going then?" she faltered. "How soon—how—"

Yes, the girl loved him, no doubt of it now. She was delicate and very pretty, a creature to pet and care for; full of laughter and exquisite mirth sometimes—such women were sunbeams in a man's house; not, however, in that mood, for her lips were quivering, and she pretended to be in search of something in the grass, that he might not see how thickly the tears were gathering under her drooping lashes. All at once she threw back her head, meeting those large, eager eyes with the audacity of a child determined to conceal some fault.

"I am so lonely without dear old Bertha; besides,

when I look at the water, it reminds me of that night when you and I went down together, and I can't help crying a little."

Waldon put up his hat to hide the smile which quivered around his mouth. This childish artifice charmed him.

"When—when are you going to be married?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I shall never be married to Bertha Canfield!"

Mary opened her blue eyes wild and wide; the color shot across her face like lightning, and away to her heart, thrilling it through and through. Her lips were parted, but she did not speak.

"I thought you would be surprised—that you would hardly believe me, but it is so," said Waldon, impressively.

Mary's face dropped to her knees, and she burst forth in a passionate fit of weeping.

"You seem to regret this."

"She is my friend. She saved my life. I promised to love her forever and ever! She is an angel—too good for any man! Why—why have you done this?"

She hushed her sobs, and listened for his answer, scarcely drawing a breath.

"I had two good reasons—one that I cannot give you, but it touched my honor, and the second was, that I dearly love another person."

Mary drew a sharp breath and dropped her hands.

"Another person?"

"Yes, Mary; one nearer and dearer than she ever was!"

The word "Mary" was uttered in a voice that thrilled through the girl. Her pale blue eyes were flooded with light, her lips grew red as cherries.

"You called me Mary. No one but Bertha and my father does that," she uttered at last. "I—I do not like it!"

"Are you angry with me?"

"Yes, I am, for Bertha's sake. She would think it strange."

"But I have told you, Miss Noel, that Bertha Canfield is nothing to me—a friend, perhaps, but nothing more."

"But what separated you? Not herself—you cannot say that! She never did it, never!" Her eyes searched his for the answer. "You cannot say that!"

"I can tell you, upon my honor, that it was no fault of mine!" answered Waldon, seriously. "That much I have a right to say!"

"No fault of yours—then she did—I can't understand—I could not have believed it! Bertha break her engagement! Oh, Mr. Waldon, it is beyond my comprehension!"

"I cannot explain further. Neither Miss Canfield nor myself have acted dishonorably, but we are not the less separated."

"But—but—"

"Well—you were about to ask something?"

"No—no; only you spoke of—of some one else."

"Yes; but when I called the lady by her own sweet name, she was angry with me."

Mary shook the tears away from her eyelashes, and taking her parasol from the grass, opened and shut it again, almost with one motion of the hand; then she began beating its coral point against the tip of her boot, now and then pausing to press it with precision in an ornamented curve of the tinted kid.

"Mary!" Waldon was close to the girl now, and took the parasol from her hand. "Mary, are you angry with me now?"

The girl turned away her face.

"It was because I loved you, Mary, that the loss of Bertha Canfield does not grieve me much."

"But I—what right have I? She was the dearest girl—the most faithful friend! Sir, I will not permit you to call me Mary! She never gave you up of her own free will, I am sure. No girl on earth would have done it!"

The triumph in Waldon's heart leaped to his face. He did not allow the girl to see it, but gently took her hand.

"But you seem willing to give me up, Mary."

"No! no! I could not—that is, if you were mine, or I Bertha, which never can be!"

Mary finished this broken speech with her arm around Waldon's neck, and her head on his shoulder.

An hour after, as Waldon and Mary Noel were sauntering along the river's bank, arm-in-arm, forgetful of everything else on earth, a servant boy from the house came toward them with a letter in his hand.

"Found yer out at last, Mars Waldon," he said. "Ole mars said you was under de willor trees, but when I got dar you was done gone. Here am de letter. Mars Hyde sent his boy over, case der was suthen 'bout haste on de letter, an he thort somebody might a died. Thar, I'se livered it into his own han."

Waldon took the letter with some agitation, for the monogram on the envelope startled him a little.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" he said. "It may be important."

Mary smiled an assent. He moved away from her,

with his face turned to the river, broke open the envelope and read the letter which Lydia had taken from under Mrs. Canfield's pillow after she was dead.

At first a shock of painful surprise stirred every nerve in his body. That poor woman was dead, and he—Russell Waldon—was her murderer. This awful truth came upon him sharp and quick as the flight of an arrow. He could scarcely see to read. The letters seemed vital with reproaches. The cry of that woman from her grave summoned his soul to judgment against itself. From her tomb she called upon him to redeem his pledge.

He had broken it already.

Tears came into this bad man's eyes; he could scarcely make out the words, they blinded him so; but it was his imagination that was touched, not his heart. It was something to have driven a woman to this; the romance, not the misery, of this self-sacrifice touched him to tears.

Mary Noel stood looking on. What letter was it that took the man's attention from her at a moment like that, when the thrill of his first kiss was on her lips? The sight of his emotion made her jealous. She went up to Waldon where he stood, and laid her hand softly upon his arm.

"May I read it, and know what is the power beyond mine that makes you weep?"

Waldon started, snatched the letter from under her imploring touch, and flung it into the river.

"There is no power on earth beyond yours, sweet one!" he answered. "Some one is dead, that is all."

"Some one that you loved, Waldon?"

"No; there was no love between us two. Come, now, let us go up to the house. I shall not rest till your father has consented."

They went across the lawn together, loitering by the way, both apparently forgetful of the letter, which had cost a human soul, and which drifted down the river till it settled against a boat where an old man sat fishing. Attracted by the colored monogram which gleamed through the water, he fished it out and spread it on his seat to dry, while he droned on, with his line loose and adrift, wondering, lazily, what those black letters on the paper said.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE FUNERAL, AND BERTHA'S LETTER.

DOWN in that New England valley was an old-fashioned meeting-house, with a low steeple—a timid imitation of the Episcopal churches which, for a long time, were the only places of worship that sent their spires boldly up toward Heaven, holding the cross of Christ on high. Behind this church lay the graveyard, crowded full of moss-grown stones, buried deep in the uncut grasses, some slanting half out of the earth, others sunk so deep in accumulated vegetation that you could only make out the head of a cherub, carved on the old stone, and a pair of wings, spreading out on either side, to which gray and golden lichens clung like plumage.

This portion of "God's field" would have been most interesting to a stranger, no doubt; but the villagers, not much troubled with thoughts of their ancestors, were far more proud of the snow-white slabs, and a prim monument or two, which told of their own immediate dead—though some of these were weather-stained, and none of

them had retained their pristine whiteness after the first year.

In a part of the ground nearest to the old grave was a low marble slab, over which mould and lichen had crept through years, unnumbered save by one poor heart, which was now lying, cold and still, in the old farm-house down yonder. A name, half choked up with lichen, was on the slab, and was sometimes pointed out as that of a foreign gentleman, who perished in the heaviest flood ever known in the valley, while on his way to be married.

Yes, people remembered it all now. The poor lady—for whom that newly-made grave was dug—was the woman he should have married. Her husband, the clergyman, was buried in Greenwood, and had a monument there; but it was by the side of this stranger the old people had resolved to lay their child, for, it was said, they had no heart to send her out of the valley, and if left there, that was the place for her, close by her first love.

This was village gossip, which never reached Bertha, who was so plunged into bitter grief that she spoke to no one, but spent her time, day and night, with the dead, calling, in her broken-hearted misery, for help to bear her burden of self-reproach; for every impatient word she had given her mother, that night by the roadside, pierced her like an arrow, and so wounded her soul that she cried out with the bitter pain.

At last, when three days had passed, Bertha, pale, grief-stained, and with great, deep-set eyes, that seemed to plead with every one for help, came out of the death-darkness of that chamber, from which all that seemed precious to her in the broad universe must be carried that day, turning the room into an empty sepulchre.

They clothed her from head to foot in black; kind-hearted women whispered words of consolation, that she heard as one listens to the sea afar off; prayers that stirred strangers to tears passed by her with vague meaning. She knew that all these people were pitying her, that one man was praying for her, and she longed to cry as they did, but could not.

Then she went with the crowd, following her whom they had taken away from that chamber in heavy, stifling black, which dragged almost to the ground as four men carried her along. But some one had broken up the blackness with white flowers, that gleamed and gleamed, leading her on to an open grave, from which came a smell of fresh earth that made her faint.

After this, Bertha had a dull sense that some one was reading; this was followed, or preceded—she never could tell which—by strains of music. Then her soul paused and listened, wondering if the music came from angels, or from the people who crowded so close, looking upon her mother's face, which no stranger had a right to see. Why had they given the beautiful whiteness of that face so broadly to the daylight? There—she had veiled it. Those people should not look upon her again!

Those around the grave were startled when they saw this young girl throw back the cloud of crape from her head, and with her own hand draw the white covering over the marble beauty of that face, before half the neighbors had looked upon it, but no one dared to raise the silvery gauze from the sweet countenance she had veiled forever. So they lifted the coffin up gently, and lowered it into the grave. Bertha was scarcely conscious of this movement, for her veil was down, and her heart was beating wildly at the thought of saving her mother.

from so many curious eyes; but all at once the dull, hollow sound of falling earth struck upon her ear. She gave one long, wailing cry, and fell upon her knees, shuddering in every nerve with a terrible consciousness of what she had lost.

That night, in the stillness of her room, Bertha wrote to Waldon:

"Come to me, oh, my beloved! come to me, for I am all alone in the world. Darkness and tears surround me on every side. My mother is dead. The most beautiful, gentle and loving mother that ever lived was buried to-day. It seems to me that they have taken the heart from my bosom, and laid it in the earth with her. I can feel the weight and deadly coldness of the earth upon it now.

"But out of this pain comes one ray of light. You are left to me. Your strength will shelter my weakness, your love will awake my soul out of its anguish and self-reproach; for I was harsh with her—on that very night, too—and the remembrance kills me! She questioned me about you, my beloved, and probed my heart for the sweet secret of its love, wishing to fathom its depths and power, as it seemed to me, with a persistence that I shrank from, so gave her petulant answers, which withered her into silence. I, her child, possessed that cruel power, and used it; but, out of her great love, she sought to fathom my heart, and learn, no doubt, if it were worthy of you, and, in my petulant wilfulness, I broke hers.

"She forgave me—thank God, she forgave me! Her arms were around my neck after that, and she bade me a tender good-night, but in the morning she was dead!

"I cannot forgive myself. I cannot live, unless you come and help me to endure existence. She loved you, she was proud of you, more than you dreamed of, for her sweet, timid nature was never demonstrative, and to her you were always grand. Oh, how I envy you in this! With no wilful selfishness, no hard word to remember, you can mourn her without reproach; but I—. When will you teach me to be self-sacrificing and noble as you are? When shall I be worthy of you?

"I shall wait for you here. Oh! do not stay long, for I suffer greatly, and now you are all the world to me. Come! come!

"BERTHA."

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE ANSWER AT LAST.

ONE hope kept Bertha from sinking under her passionate grief. She could take no comfort from the subdued sorrow of her grandparents, who had learned how to suffer and be still. Deeper and more bitter anguish than death ever brings had taught these people how to meet even this great affliction with Christian patience. They suffered, but with a gentle submission more touching than the stormy rebellion with which Bertha wrestled with the inevitable. She, in the exaction of her great sorrow, reproached even that dove-like old woman, in her heart, for want of feeling, and thought how easy it was for the aged to give up their loved ones, because of their own nearness to the grave. So, mistak-

ing the deepest and most holy sorrow that man ever knows for something like apathy, the girl refused to be comforted by that kind, gentle voice, so pathetic in its tremulous age, which she understood in later years, but not then.

"They do not know how I suffer. They are old, and cannot feel as I do," she would say to Lydia, when the girl became almost her equal in the quick fellowship of mutual bereavement. "It seems to me almost as if they did not care. But one is coming who will understand it all, for *he* knows and feels everything."

Then Lydia would turn away with mingled sadness and loathing, but give no answer. She was eating the bitter fruit of knowledge.

After a while Bertha began to look for the arrival of her lover. Day after day she watched the train come in, with longing impatience, but it brought no Waldon and no letter. What was the reason? Had Waldon left Virginia? or by some chance had her letter failed to reach its destination? She wrote again, directing to New York, but still Lydia haunted the post-office without avail, and the train passed, hooting at her disappointment like a demon.

One day Bertha became passionately impatient. Lydia should stay at home. She needed a long walk; those close rooms stifled her. The man would be more likely to search his letters over for her. Of course, Lydia asked him timidly, and he did not care.

The mail was scarcely in that day, when an eager face looking out from a cloud of black crape appeared at the post-office window, and a voice so thrallled by anxiety that it scarcely rose above a whisper, asked if the mail brought any letters for Miss Canfield—Bertha Canfield.

Yes, there was a letter; the handwriting was a little indistinct, but that must be Bertha Canfield.

Bertha reached forth her hand for the letter. It was his writing. He was coming. This was but the forerunner of something still nearer her heart.

She walked away rapidly, holding the letter in her hand. A longing to devour its contents took away her breath. She panted with intense desire rather than fatigue. Some wagons passed her on the road, going to the depot; then a workman appeared with a tin pail in his hand. She longed to sweep them all from the highway. Would they never let her be alone?

At last, just before she came in sight of the farm-house, these persons had drifted out of her way. She drew a deep breath, leaned against the stone wall, and broke open the letter. Her black glove had stained it a little, which troubled her just for an instant as a bad sign. In the midst of her impatience, she stopped to kiss Waldon's name before she began to read. Then she held it open against the stones with one hand, brushed her thickcoming tears away with the other, and gathered in the first words:

"MY DEAR MISS CANFIELD:"

She caught her breath, forced the paper tightly down to the stone with both hands, and read on:

"I cannot answer the letter which has just reached me as your own noble nature has a right to expect, because it is no longer my privilege to bring support or comfort in your time of distress. I cannot explain how this gulf has been dug between us, or why it is impossible that any power can ever bridge it over. One thing I may reveal,

and will. The fault belongs neither to you nor me. More, I have pledged myself never to reveal to you. Indeed, my own judgment tells me it would be far better that you should never know. Enough that we are parted—all the sweet hopes, all the clinging love—but I forbear. Why lacerate your proud heart or my own by an allusion to what we have been and hoped to be? The ground is cut away from under our feet. We are torn apart by the hand of one already passed to judgment. Let the dead past bury the dead. Enough that you and I are separated forever.

"Not knowing all that I am forbidden to tell, there yet may linger in your heart some unbelief in the stern necessity that has torn your life from mine—some vague hope that time or a miracle can change it. Fearing this, and acting from a solemn sense of duty, I have placed a barrier against all such possibilities. We can never meet as we have done again. In order to make this inevitable I have battled against all weakness, and for your sake more than my own turned resolutely from the past. My honor demanded it. The great future which lies before a public man like myself demanded it. Your own peace of mind demanded the sacrifice, and I have made it. Bertha, I am engaged to another—a woman who loves me as you loved me, even perhaps with a deeper abandonment, because all the strength of her gentle nature concentrates in the one word—love. Bertha, when we meet again, I shall be a married man. I hope then and now, there will be friendship between us. Nothing need prevent that, nothing should prevent it, for the lady I am pledged to marry is Mary Noel, your own friend.

"Farewell. It is our destiny to say this cruel word.

"RUSSELL WALDON."

Like a wild colt which the lasso has missed, Bertha fled toward the house, holding down her black veil tightly, that no one might see her face, and crushing the letter in the fierce grasp of her hand.

Lydia came forth to meet her.

"Turn back!" she said, sharply. "Pack up some things; we are going a journey."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

MRS. WILSON FORBES HAS A VISITOR.

MRS. WILSON FORBES was preparing to go South. Her brother Egbert had written so feelingly of his loneliness, and with such general depression, that her kind heart was seized with an affectionate desire to brighten up his old home again with her presence. With the quick intuition of a loving woman, she had guessed at the bitter disappointment which Bertha's engagement had been to her brother Fletcher; but there existed no direct confidence between them, and the young man knew nothing whatever of the entanglement which had made her so long nothing more nor less than Russell Waldon's slave. Now, being both a free woman and a happy wife, she could afford to carry a little of her own bright sunshine down to the old Southern homestead where Fletcher lived alone, and was so unhappy.

"A lady, Mrs. Forbes, who wishes to see you."

Mrs. Forbes was presiding over a huge Saratoga trunk, in which her maid was buried head and shoulders, pressing

down, folding up, and doing her very best to make a Noah's ark of it in the way of compactness and variety.

"A lady, did you say, Julia? and I looking like this. Tell her I am not at home—sick, dead. No, one may as well give the truth now and then. Say that I am packing up for a journey, and wouldn't see my own grandmother, if she were going to make her will this very day. There, there—come back. What kind of a lady is it? Where's the card?"

"She did not give me any—only said, 'Tell her a lady wants to see her very much.'"

"Ah, some one in distress, poor thing—young or old?"

"Young, and a real lady—you could see that in spite of her black veil—awful deep mourning, but genteel. In trouble, too, one made sure of that by her voice."

"That will do; I'll go down. Help me off with this wrapper—that black silk, leave it out. I will go down, Julia; but go on with the packing, I shall not let any one keep me long."

Directly Mrs. Forbes was rustling down-stairs, fastening the coral buttons of her dress as she went. When she entered the reception room, a lady came forward, darkening the room with her coal-black garments as she moved.

"Mrs. Forbes, I—"

Mrs. Forbes retreated a step; she was taken by surprise.

"Miss Canfield—Bertha!"

"You are surprised to see me—no wonder."

"I am surprised and sorry to see you in mourning, Bertha," said the lady, with tender interest.

"My mother is dead!"

The words sounded abrupt, but the voice that uttered them shook with emotion.

Mrs. Forbes, greatly shocked, was about to ask some question, when Bertha interrupted her:

"I wronged you once—will you pardon me for it? When you would have warned me, I refused to take it kindly. In my arrogant self-confidence, I struck the hand that would have saved me."

"I do not understand you, Bertha."

"I thought that you had once loved Waldon yourself, and would not forgive him that he turned to another."

"And so I did, or rather thought I did," answered the lady, gravely. "I fear it lasted some time after I knew him to be unworthy any good woman's love; but I had no jealousy of you, Bertha—only profound pity, for I knew the man."

"You warned me; you doubted then if he would not change."

"No, I simply dreaded that he might prove faithful, and drag you down into his life; but I should have known better. What girl in the fever of her first love ever took advice?"

All at once Bertha threw back her veil, and fell at Mrs. Forbes' feet.

"I asked your forgiveness, but that is not enough. In all the wide world; you are the only one to whom my heart turns in its misery. Read that, then tell me how I am to act. Advise anything but patience and silence, and I will do it."

Mrs. Forbes took Waldon's letter, threw her arms around Bertha's neck, and kissed her.

"Poor girl! poor child! was not that one trouble enough—must he strike you when your heart was sore?"

Bertha answered nothing, but laid her head down on Mrs. Forbes' lap, and moaned a little as that lady read the letter.

"The ingrate! the villain!" she exclaimed, folding the letter with an irate twist of her fingers. "Who is this other one?"

"My schoolmate, my bosom friend," answered Bertha, with a thrill of bitter antagonism in her voice. "A girl that I would have died for; who insisted upon taking an oath that we should be true friends forever. This is how she keeps her oath."

"Do not blame her; that man would lure an angel from Heaven, and tire of the poor thing before it got through the first drift of clouds. Is this Mary Noel rich?"

"Very rich."

"That accounts for it. I remember now who her father was—a very wealthy man indeed. I think Waldon may prove tolerably faithful to an estate like that."

"But he does not love her. Did you read that sentence where he almost says it was her love for him? It is pity, avarice, anything but love."

"That I believe."

"Oh, he did love me!" cried the girl, with a thrill of pathetic regret. "I know he did! I know he did! This girl has not separated us, but something else which he will not tell me of. But he shall! he shall! Did you not see that in the letter?"

"Yes, I saw an attempt at romantic mystification. There may be something in it, but I think not."

"I must know—I will know—there is something! Poor mamma held several private conversations with

him before we left Virginia, and seemed to wither after them. Mrs. Forbes, I think she did not like him and wanted me to break it off. She was so persistent, so anxious to learn about my feelings. Perhaps she discouraged him."

"Possibly. Your mother was a sensitive woman, who must have felt the unworthiness of this man."

"Something has been done to separate us. Oh, tell me how I can ever find out what it is! I have no father nor brother to demand the reason, but I have a right to know it. Oh, Mrs. Forbes, help me! Help me, or I shall die of this awful suspense! If I only knew what it was!"

"Poor girl, do you love him so yet?"

"How can I help it? He was to have been my husband. I never dreamed of any future but that. To me there was no other man in existence. Oh, Mrs. Forbes, he does not really love Mary Noel! The cause of all this trouble lies deeper, I am sure it does! Help me to fathom it!"

"Trust me, Bertha, I will," said the kind lady, with tears in her eyes. "For your sake I will endure the presence of this man; but I can scarcely think it doing a kindness."

Bertha seized the white hand that caressed her, and pressed it to her lips again and again.

"I was busy packing when you came in. My brother Egbert lives near Mr. Noel's plantation, you know," said Mrs. Forbes.

"Yes—yes—I know. How could I forget to tell you? He saved my life and that of Mr. Waldon, but would not wait to be thanked. How ungrateful I am!"

"How blind!" said Mrs. Forbes. "But the time will

come. There, there—don't look so unbelieving. I was speaking of my journey. In an hour or two I shall be on my way to the James River. Edward Lane will join me there after he graduates. These two brothers may help us fathom this mystery, but since the strange death of Clara Anderson, Edward has not been so intimate with Waldon."

"Clara Anderson! Oh, Mrs. Forbes, she was my friend—a noble, grand girl whom few people understood. If ever a poor girl was hunted into her grave, it was Clara. Your brother knew her worth and would have saved her, but it was not to be."

Mrs. Forbes was walking the room, absolutely wringing her hands in the anguish of her repentance. At last she turned and came close to Bertha.

"You are right, Miss Canfield. It was an awful persecution, and I did my share of it. Poor girl, I thought her ambitious, a bold intriguing girl. Do not defend her, I know it all now. She never did encourage Edward. He made me his confidant at last. If he had done it earlier, much misery might have been spared, but he trusted no one but that arch-traitor Waldon, who ended in betraying him and making a merit of his treason with me."

"Betraying him! Oh, Mrs. Forbes, what could Mr. Waldon have to do with Clara's death?"

"What had he to do with your life and mine?"

"But he did not know Clara. She never mentioned him to me in her life."

"Still she knew him well."

"No, no, it is impossible. I remember giving her one of his books after she left school, and she said that to know him would be the greatest happiness of her

life, but that she never expected to have so great a pleasure."

"All this may be true, but it is equally true that he undertook to plead my brother's cause with Clara Anderson; and went to her house for that avowed purpose. I reached my father's home that day bitterly prejudiced against the girl. She had been represented to me as a needy adventuress in pursuit of my brother from greed of his wealth."

"Poor Clara—poor, dear Clara! There never was a prouder or less mercenary person," said Bertha.

"I can believe that now, but then she was described to me as the very reverse of all this. I met Waldon riding away from her house, and entreated him to watch over Edward. Without telling me that Edward already had his pledge of friendship, he promised all that I asked, but I never dreamed of suggesting the course he took."

"What course?"

"That of coldly winning the girl's love for himself."

"Oh, Mrs. Forbes, this is terrible!"

"But it was his design, and I believe he carried it out, all the while pretending to plead my brother's cause. Almost every day for weeks—I think it ran into months—his horse was seen at her gate, himself seated close by the window at which the poor girl worked. He brought her bouquets; he read to her hours together; but you know the man, as I know him. She believed in him, no doubt loved him. Once assured of a woman's love, the demon always comes uppermost in this man."

"All at once he ceased to visit that house. His presence there had deeply injured the girl, but what did he care for that? She drooped visibly. Once and only once

was she seen away from home after his horse ceased to be every day at her gate. That was when she rode through the village on her way to the Housatonic Falls."

"The Housatonic Falls! Oh, Mrs. Forbes, are you sure that she knew Mr. Waldon before then?"

"I am certain that he had spent half his time with her for weeks, and suddenly gave up coming just before that ride. I know also that she saw Waldon with another lady, who had been thrown from her horse, in his arms."

Bertha clasped her hands.

"Oh, Heavens! and I wrote that letter," she thought. "The letter that perhaps killed her."

"Edward came to a knowledge of his friend's treason late and by slow degrees. At first he would not believe it."

"How could he?" cried Bertha. "I cannot believe it. I do not."

"Still, after what I have told you, do you wish to see this man again?"

Bertha fell into thought a moment, then lifting her head, answered,

"Yes."

"Surely you would not go to Willow Bend now?"

Bertha shuddered.

"What? there? Mrs. Forbes, you scarcely know me yet. You have dared to tell the truth when it was very bitter, and have forgiven me for resenting it. I will trust you entirely. I cannot live here. A yearning wish to see that man again consumes me like a fever! I *must* go where something is to be learned! I must breathe near him, or not at all! This is killing me!"

"You shall go. I will arrange it."

"Secretly; I must not be known."

"You shall go secretly and safely. I was the slave of this man, once!" exclaimed Mrs. Forbes, in bitter self-abasement; "and suffered almost as much."

"It is something besides love. Some terrible wrong has been done. I feel it in every sense of my being. There has been a great sacrifice, either in Waldon when he gave me up, or by some person I am yet to learn about. I must know two things: Does he love her, and did he break off our engagement entirely from waning affection? or is it the work of some slanderer? To believe him so entirely a villain, is worse than death. Help me! help me get at the truth!"

"Trust me, I will!"

"And this other matter?" said Bertha, bending her great, yearning eyes on the woman she had doubted.

"That, too, shall be accomplished. Now, good-by! The train never waits."

CHAPTER LXIX.

DIAMOND ISLAND.

DIAMOND ISLAND, on which Mary Noel had given her picnic, belonged to an estate which young Fletcher had inherited from his grandfather. Upon it was a comfortable old house, built of stone and hewn logs, one wing of which was inhabited by a family of colored servants—Uncle Sam and his wife Celia—to whom the care of the house, the cultivation of the land, and the consumption of its products had been left ever since the elder Fletcher's death.

An inlet of the river cut this island in two, leaving the house, some cultivated fields, and a little swamp, full of magnolias, in one end, and on the other a grove of grand old forest trees, a clearing of rich turf, and the spring which Mary Noel had converted into a wine-cooler on the occasion of her picnic.

A rustic bridge of logs connected these two green fragments, under which the water ran in a swift current, boiling over some hidden stones, and feeding the roots of innumerable wild grape vines and shaggy trumpet flowers that tangled themselves along the banks and around the logs of the bridge.

Sam had a grand killing-time of one pig and a lean turkey each year. Beyond all this, the old man sometimes went out fishing, and usually got to sleep in his boat, while the fish ran away with his hook, sometimes dragging the pole with it.

As for Celia, she took good heed of the building, aired the furniture once a fortnight, year in and year out, scolding all the time at things in general; baked excellent hoe-cakes by the fire, and made her husband stand around on washing-days, when a pair of tow-trowsers and two or three clumsily-shaped garments of cotton-cloth fluttered ostentatiously from a clothes line at the back of the house.

Once or twice in the year the old couple went over to the home plantation, and got a little news about their young master, which was about all the service they rendered him, and that was always repaid, at Christmas time, by a present of gay calico, gorgeous kerchiefs, and some strong twilled fabric, which Sam claimed for his own particular benefit.

So the time rolled on with the old couple, until one

day, just at nightfall, an elegantly dressed lady came gliding across the log bridge, and, looking toward the house, smiled on seeing Sam with one hand over his eyes, watching her approach, and Celia peering over his shoulder with her thick lips ajar, and her eyes widening as they filled with slow, half-doubtful recognition.

"Git out ob de way, you blind ole cuss! Doesn't yer see who it am? Fore de Lord Miss Alle! didn't know who it wer, chile! Come in, honey—not dar, dem is only de quarters. Thar, now, young missus, just give old Celia a good look at yer face. Goramighty, how handsome you is! Wat yer doin' peakin' in der door, ole man? Come in, it's der young missus."

Sam came into the neat parlor, which Celia had flung open for Mrs. Forbes, and stood, hat in hand, regarding her with mingled joy and trouble in his sly old face.

"Young missus, I hope yer hasn't come to tell ole Sam and Celia dat dey must leave dis place an go free?"

Before Mrs. Forbes could answer, Celia pushed the old man aside, and fell square upon her knees in front of the lady.

"Oh, honey, yer own brudder doesn't mean ter send us off de island, toting de old bed on our backs?" said she, with pathetic earnestness.

"No, Celia—get up. He hasn't the least idea of sending you away, poor souls! That would be cruel; but for a little time you will not be here quite alone."

"Is you comin'? Is it you, chile?" cried Celia, lifting herself from the floor.

"No; but a lady will come and live a while in the old house, whom you must care for as if it were myself—a lady and her maid."

"Ough!" groaned Celia. "Miss Alle, when am dey comin'?"

"This evening, I think, Celia."

"Goramighty! Ole man, g'lang ter de woods, cotch a chicken, an' pull up some ob dem young tatars in de corn lot. Folks am mighty hungry when dey come ober here."

"That is right, Celia. My friend has been on the railroad all day. She will need your care."

"Yes, honey."

"Besides, there is something else. She is not well. Her mother is just dead."

"Pore chile!" muttered Celia.

"She comes here for perfect solitude."

"What am dat, Miss Alle?"

"She wishes to be left alone."

"Oh!"

"You must tell no one that she is here—not a living soul. Caution Sam about that. I shall never forgive him if he speaks of her to any one."

"I'de jus like ter cotch him at it," answered Celia, clenching a formidable hand.

"Beyond this, do just as the lady directs; but, if you can help it, let no one, except myself, come on this side of the bridge so long as my friend remains here."

"I'd like ter see 'em try it—dat am all."

"I will send things over from the plantation. You will know how to receive them without exciting suspicion."

"Trus' dis ole woman 'bout dat."

"I shall be here often myself. Is the house in perfect order?"

"Ebbery corner ob it."

"That is right. I must go now. Has Uncle Sam got anything like a boat?"

Celia looked a little confused, but answered that she believed he had.

"Then tell him to look out every day for a handkerchief that I will hang on that great elm tree which droops over the bank, directly opposite the island, when I want him. It will save me the annoyance of trusting too many of our people over yonder."

Celia nodded.

"Good-night, Celia. I am glad to see you once more. Have everything in readiness. By-the-way, where is Sam?"

The loud cry of a chicken, which Sam was carrying in from the woods by its two legs, revealed his whereabouts, and Mrs. Forbes walked forward to meet him.

"Sam, if you have a boat that will hold two, get into it about sunset, and row over to the big elm tree. You remember how it leans over the water. Wait there till some one inquires for you."

"Yes, Miss Alle. Hyur, ole woman, dar's yer chicken; tote it to de house."

Celia snatched the chicken a little roughly, and wrung its neck then and there, while Sam walked down to the water with his young mistress.

That night, while Sam sat in his boat waiting for the promised summons, a voice from under the elm tree called out, timidly:

"Is a man called Sam waiting?"

"Yes, missus—here I is," answered the darkey, coming out of the shadows. "Hop in—hop in."

The next minute, Bertha Canfield and Lydia were on their way to Diamond Island.

CHAPTER LXX.

BERTHA AND WALDON MEET AGAIN.

"I must see him! I will—I will!"

Bertha was walking up and down her chamber, sweeping the India matting with her loose robe, and stamping her foot now and then with feverish impatience.

"Some fiend in human shape has maligned me to him! I will know the truth! Lydia!"

"I am here, Miss B., and have been all the time," said Lydia, coming out from behind the muslin curtains of a window sunk deep into the wall, through which she had been anxiously watching the young lady. "Can I do anything?"

"Lydia, is there any way by which we can leave the island?"

"Yes, miss. Old Sam can set us ashore in his tub of a boat."

"But I want something more than that."

"To go up stream? I understand."

"Is there no boat—no horse?"

"I'll inquire of Sam, if you must go."

Lydia went out of the room, and found Sam in the garden patch, where Celia had sent the old man for a mess of new potatoes. She found the old servant sitting on the broken turf which grew around the roots of a great oak on the edge of the potato patch, fast asleep, with his hoe lying close by, where he had dropped it.

"Sam! Sam! I say, old Sam!"

The old man started, snatched up his hoe, and looked around, much relieved when he saw Lydia.

"It's only you, sure 'nuff," he said, with a sigh of

relief. "Thought de ole 'oman was 'bout. He! he! he!"

"Sam, is it possible to get a boat that will hold water—something that a—that I could pull up stream? One gets so tired of doing nothing."

"Duz dey!" said Sam, combing out his wool with the fingers of one hand. "He! he! he! Dis ole darkey never gets done tired doin' dat. He! he!"

"I should think not," answered the girl, laughing. "But about the boat—can such a thing be got?"

Again Sam's fingers sought the wool on his temples. He seemed greatly puzzled and irresolute.

"Miss Lyddy, am yer to be trusted wid a mighty big secret?"

"Am I? Oh, yes."

"Miss Lyddy, jist tote yerself down to der bridge. I'se gwoin' to show yer suthin'."

Lydia followed the old man, wondering what form his secret would take when they reached the log bridge.

Sam let himself down the bank at one end, and, parting the trumpet vines with both arms, told her to look over.

Lydia leaned over the logs, looked through the opening Sam had made in the vines, and saw a little boat, whose outlines seemed familiar, moored close under the timbers.

"As true as I live, it's the 'Firefly!'" she exclaimed, delighted. "How came it here, Sam?"

"Comfisticated prop'ty," answered Sam, rubbing his hands in high glee, "come down yer ob its own self. I only jist 'ticed it inter de run, agin some pussen come down 'quiren 'bout it."

"It was lost after the picnic, months ago, Sam—the

night my young mistress was nearly drowned. I think the boat belongs to Miss Noel."

"Don't know noffin' 'bout dat. I'se comfisticated it, and dat's 'nuff for dis darkey. Now, what am it you wants, Miss Lyddy?"

"This, Sam: Miss B. and I mean to have a good, long pull up stream with this boat, after sunset. Get it out, and, if the cushions are saved, put them in."

"Cushens!" said Sam, ruefully; "dem are done gone. Dey drifted 'long wid de boat, wet as sop, so de ole 'oman took de stuffen for pillars. But de young missus kin have dem."

"Never mind the cushions; we can do very well without them. But get the little craft in order for a good long trip."

After giving these directions, Lydia went up to the house and reported progress.

Bertha stopped her restless pacing up and down the room long enough to listen, then commenced walking again, pausing now and then to take out her watch and wonder if it had not stopped.

At last the soft glow of coming sunset fell upon the island, and through its golden mist the two girls went down to the log bridge, where the "Firefly" lay rocking, light and graceful as a Turkish caique in the water.

Sam unmoored the pretty craft, and Bertha sprang in, directing Lydia to seat herself in the stern.

"Where is it you are going, Miss B.?" inquired the girl, as they put forth into the broad river.

"Lydia, I am going to Willow Bend. A person is there that I must speak with. It may be difficult, but you must help me."

Bertha spoke with energy. The exercise of rowing

gave her unusual force; perhaps the hope of seeing that man stirred the blood in her veins. At any rate, the "Firefly" shot up stream like a bird. At nine o'clock it lay under the weeping willows, which drooped over it like the long, swaying fringes of some royal tent.

"He usually walks here about this time," thought the girl, as she sprang on shore, leaving Lydia in the boat.

The house was before her, lighted brilliantly from the parlors and dining-room which were exposed through the open windows, through which she saw a man and a woman pass to the veranda, where they paced slowly up and down, conversing together.

Bertha watched them with pressed lips and dilating eyes. The man's tread reached her where she stood, concealed by the willows, which in places swept the bank with their branches. Never, since she first saw Waldon, had that footstep failed to make her blood stir and her heart leap. She heard it now with a pang that shook her from head to foot; for with it came a sweet gush of laughter, and the under-tones of a voice that had spoken to her tenderly only a short time ago.

Those two left the veranda, and strolled down upon the lawn. The man's head was bent toward his companion, and her hands were clasped fondly over his arm, while her cheek almost touched his shoulder. They came straight down toward the spot where Bertha was standing. She drew back, placing the trunk of the willow between herself and them.

They sauntered to the very edge of the drooping foliage, talking eagerly. She was speaking.

"Then everybody will say that she jilted you, and I took up with Bertha Canfield's leavings," Mary was saying, when her words became clear. "Besides, if papa

ever hears about your being engaged to her, he will want to know why you broke it off, for he is awfully particular about honor, and all that."

"It is not likely that he will ever hear about it. Bertha was far too delicate to speak of the engagement while it existed, and the most reticent pride that I ever knew in woman will keep her from complaint now."

"But other people knew it. Miss Bertha's exquisite delicacy did not prevent that. Mr. Hyde told me of it before they had been here a week; besides, it was known everywhere in New York," said Mary, almost spitefully.

"But these people are my own friends, and knew of my entanglement almost as soon as I was sure of it myself. They will learn that it is broken the first opportunity after everything is settled, and know how to be silent. As for New York, your father is not likely to go there before his knowledge will be of little importance."

"But I—I wish to know, and wish the world to know. It shall not be said that Bertha Canfield refused what I accepted," said the heiress, petulantly.

"The dew is heavy—you will take cold," was Waldon's answer. "You had better go back to the house."

Waldon spoke almost curtly. He was getting angry.

"But you will go with me. Surely you do not intend to return to Mr. Hyde's at this late hour?"

"No. I will see you safe indoors, then take a stroll along the bank."

The couple turned and walked slowly toward the house, while Bertha watched them from the boat to which she had leaped the moment their conversation turned upon herself; but before she could escape, that one sentence had struck her like a blow.

Drifting in the shadow of the bank, Bertha saw

Waldon turn from the veranda, after Mary went in, and stroll down to the river again. The moon was shining brightly now, and through the swaying willow branches came swift ripples of silver from the water, which trembled all over with light. She allowed her little craft to float downward with the current till the willows swept over it. Then she sprang on the bank, and, before Waldon was aware of her presence, stood by his side on the very spot where they had parted only a few weeks before, pledged man and wife.

"Bertha! Great Heavens! Bertha Canfield, how came you here?"

Her presence sent a shock through that strong frame. The man's knees shook under him; but through it all came a wild thrill of pleasure. With all his faithlessness, the man had loved her, and she was superbly beautiful, standing there in the moonlight, as it sifted through the willow branches upon her head and her dusky garments.

"You did not expect me—did not wish to see me—but I came, knowing that. Only a few minutes ago I stood behind this tree while you talked with the girl that was once my friend. I heard part of what you said, not willingly; I could not get to the boat sooner than I did. She only asked the question that I came to ask. That which you declined to tell her I must know!"

"Why have you come, Bertha? This can be nothing but a most painful interview."

"What is there left for me on earth but pain?" cried the girl, with a pathetic cry of despair. "But I will understand—I must understand! I have no father, no brother, to come and say, with a power of redress: 'This woman has been wronged, her heart trampled on,

and her pride broken, and we will have full and sufficient reason, or such atonement as men force from men.' I am only a young girl—fatherless, almost friendless, buried in sorrow for the death of a mother who loved me supremely, hunted down by some vague evil which no one can explain but yourself. This you *must* explain, or kill me! I cannot live—I cannot live with this fever of doubt burning up my strength! Waldon! Waldon! if you ever loved me, give up the secret that has separated us! I will know it!"

Waldon stood motionless, gazing upon Bertha. Her beauty and the wild grandeur of this appeal awoke all that was worshipful and good in him. Coming directly after the shallow petulance of that other girl for whom he had sacrificed her, the contrast was overpowering. For that moment the selfish fiend fled out of his nature, and left him purely a man of genius, so lifted above his own meaner self that a keen intellect gave him one glimpse of its own actions as they would have appeared to others knowing them as he did. But for these momentary feelings he might have told Bertha the truth, concealing only what he knew of her mother's death; but now the solemn promise he had made that mother came back to his memory with a shock. He could neither force himself to betray her trust nor own that he was her murderer. As he looked upon the girl, doubly bereaved by his own selfishness, this man hated himself with bitter hatred, as if he had been some other person.

"You will tell me this, that I may depart at once," said Bertha, whose voice shook with the tremor that disturbed her whole frame. "I did not come to plead with you, or in anything change that which you have done. But I must know why you have done it. If any man or

woman has maligned me, the right of self-justification is mine, and I demand it! If it is—as one who loved you less than I did might be tempted to think—because another had greater attractions and more abundant wealth, you could at least grant me the privilege of contempt."

"No! no, Bertha! I could not endure contempt or hatred from you; and that would come if I broke the solemn pledge that binds me to secrecy. Ask me anything but this, even to dishonor myself by breaking up this new engagement, and I will do it, rather than betray a sacred trust! Ask that, Bertha, for now that you are before me, in all the grandeur of your soul and this wonderful loveliness, I can see how my heart has debased itself. Ask that, Bertha, and I shall be madman enough to ruin myself and follow you. Ask me! ask me!"

The fiend was coming back into the man's soul again. Enraged with himself, and lured by her presence, he flung his arms around the startled young creature, and kissed her madly on her eyes, her hair, and her quivering lips, until she broke away from him, and leaping into her boat, fled down the river.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE LOST DREAM.

"BERTHA! Bertha!"

For a moment Waldon was beside himself—all the broad lands of Willow Bend, the mansion gleaming with lights, and the girl who could make him master of them, were nothing to him. He fairly hated the things

for which he had sold himself and murdered another. All his old passion for the beautiful woman who had fled from him blazed up with a burning thirst to reconquer her, and escape the pink and white beauty who waited for him so impatiently on the veranda. He could see her passing in and out through the French windows like a drifting cloud, while the other had pushed him from her with angry, burning words, and leaped, as it seemed, into the very depths of the river.

Waldon went close to the very edge of the water, and looked up and down in a vain search for some boat. But he saw nothing. Bertha's tiny craft was sweeping down the shadows of the bank. She used no oars, but sat in the stern with her face covered, sobbing as if her heart would break, and whispering to herself:

"He loves me yet! he loves me yet!"

Had Waldon caught one glimpse of the boat, he might have followed it, for difficulties always made him rash; but he saw nothing, and believed, for a while, that Bertha had drowned herself to escape the rude caresses with which she might have deemed herself insulted. Shocked by the fear, he fell upon his knees and sobbed like a girl.

A faint sound from the river brought Waldon to his feet again. Lydia had taken up the oars, and down through the rippling silver of the moonlight that little craft was going, with arrowy speed, carrying Bertha away from him through that path of light, while he stood his old self again, wondering at the sudden passion that had so nearly swept him away from the path he had laid out for his future.

Waldon strode into the moonlight, and walked up and down the bank, congratulating himself that this one great temptation had been broken up by the girl's own act.

He looked out upon the noble landscape over which the dew glittered like a mantle of jewels; groves, pastures, off-lying farms and houses for working men, stretched up and down the river, glorified by floating mist that grew luminous in the moonlight. His vision could not reach the extent of property that might be his in exchange for the girl who had just left him.

"Fool! fool!" he exclaimed, sneering at his better self, "for so many idiotic minutes, while the thrill of her voice, and the glamour of her beauty was upon me, I was ready to give this up and not think it a sacrifice. I wonder what it is that comes over me sometimes, and makes almost a superior being of me! More than once it has marred my fortunes. This time I will keep the angel under foot. It always grows powerful when that girl is by me. She must not come near me again. I wish her no harm—Heaven knows I have down her enough—but if she struggles, I must throw up a wall of brass between us. If people will have explanations, I must give them. No romance or sentiment shall swamp me with all this in view!"

"Waldon, Mr. Waldon, do come in! I'm sure the damp air is not good for you, and it looks so strange. People will see me sitting all alone, as if you had given up caring for me; and—I think you have."

"Foolish child," said Waldon, gathering the cloud of white muslin, from which this complaint came, close to him with one arm. "I never loved you better in my life! The sight of this landscape inspires me with new emotions. How beautiful it is! I can never forget that you are the central figure, lady-bird."

Waldon took a satanic pleasure in thus uttering, half-veiled, the value this girl was to him.

"Ah! now you are talking poetry. But why don't you write it out for me? Writers always do when they care for one; but I have never had a single line, except—except—"

"Except what, lady-bird?"

"Except some lovely lines that Mr. Hyde slipped into my hand. He writes beautifully! Oh, what a naughty word, Mr. Waldon! I never heard you swear before. Let me go; it frightens me!"

In order to facilitate her going, Mary clung to Waldon's arms with both hands, and laid her head partly on his bosom, where fresh oaths against young Hyde's impudence were seething.

"Don't be angry—forgive him, for my sake. One can't help being loved, you know; and he, poor fellow, has no idea about us!"

Waldon made no answer to this plaintive appeal, but strode into the house, half carrying the clinging loveliness to which he was more than ever pledged for life.

Meantime Bertha sat dreaming in that little boat, sometimes with her hands clasped and her eyes uplifted, full of troubled delight, as if a great hope had found birth in her heart. And this is what that hope was saying:

"He loves me—he loves me yet! Whatever the evil thing is, it has not conquered his love. That *she* can never have!"

The boat swept downward, plowing up music from the silvery ripples, and Bertha's heart beat time to the oars, while her eyelids closed over unshed tears, and her lips quivered with the thought of kisses he had so madly rained upon them. At first she had been angry and frightened by this impetuous outburst; but love is lenient

to faults that prove its power, and while burning blushes came with the memory of his fault, she forgave it, because even that was a proof that his heart had never given her up.

Bertha had no plan in this—no definite hope that her broken life would ever again unite with that of the man who was to have been her husband; but those few sweet words singing at the bottom of her heart were enough for the hour—on the morrow reason would come and strangle them, like unfledged birds in a nest.

Lydia, who knew everything, saw the brightness of her young mistress' face, and uttered faint moans as she bent to the oars—beyond that the girl never opened her lips.

CHAPTER LXXII.

A YOUNG GIRL'S CONFIDENCES.

"INDEED, Egbert, I shall insist upon going. The Noels have been old friends of our family for ages, and I have a particular desire to know this young girl, who was only a pretty child when I was here."

"But I do not really care to go. Circumstances—"

"I know all about it. How you dived down into the bosom of the James, and dragged a man out of death's arms, whom it would have been better for the world if you had allowed him to drift quietly out of it. But what then? Is one to be unsocial because one is brave?"

"Alice, you cannot understand! I wish to avoid that man's thanks—they stifle me!"

"I dare say. His presence will almost stifle me, for I know him. But never mind that. I have accepted the invitation, and mean to be particularly agreeable to Mr. Waldon."

"Very well," answered Fletcher, almost disposed to laugh. "When a tyrant fills the throne, slaves must obey!"

"I wonder who they will have? Any visitors at Willow Bend that you know?"

"Not now. A—a young lady, whom you know a little, I believe, was there, but she is gone. Waldon is engaged to her."

"Yes, I know—Bertha Canfield. A splendid creature—ten thousand times too good for him. Was not she down in the river with him?"

"Where did you hear about this, Alice?"

"Why you wrote me about it, of course."

"No, I am sure not."

"Then I don't remember. From the servants here, I dare say. They know everything."

"Not quite," answered the young man, with a bitter smile; and taking his fowling-piece from its rack, he went out.

"Poor, proud fellow!" thought Mrs. Forbes, looking after him with loving sympathy. "How little he dreams that I know all about it, and that she is so near! It strikes me, Alice Forbes, that you have got tangled up in a touching little romance; but, if I can help it, Egbert shall not crash against the rock that so nearly shipwrecked me. Oh, Heaven forgive me! how I detest that man!"

She did detest him—yet, being a woman of exquisite tact and wonderful self-control, met Waldon, three days

after that, with the most cordial politeness, resolved, if possible, to ascertain from him what Bertha Canfield was pining to know.

Very pretty and delightfully blissful was Mary Noel that day. Mr. Noel, with some hesitation, had given his consent; and, after that, there was no reason why her engagement should be kept secret, though privacy had brought a pleasant tribute to her vanity, in an offer from young Hyde. Waldon had enjoyed this with great zest, for, next to success for himself, he loved defeat for his friends, and these two delicious morsels coming together filled him with infinite satisfaction.

Mary had acted up to her nature, and coquetted a little with Hyde. She refused to give him a direct answer, amusing herself with the idea that he would soon receive information which would render a positive rejection unnecessary.

Thus, in absolute ignorance of the exact state of things, four persons in that party met, with great danger of falling into cross purposes.

At first, invitations had only been given out for gentlemen. Young Hyde, with his guests, and Egbert Fletcher, were of the number; but, when Miss Noel learned that Mrs. Wilson Forbes was on a visit to her brother, she rode over, left cards, and afterward included her in the dinner party, thus adroitly making it proper that she should be present herself. No other ladies were expected. Mary told Mrs. Forbes of this while they were in that great, airy chamber, busy about the toilet table after the maid disappeared.

Mrs. Forbes only smiled, and shook out the folds of her rose-colored dress, over which quantities of white lace fluttered incessantly.

"So much the better," she said. "We shall have a chance to get acquainted. When I saw you last, dear, you were just the prettiest, golden-haired little thing in the world; but, since then, you have broken dozens of hearts, I dare say, and fancied yourself in love ever so many times."

Mary blushed rosily, and tossed a long curl, that had fallen to her bosom, over her shoulder, looking at herself in the glass and admiring the effect.

"Not so many hearts as that, Mrs. Forbes, and as for falling in love, once in a lifetime is enough for me."

"Then you own to that once. It must be serious, and very recent, I should think, from the dainty fashion you have of blushing."

"Oh, yes, very recent. I don't mind telling you, because it must all come out soon, and our families have been such old friends; but you will be astonished, because everybody thinks him engaged to another person, and so he was till—till—"

"Till he saw you, and thought better of it. You are speaking of Mr. Waldon, I fancy."

"Do you know him? I should think so, from the way you speak," inquired Mary, sparkling with animation.

"Oh, yes; we are old friends. That is why guessing was so easy."

"You know him, and understand how perfectly splendid he is. But in one thing you are mistaken. It was not just as you think. He had given up Miss—that is, the lady we are speaking of—before I knew that he cared for me. It was something very distressing, I am sure, that made it impossible for him to marry her—something touching his honor. I would not say this,

only she was my own friend, and, not knowing, people might blame me for marrying him, and not associating with her after—which, he says, must be, as that which made it impossible for him to keep his engagement must break up all friendship between us."

"Oh, yes, I understand this sensitive honor!" said Mrs. Forbes, in a voice that thrilled with lofty disdain, though Mary did not feel it.

"Isn't he the soul of honor?" she said. "So careful, too, about me. 'The snow,' he says, 'must not be more pure than the woman he marries!' A pretty idea, isn't it, Mrs. Forbes?"

"Yes, a very pretty idea," answered Mrs. Forbes, with a curl of her red lips: "so very appropriate! But do you know, my dear, I think modesty blinds you a little. There could have been nothing more potent than your own loveliness in breaking up the old engagement."

"Indeed, you are mistaken. I saw him receive a letter, which distressed him terribly. I saw tears in his eyes."

"But what was in the letter?"

"I do not know. I asked to read it, but he flung it into the river. I am sure that letter was about her—in fact, he told me so, but that it was something he was bound to keep secret."

Mrs. Forbes was satisfied that she had mastered all the information Mary had to give, and she came to this conclusion: Waldon's motive for breaking his engagement was Mary Noel's wealth. Beyond that he had something which answered as an excuse to his own selfish nature. What that something was, she resolved to find out. Gathering up the silken folds of her robe, she stood ready to descend to the drawing-room; but Mary was

fastidious about the arrangement of her front hair, and doubtful of the exact spot where a white moss rose, Waldon had sent her, would be most effective. When this was arranged, she grew anxious about the flow of her filmy blue dress—wondered if it was not too deeply tinted, and if he would think it enough like a summer sky.

Mrs. Forbes watched her patiently; there was something child-like about all this that touched her with gentle compassion. At last, the girl was ready to go down, and taking her cobweb of a handkerchief from the toilet, cast another shy glance at the mirror, and followed her guest from the room.

Mrs. Forbes and her brother had come early. Waldon had been at Willow Bend all day—indeed, he almost lived there now—and none of the other guests had arrived, so that he was walking up and down the drawing-room alone when the ladies entered it. For an instant, he held back, dreading a rebuff in the presence of Miss Noel; but Mrs. Forbes reached out her hand, with a brilliant smile, and he came up at once, most cordial in his greeting.

"So long, so very long since we met," said the lady, with impressement; "and to find you here, of all places in the world!"

"The best place in the world for me to find myself is where I am likely to meet you!" was the prompt answer.

She had put her arm quietly through his, as he spoke, and lured him out of the French window, nodding back to Mary with a pleasant smile.

"We are old friends, my dear, and have so much to say."

Mary, directly after, found herself alone, with a hot flush on her cheeks. She was beginning to dislike Mrs. Wilson Forbes very much.

Waldon and the lady walked down to the lawn, which was closely cut and soft as velvet, over which her rose-colored dress swept like a cloud at daybreak.

"What a lovely place it is! and what a sweet girl! I should almost think you would regret being engaged," she said, looking around her.

"No, I am not likely to regret that," said Waldon, with a mysterious smile.

"True. Bertha is not likely to be pushed aside even by a girl bright and lovely as this one. I beg your pardon for speaking of it as possible, even in jest."

"Mrs. Forbes, I am not engaged to Bertha Canfield."

"Not engaged! That is all nonsense! I know better."

"It is true."

"True! But how? The engagement was understood and recognized everywhere. In such cases, old friends, at least, have a right to ask explanations."

"But if I do not choose to give them?"

"Then, of course, it will be understood that the lady has jilted you."

"Jilted *me*! No woman will ever have the credit of doing that!"

"I don't know. There never was such a belle as Bertha Canfield. No one will believe that you snatched a girl like that, all fresh and blooming, out of her first season, to drop her so soon."

"But they shall believe it if—if—"

"Well, old friend, if what?"

"If I have to tell the truth," answered Waldon, in a low voice.

"Ah, that rare thing in the world—a good, wholesome truth! Tell it me, Waldon."

"You seem eager. I remember now—it is not likely that you would love Bertha. I wish to do her no harm, but if I am driven to it, you shall know, and I will depend on you for setting me right with society."

"Yes," said the lady, controlling herself with difficulty; "you can depend on me, if placing you right with our set is needed."

"Yes, I always counted on you as a friend—though things did happen that rather disturbed me. I suppose it's all right between you and Forbes?"

"Right! Yes. Why do you ask?"

"She does not know of the letters," thought Waldon. "The old fellow kept them back, after all. How he must love her!"

"Here come more guests; we must go in now. After dinner, perhaps, I shall have more to tell you," he said, observing that Mary was fluttering around the window with increasing impatience.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE STORMY DINNER.

THE guests assembled rapidly now, and dinner was announced. Mr. Noel led Mrs. Forbes to the table. Waldon followed with Miss Noel on his arm. The rest came independently; being only men, no one took much notice how they arranged themselves around the table.

Then came the usual routine of a hospitable dinner—profuse in delicacies, brilliant with flowers, and bright with sparkling wines, shining crystal and gleaming silver. Mrs. Forbes made herself charming to the host, who, being for many years a widower, and an habitual invalid, seldom enjoyed an occasion like that as he did under her brilliant influence.

Mary Noel was in fair progress with her first love quarrel, and, with the pouting wrath of a child, turned her shoulders on Waldon, while she bestowed lavish attentions on young Hyde, which the young man received almost as a pledge that his proposal was accepted, while Waldon drank his wine quietly, with a cynical smile on his lips. He rather enjoyed the whole thing; it was so delightfully transparent. By-and-by, if Mary tempted him too far, he would dash the cup from Hyde's lip in a way he would remember. The insolent fellow! how dared he aspire to any woman Waldon chose to exalt by a preference! The other guests, being gentlemen, talked of politics or racing, in undertones, between the courses.

After the dessert came on, both Mrs. Forbes and the young hostess began to feel their presence as a restraint upon the conviviality. Throwing a mesmeric telegram across the table, the elder lady began to draw on her gloves; then both arose, and floated softly out of the room.

Waldon arose to open the door, but young Hyde was too quick for him, and, bathed in happy smiles, bowed low as Mary passed out.

"I am afraid that I, too, must claim a lady's privilege, and ask leave to retire," said Mr. Noel, who did, indeed, look pale and weary. "My physicians forbid too much

even of this pleasant excitement. Mr. Waldon, will you take my chair? Our guests will feel all the advantage of the change."

"Our guests!" Some of the persons thus designated looked up suddenly, and cast significant glances at each other. Hyde had not noticed the word particularly, but waited, smiling, till Waldon had taken Mr. Noel's seat, when he called out for those beneath him to close up, and take their wine comfortably. Then came a cracking of corks, the gurgle and rush of wine poured into crystal, and a confused murmur of voices, in which politics and horse-racing clashed with sharp epigrammatic sentences from Egbert Fletcher and Waldon, who seemed measuring swords like persons preparing for a duel.

After a while, when the mellow influence of the wine began to manifest itself, some one broke into the old fashion of health-drinking, and a voice called out: "Fill up, gentlemen—a bumper for our host *pro tem.*, and a double bumper to the lady who will soon bear his name."

A clash of glass, and the rich gurgle of wine followed. Waldon arose to answer the toast, but he was interrupted:

"Stop, stop!" cried young Hyde, "we haven't drunk to the lady yet. Overflowing glasses to the most beautiful woman of New York, Miss Bertha Canfield, our future Mrs. Waldon."

Again the glasses rang against each other and were emptied simultaneously, deep inhalations of breath followed, and then Waldon rose to his feet, with a brimming glass in his hand.

"Gentlemen, I drink to the lady's health with all my

heart, but not as my future wife; that honor, or misfortune, which ever you may deem it, will, in a week or two, fall upon the lady who has just left us, Miss Noel."

A dead silence fell upon the revellers. Waldon's engagement to Bertha Canfield had been so publicly acknowledged, that even this open mention of her name had not seemed very much amiss, even among the most fastidious; but this bold repudiation struck every one with surprise. The revellers looked at each other in almost ludicrous consternation. Some sat down their empty glasses with emphasis; others held them fast, gazing blankly upon Waldon.

Two men present started up from their seats with white faces and eyes full of fire—those men were Fletcher and young Hyde. To one, that man's words had brought a keen sense of delight—to the other, savage resentment which he had no power to control.

"Is this true, sir, or are you chaffing in your cups, Russell Waldon?" exclaimed Hyde, setting his glass down with a crash that shivered it to splinters.

"I never chaff where ladies are concerned," answered Waldon, blandly, for he was a man to enjoy another's discomfiture with the cool deliberation of an epicure; "and am not likely to speak rashly at this table. That I occupy this seat, invited to it as you heard, is proof enough that the master of the house has accepted me as his son-in-law. As for the lady, she permits our engagement to be made public from this evening."

Hyde sank back to his seat, his eyes glowing, his teeth clenched hard under his mustache, and all his features locked with rage.

Fletcher leaned forward from the seat he had slowly

taken. His eyes were bright as stars, but in their stormy joy arose a look of growing indignation. Had this man dared to thrust that noble girl aside, or had she broken loose from his thralldom?

"But how came this about, Waldon?" cried a young man from the bottom of the table, who sat rather uneasily in his chair, and in a mellow, sleepy voice, which gave the words a drowsy significance, he half sang, half recited:

"It is good to be just and wise—it's good to be honest and true,
It is good to be off with an old love, before you are on with a new."

"You have told us about the new love; but how about the old? That's the question before the meeting—'how about the old?'"

"Oh, as to that," answered Waldon, laughing, "I hold myself answerable to no one."

"Yes, you are; I am that young lady's friend. I was the means of introducing her to the evil destiny which association with you has brought on so many women. I wish to know how your engagement with Miss Canfield was broken."

Fletcher spoke with bitter vehemence. In his fierce rage he saw the weak point in Waldon's armor, and struck through it. In defending Bertha he unconsciously avenged the death of Clara Anderson and the treason that led to it.

Hyde also became her champion, thus turning his wrath aside from its own stinging course. An hour ago, he had thought the heiress of Willow Bend almost his own—the thought burned his heart like fire.

Waldon leaned back in his chair, and laughed till the white edges of his teeth shone again.

"And who gives to Mr. Egbert Fletcher the right to criticise or question me? What is there in my engagements to interest him?"

"So much, sir, that I take it for granted that the young lady came to her senses in time, and cast you off."

"Cast me off—*me!*"

There was fire enough in those great eyes now, and quite sufficient rage in the strong features to startle more than one of Mr. Noel's guests.

"You heard what I said," answered Fletcher, growing hard and cold, as the other kindled to wrath. "There existed only two methods by which an engagement so well known could be broken—dismissal by the lady, or dishonor in the gentleman. No person familiar with Mr. Waldon's high moral character would for a moment accuse him, so that we must suppose the dismissal came from the lady."

Fletcher spoke with the very quintessence of scorn and bitterness—his voice was low, and stung like a viper.

Waldon writhed under it. Both self-control and manhood gave way under this scathing contempt before men he had used and considered as nothing more than literary or social satellites.

"You demand the facts?" he said, clenching a champagne glass by the stem, and pressing it down upon the table. "You believe it possible that any woman would fling me over, as you elegantly term it. You wish to know why the engagement between myself and Bertha Canfield was broken off. I will tell you. If the lady does not like it, I call every man here to witness that you brought it on her, not I—"

The man hesitated. Through his writhing vanity, and

his venom against Fletcher, he had a sense of the dastardly thing he was doing, and held back a moment.

Hyde saw this, and goaded him on with a cold smile.

Then Waldon made the plunge, like a vicious horse grinding the bit between his teeth.

"I broke my engagement with Bertha Canfield because she was a girl that no gentleman could marry without dishonor."

Hyde leaned back in his chair, with a triumphant smile on his lips. He cared nothing for the blasted reputation of this poor girl, but exulted in the degrading act of the man he hated.

"Liar!"

As he uttered this one scathing word, Egbert Fletcher leaned over the table, and dashed a full goblet of wine into Waldon's face.

"Liar! coward! hound!"

Blinded by the wine, stung by these insulting words, Waldon leaped to his feet, dashed the dripping moisture from his eyes, and made a plunge across the table, attempting to clear it like a wild beast, and kill the man, who had insulted him, with his clenched fist. Half a dozen powerful men held him back, frightened by the gladiator fury in his eyes, and the foam that flew in swift flecks from his lips.

Fletcher stood opposite, white as death and firm as a rock, while around them rose a wild clamor of words, through which Waldon's voice hissed its stinging venom, while he struggled against the hands that held him, and struck out wildly across the table, beating the air.

Fletcher neither moved nor spoke, but his breast heaved with a fierce, animal longing to smite the mouth that had dared to cast shame on the woman he loved.

Only one man at the table kept his seat. He was smiling blandly, darting the blade of his knife here and there, while he sung, in a mellow voice:

"It's good—it's good to be off with an old love, before you are on with—with flirtation number two."

This was the scene upon which Mrs. Forbes and Mary Noel entered, when the noise of the quarrel reached them in the drawing-room. Their frightened faces subdued the storm a little.

Waldon struggled madly against the hands that held him, unconscious of their presence.

Mary forced her way to his side, and clung to his arm, sobbing out:

"Oh, Waldon! Waldon! do you want to break my heart?"

Mrs. Forbes approached Fletcher, and laid her hand on his arm. She was trembling from head to foot, but spoke calmly, like an angel of peace.

"What is this, Egbert?"

He looked in her eyes an instant, blinded by his passion; then, recognizing that anxious face, answered, almost in a whisper:

"He slandered the woman I love."

"I understand. Come with me, brother. This is no place for us."

"When they have taken their hands from him. I will not leave the room until they set him free."

"They have set him free now. Mary Noel is clinging to his arm, crying like a baby—that is all."

Mary Noel heard her name, in the confusion, and cried out, with a burst of sobs:

"Oh, Mrs. Forbes! dear Mrs. Forbes! do find out what has happened? He won't speak a word to me!"

Papa has gone to his room, and I've nobody to help me but you!"

Mrs. Forbes turned at this appeal, and led Mary from the room, consoling her with great kindness.

"Go to your room, child. This is no scene for you. These gentlemen must not learn in this way how much you are interested in Mr. Waldon."

"Oh, but I must see him! I can't go up till I have seen him! He didn't seem to know me, Mrs. Forbes, and I just engaged! Isn't it terrible?"

"Go into the drawing-room. By-and-by he will come to you, I dare say. There, sit down in this great easy-chair."

Mary flung herself into the chair, and began to cry again.

"Do make him come in! Tell him that I am just breaking my heart!" she sobbed.

Mrs. Forbes was in the dining-room again before half this plaint was uttered. She found Waldon, exhausted by his wild rage, lying back in his chair, with his cravat loosened, and his white vest, all stained with wine, unbuttoned. Now and then he gasped out:

"I will have his life! Gentlemen, I call you to witness, I would have had his life now, but for your interference."

A faint smile trembled across Fletcher's mouth, and he regarded with intense scorn the artistic tableau gotten up around the great man's chair.

Half a dozen persons were grouped about it, giving him their most devoted attention, as if he had been a fainting woman, instead of a strong man, whose threats of vengeance made them watchful.

"Tell him that Miss Noel is in the drawing-room,

awaiting an explanation of this disturbance," said Mrs. Forbes, gliding past the group, and approaching her brother. "Come, Egbert, let us go now."

Fletcher took her hand, led her to the door, and, leaving her in the hall a moment, turned back. Putting one of the impromptu guards aside, he leaned down, and whispered in Waldon's ear:

"My plantation is not far off—you will know where to find me."

Waldon started from his chair, foaming with rage, but not till Fletcher had reached the door and taken Mrs. Forbes on his arm. Then he broke into a fierce sneer, and, pointing after them, called upon those present to witness how adroitly the man who had insulted him could cover his retreat by the presence of a woman.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

ON THE LOG BRIDGE.

"AND you saw him?"

"Yes, Bertha."

"Did he—did he speak of me?"

"More than once."

"Kindly—regretfully? Oh, tell me every word that was said! I do so hunger and thirst for one little word! Remember, you promised solemnly to tell me everything."

"I know, dear; but that is difficult when things are implied rather than expressed. Waldon certainly spoke of you."

"Yes! yes!"

"And so did Mary Noel; but she evidently knows nothing, and is, beside, a precious little goose! I wonder a girl all puff and gossamer, like that, could have been your bosom friend. Bertha, never were two creatures more unlike."

"Perhaps—I dare say. But do tell me; I am not patient, you know."

"Well, I have promised foolishly, I think now, and will do my best. I led him to the subject—kept down all my dislike, for I detest him—and asked, almost point blank, what the trouble was between you. He answered vaguely—said nothing against you—"

"Against me! How could he?"

"But spoke of your engagement as positively at an end. Poor child! how white your lips are! I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it! The man is so unworthy, so absolutely vile!"

Bertha protested against the charge with all the force of her sinking heart.

"No! no! it is *not* that. Something has arisen that we do not comprehend, and he is too honorable to speak."

"Too honorable! the ingrate! the coward! Bertha, diseases exist that cannot be cured, save by cutting off a limb. It takes a wise surgeon, they tell me, to know just when and how to cure in this desperate way. I am not that. Your clinging faith in this man shocks me. Yet I can understand it too well! too well!"

"Do not speak ill of him again, dear friend," said Bertha, laying her hand on Mrs. Forbes' arm, and lifting those great, beseeching eyes to her face. "I know how kind your meaning is. You think that I could give

him up with less pain, believing him unworthy; but that is not so. I would rather, a thousand times, resign him to a happier woman, even *her*, than think him, in anything, less perfect—less deserving of such idolatry as I have felt—still feel—for him. No, no! some wicked thing has come between us which you have been unable to fathom."

Mrs. Forbes answered nothing. She had no heart to persist in the truth against the sublime faith which possessed this noble girl. Knowing too well that half the value and beauty of a woman's life is torn away when she is first convinced that the man she loves is mean and unworthy, she absolutely feared the effect upon this proud, trusting, sensitive girl. But something must be said. The scene she had witnessed at the dinner party must reach Bertha, sooner or later.

"You promised to tell me all," said Bertha, wondering at this hesitation. "Have you done so?"

"No, Bertha; something else happened at the table after I left. There was some discussion—some drinking of toasts—in which your name was mentioned. Then Waldon openly disclaimed his engagement, and declared his approaching marriage to Miss Noel."

"What—what—in a crowd!—before strangers!" gasped Bertha.

"Several young men were present, among them Mr. Hyde. Do you know him?"

"Yes. He is *his* bosom friend, and adores him like a woman!"

"Is he your friend?"

"I do not know. God help me! I cannot say that I have a friend on earth!"

"At any rate, he seemed to act as such," answered

Mrs. Forbes, forgiving the implied doubt of herself unasked; "for when Fletcher proclaimed himself responsible as your friend, and demanded an explanation of the treatment you had received, this gentleman sustained him, I think."

"That is strange. I thought he did not like me. But the explanation—did he give one?"

"Bertha, he said that no gentleman could marry you without dishonor."

Bertha turned to marble; face and neck, hand and lips, hardened into a deathly white, then, as a statue reels from its base, she fell slowly sideways. Mrs. Forbes caught her with both arms, or she would have fallen prone on the logs of the bridge where they had met and conversed.

"Sam—Celia! Great Heavens! will no one come! Celia—Celia! this way—bring something that holds water! Stop fluttering about the door, I tell you, and come at once!"

In answer to this cry, Celia came running down from the house with a calabash in her hand, calling back:

"Ho, Sam, yer 'fernal lazy nigger, what yer 'bout, when Miss Ally hollers murder?"

Sam, who was gathering sweet corn from his garden patch, dropped the green ears from his arm, and ran after his wife, who found Mrs. Forbes seated on the great side log of the bridge, holding what seemed like a corpse in her arms.

Down through the tangled vines Celia tore her way to the inlet, and filling her calabash, hurried back to the bridge just as Sam came up.

"Dare you am, standing like a stump, and doin' noffin', an' de young lady done gone dead! Hole dat, thar!"

Sam took the calabash while Celia dipped both hands in it and dashed the water over that deathly face.

"Is she dead—is she quite dead?" questioned Mrs. Forbes, who was almost as white as the poor girl she held.

"Dead! Goramighty, no! She'll come to, Miss Ally, and would right off, if it wasn't for dis lazy ole nigger, as won't hole de calabosh perpendiculum. Dare now, she am wicken her eyelashes—dat last swash ob water done it. How am yer, mis? How does yer feel, honey?"

Bertha opened her eyes, vaguely at first, then with a look of wild wonder.

"What is the matter?" she said, lifting one hand to her wet hair. "Have I been in the water?"

"You have fainted, dear. I was telling you something, and you fell," whispered Mrs. Forbes, kissing that damp forehead upon which her tears dropped. "I was frightened, it was so like death, Bertha!"

Bertha turned a little in the kind arms that held her, and, for a few moments, lay gazing into that kind face.

"I remember now," she said, after a little time; "but my mind won't receive the thing you said—it is too terrible!"

"It is true, Bertha. What he meant I cannot tell; but that was what Waldon said."

Bertha looked jealously at the old people. She could not endure that they should hear that much of the shame that had been put upon her; but their kindness made her grateful even then, and trying to smile, she said to old Celia:

"I am better now. There—I will sit here a while by the side of your mistress. You can go to the house now."

"Come along, ole man, and don't yer be all day 'bout gitting dat green corn—come!"

Sam turned obediently, and followed his wife, who went toward the house, swinging her calabash by the neck, and scolding the poor old fellow all the time for coming away from the corn patch, when he "wasn't wanted, no more than a chicken wanted two heads."

Bertha had gently released herself from the support of her friend, and sat down on the log beside her.

"I had no father, no brother there, to ask what those cruel words meant," she said, in a low, dreary voice. "Oh, it is hard to be fatherless! and now I have no mother—no human being in the wide world strong enough to tear away this mystery from the man I was to have married. Oh, Mrs. Forbes, some one must have slandered me to him fearfully! But how could he believe it without breaking his heart! Did he look ill?—did he seem to have suffered much?"

Mrs. Forbes was out of patience. Would the blind love of this young creature never permit her to understand.

"I saw no appearance of suffering, and you were not altogether left without defence."

"You did not observe it, very likely, for he has a god-like power of self-control; but I know the generous, sensitive nature under it all. It breaks out, now and then, to the world, through his poetry; but to understand it well, one must have loved him. Oh, my friend, he suffered terribly before he could force himself to believe the thing he said! What wicked, wicked person can have imposed on him so?"

"I said you were not altogether left without defence," said Mrs. Forbes, out of all patience. "When Waldon

made this disgraceful charge, one man at the table dashed a glass of wine in his face, and called him a liar."

"Called him a liar? Who was the man?"

"My brother, Egbert Fletcher."

"And he is alive? Waldon did not kill him on the spot?"

"No, that would have been dangerous; but I think he will try and get revenge in another way."

"A duel—you do not mean that?"

"Yes, Bertha, I do mean that. One of these men must fall."

Bertha arose, looking drearily toward the house.

"I must go. It seems as if I were dying!"

CHAPTER LXXV.

JUST A LITTLE APOLOGY.

AS Mrs. Wilson Forbes was driving home, very much dissatisfied with herself, she saw a young lady, followed by a colored groom, galloping down the river road, with a swift speed, which indicated something more important than a simple ride for pleasure. The moment this fast rider came in sight of the carriage, she threw up her whip hand, and put her horse upon the run.

"Oh, Mrs. Forbes! I am so glad to have overtaken you—so troubled! so fearfully anxious! Mr. Waldon went over to Hyde's last night, in defiance of all I could do, and I'm terrified to death from fear that something may happen."

Mrs. Forbes had stopped her carriage, and Mary Noel

said all this, leaning from her saddle and panting for breath.

"What is it that you fear so much?" inquired the lady, thinking first of her brother, then of poor Bertha, as she had seen the wretched girl walking up from the bridge, with all the strength smitten from her limbs by the very dread this maiden carried so lightly.

"Oh, Mrs. Forbes! they will fight! How could your brother insult him so? the bravest, proudest man on earth! What was that Bertha Canfield to Fletcher, that he should put himself in such awful danger?"

"My brother does not often sit quietly and hear a woman slandered," answered Mrs. Forbes, coldly, "and at such times he is not a man to calculate consequences."

"But he will be shot—as true as you live, he will be shot! You have no idea what sure aim my—that is, Waldon, has. I like your brother so much, it would be dreadful. Do try and prevent it, my dear Mrs. Forbes! You could—you can do anything. Just tell your brother how dangerous it is!"

Mrs. Forbes smiled a little scornfully.

"I fancy that would not be exactly the way to influence him!" she said.

"Well, you know the best way. Tell him how ridiculous it is to fight for a girl like Bertha Canfield, who never let Mr. Waldon alone for an hour, till she had entangled him, and then gets up duels and things when his eyes are opened, and he refuses to marry her. It would just be ruin to him, fighting for a girl like that. Tell him so, and make him apologize, beg pardon, and all that. Mr. Waldon will let him off after that. He told me so."

"He told you so, did he? When?"

"Last night, after all the rest were gone. You don't know how I pleaded with him! how I clung to him and implored for your brother's life!"

"Indeed, you were very good!"

Mary did not observe the curl of that haughty lip, and went on, with headlong rashness:

"At first he would not listen, but went on like a lion. You could see specks of froth flying up to his dear lips, faster than I could kiss them off—and I did my best! I told him how wretched I should be; how papa would mourn having once given consent, and how people would talk, if, just before our being married, he should fight for a woman like Bertha."

"What did he say then?" inquired Mrs. Forbes, parting her lips with difficulty from their haughty pressure.

"Mrs. Forbes, he cursed her! I was so frightened! But wasn't he excusable? Why couldn't she give him up quietly, without all this fuss? And your brother taking her part! The idea!"

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Forbes, "that you were not particularly successful with Mr. Waldon. He left you, I dare say, bloodthirsty as ever."

"That is true. But the insult—a glass of wine dashed right into a gentleman's eyes! What was the use of pleading against that? Then I said: 'Well, if you refuse me, I will go to Mr. Fletcher. He never could resist me.' You know, Mrs. Forbes, I was in hopes of making him jealous, and come round a little; but, instead of that, he seemed pleased by the idea, and told me to come—there might be hopes of success in that quarter, and he had no objection; all he wanted was an apology. As for bringing that girl's name up in a duel,

he wanted it no more than I did. So it was agreed between us that I should ride over this morning, and get your influence with Fletcher. Just a little apology, Mrs. Forbes. Waldon won't be over-particular, and all this trouble will be washed away like melting snow. I'm sure Mr. Fletcher will do it, just to oblige me."

There was no possibility of intensifying the scorn that Mrs. Forbes felt for Russell Waldon; but the mean cowardice of sending this young girl to ward off a threatened danger went even beyond anything she had dreamed him capable of. True, Mary did not understand that she was acting as his tool, but rather prided herself upon the independent idea which would lift her to a heroine of romance in her lover's eyes, and bring her nearer to a level with himself.

"Then your mission was really to me," said the lady, controlling herself. "I am to importune my own brother to make a craven of himself, in order that you and Waldon may be married, and enter upon the good things of life on velvet. What does he think of me?"

"Oh, he thinks the world of you! I was a little jealous that night, you know, and he confessed all about old times, when you were so fond of him, in spite of his not caring, before he got you married off to Mr. Forbes."

"Before he got me married off to Mr. Forbes!"

Mary started upon her saddle. That burst of indignant scorn terrified her almost into running away, but after riding off a pace or two, she wheeled her horse and came back.

"Dear Mrs. Forbes, I had no idea of offending you. Indeed, I don't know how any lady on earth could help loving him; and he couldn't love them all, you know.

He only told me about it that I might understand how much more likely you would be to interfere because of old times, for his sake as well as your brother's. Besides, there is one thing I forgot to mention. Papa knows nothing about this quarrel; he was ill, and went to his room, so I bribed the servants, and they kept silent. He was never told a word about Bertha's engagement, and all that coming at once might set him against Waldon; so, for my sake, Mrs. Forbes, do the very best you can."

"I will do the very best I can to preserve my brother's honor. You can say this to Russell Waldon."

"I was not to mention him as even knowing that I came, so I cannot do that," said Mary.

"As you please; but your horse seems restive. Good-morning, Miss Noel."

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE RESCUED LETTER.

BERTHA had borne up bravely, and defended Waldon to her friend, even when her own heart was giving way from its unswerving faith in the man she loved. No excuse could be found, even in her trusting nature, for the base and cruel words this man had spoken; the very thought of them made her faint, and drove her heart, shuddering, away from him. Still she struggled, and strove to disbelieve. It was hard to be separated from him forever; but, oh, how infinitely worse to see this god-like idol fall at her feet, an abject

thing, too mean for spurning. No, no; slander and malignity were following him also.

Bertha was lying upon a low chintz couch in her chamber, with the blinds half closed, and casting greenish shadows on the white-washed walls. She had been thinking of these things, till she ached all over head and heart, when the door opened and old Celia looked into the room.

"Am yer to sleep, young missis? Case if yer isn't, I'se got suthin' here mighty pretty. 'Spect yer kin make it out for ole Celia. See thar!"

Bertha arose languidly from the pillow which Lydia had placed under her head, and took the paper Celia held toward her. It was a sheet of large note paper, covered closely with writing, which Celia seemed to hold in no esteem; but she pointed with her finger to a tinted and golden monogram at the top, upon which Bertha gazed with parted lips, and eyes widening in startled surprise, for the paper belonged to herself, the monogram was hers, the writing was her mother's.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded, sharply.

"Ole man done fished it up out ob de river, ebber so long 'go," said Celia, a little startled.

Bertha did not answer—she sat upright, with the letter grasped by the edge in both hands, reading it. Steadily, slowly her eyes passed from line to line, freezing her into stone.

It was the letter that Mrs. Canfield had written to Waldon the day before her death. In it she had told him of her solemn purpose to immolate herself, that the barrier of her disgrace should no longer separate him from her daughter. Oh, with what touching eloquence she pleaded with him to protect that child from all

knowledge of her sin, and of the manner of her own death. She appealed to his generosity, his manhood, and besought him to give double care and double devotion to a young creature who had been made an orphan for his sake. Never was pathos more touching, or prayer more earnest, than this poor lady put forth just before she laid herself down to die.

Bertha read every word of this mournful revelation. No tears blinded her eyes; they grew brighter and brighter, with a terrible depth of meaning in the blackness which intensified as she read. A shock of feeling passed over her, now and then, as lightning might strike a statue; but most of the time she sat dumb and still, reading the letter over and over again. At last she folded it carefully and laid it in her bosom, which was cold as marble; every drop of blood in her veins had flown to her heart, and was burning there like living fire.

Celia had left the room, terrified by the dead whiteness of that young face, afraid even to ask for a return of the pretty monogram which old Sam had fished up from the river.

Bertha was entirely alone. She looked around wildly; the white walls seemed to glide and heave around her; the windows were in motion; the floor on which she stood sunk and rose like the billows of a rough sea. She fell upon her knees and clung to the couch with both arms, like a wrecked creature tossed in a storm.

All at once her voice broke out in a fearful cry:

"Oh, mother! mother! mother! You are dead, and he killed you!"

She fell with her face upon the couch, and lay for hours, giving out low, dry moans, which were neither

prayers nor curses, but a hard agony, impossible of expression.

Lydia came in and went out again, afraid to speak. She knew nothing of what had passed, only that a tiny picture had been given to young missus, who had gone right off inter tantrums 'bout it.

An hour passed, and there was no sound from Bertha's room. Lydia went up again, and found her lying on the couch, with her eyes wide open and looking up at the ceiling.

"Are you better?" said the girl, tenderly; for she had learned great gentleness within the last few months. "Celia thought you were sick, and got frightened."

"I am not sick, but strong, Lydia. Feel of my nerves: they are tough, like harp strings, and my flesh is iron!"

"It is cold and quivering. Let me bring you some wine," said Lydia.

She ran down-stairs, and came back with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

"Drink, Miss Bertha! You've got an awful chill!"

Bertha drank the wine; a shudder passed over her; the blood was beginning to flow back from her heart.

"It seemed almost as if I were dead too," she whispered, with a piteous smile.

"Don't, don't, Miss Bertha, you frighten me!"

"Why, there is nothing to be afraid of now. When the worst is known, one is lifted above fear. Do I look strangely, Lydia, that you search my face so? Can one moment transfigure a person?"

"Dear Miss Bertha, you talk so strange, I don't like it. You make me tremble!"

"It seemed to me, a little while ago, that the whole earth trembled; but I am quieter now, Lydia."

The poor girl held out her arms, and Lydia crept timidly to her side. Then Bertha's head fell on that faithful shoulder, and she whispered hoarsely:

"Oh, if I could but shed one tear, I think it would save me!"

"Miss Bertha, what is it?"

"Lydia, I know all that you do! Oh, my mother! my mother!"

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE WEDDING AT WILLOW BEND.

IT will be remembered that Mr. Noel was forced by indisposition to leave his guests at the dinner table, on the night that ended in such bitter feeling between the parties left behind. Before morning he became seriously ill, and the next day was pronounced in imminent danger, from one of those acute attacks of a disease which might any moment prove fatal. Another morning found him worse, and the doctor despondent.

In this strait, the sick man had but one overpowering anxiety: his daughter's welfare. He had consented willingly to her marriage with Waldon, who was so well known as an author and a rising man in public life, that his lack of wealth was of little importance to a person who possessed so much.

Few kinder or more indulgent fathers ever lived than Mr. Noel; and now, when death seemed very near, anxiety to leave his only child under safe protection grew strong within him. He sent for the girl and won from

her a half-frightened, half-delighted consent that the marriage should be celebrated then and there in his sick-room.

An hour after Mary Noel gave her consent to this, a young man was galloping at full speed toward Hyde's plantation.

Young Hyde, being a bachelor, and entire master of himself, led a careless life on the estate his father had bequeathed him. Without much regard to the elegancies of society, he extended a hearty, almost rude hospitality to such friends as chose to make his house their headquarters for lounging, shooting, or any other country amusement that their own ingenuity could devise. With plenty of old family servants ready to bestow their labor upon his guests, a stable full of blood horses, and any amount of empty sleeping-rooms, the Hyde mansion was usually a scene of great hospitality and free living. Guests remained in that house so long as it pleased them, without any idea of restraint. In fact, each one soon became a sort of amateur master. Certainly, the party now assembled under its roof had a jolly, idle, rollicking time of it, and seemed in no hurry to depart.

Hyde and some idle young Virginians from Richmond were lounging around the windows of the smoking-room, half in and half out of doors, at the very time that Mary Noel was giving her consent to a speedy wedding. They had been discussing the unpleasant termination of the dinner, and seemed rather astonished at Waldon's apathy in the matter; but he sat apart and smoked much, leaning back on one chair with his feet on another, while his friends went into an eager discussion of his duties. He had seen Mary after her interview with Mrs. Forbes, and that young person, having misunder-

stood the indignant lady entirely, and, as such people will, added a good deal of her own to what had really been said, Waldon was satisfied that, through this underground channel, he had secured an apology from young Fletcher ample as he could wish. Hyde's interference he chose to ignore entirely. He was well aware that a quarrel with her brother would be sure to enlist Mrs. Forbes against him; and an open rupture with Hyde would have left him without a home, when it was most important that he should be in the neighborhood of Willow Bend.

"Alice never will allow me to run the risk of being shot," he reasoned. "There is enough left of the old feeling to set her actively to work, and she is a deuced clever woman. In fact, I never took the trouble to please any but clever women until this bit of cream and honey came in my way. I wonder how she will manage it? The fellow is plucky enough, but she can control him, and will. The woman who once loves Waldon never wholly throws off his chains. I shall be in no haste here, but give ample time."

In this way the man reasoned, while his companions chatted lazily, sending up clouds of smoke among the stags' heads, foils and fowling-pieces that ornamented the great open hall where they were sitting.

"Let him alone," said one of the young Virginians, who could not understand this cool way of taking an affront. "He is not likely to put up with an insult like that. New Yorkers are not fond of duelling, but such want of pluck as that would drive him from the clubs."

Waldon heard this, and was stung by it, as Lane saw with great satisfaction; for a sharp, underground antagonism was going on between these two men, which

threatened every moment to break out in an open rupture.

"I think they can leave Waldon to take care of his own honor," muttered that gentleman, as he caught the drift of this conversation, while he twisted a loose leaf around the end of his cigar, and polished it down with his finger. "I am waiting for that young hound to send me an apology. Wasn't it a statesman who taught us the value of 'masterly inactivity?' There! I have lost my light, and the whole thing isn't worth that! Boy, bring me a match."

A young mulatto, who was lolling against a post of the veranda, listening greedily to the talk, went off like a flash, and that moment a horseman appeared in the road, coming full gallop toward the Hyde mansion.

"It is one of Noel's people, I think," observed Hyde, leaning forward to get a good view of the approaching horseman, "riding like the mischief. I wonder what is up at the Bend? Old fellow dead, perhaps."

Waldon set down his chair with a crash, and started up. Hyde laughed, and snapped the ashes from his cigar with vicious emphasis.

"Perhaps it is the apology coming!" he said, with a curl of the lips, as he replaced the cigar between them.

Waldon gave him a glance of fire, and walked forward to meet the man, who rode straight toward them.

"A letter, sar," said the young fellow, taking off his hat, from which he produced a canary-colored note, on which gleamed a tiny monogram of gold. "Ole marse done sick. Couldn't send noffin hisself, so young missus done writ it."

Waldon heard nothing of this, but tore open the note, rending the pretty monogram in twain, and read it eagerly.

"MY DEAR MR. WALDON:

"Papa is ill; the doctor thinks worse. He is very, very anxious that you should come to the Bend at once. I do not know how to write it, and am blushing all over, but he wishes so much to see us married before he dies. Of course, it is dreadful—without trousseau or anything—and I was just sending to France for such lovely things! But poor, dear papa, how can his own—own child refuse him anything in his dying hour? I have just been looking over my things, and find a white *gaze de Chambéry* that has never been worn but once. My maid is now busy putting new lace on the flounces. She works in breathless haste, and oh, dearest, I shall be ready by the time one of Mr. Hyde's swiftest horses can bring you here. I don't know how to subscribe myself, standing on the edge of a precipice to which your noble love has so sweetly led me, but, for the last time, am

"MARY NOEL."

A flash of haughty triumph brightened Waldon's face as he came back to his friends with this note in his hand.

"Does he send an apology on canary-colored paper?" Hyde cried out.

"Hyde, pray excuse me," said Waldon, ignoring the young man's sneer, because of the swift revenge his words would bring, "it is an extraordinary request; but pray make a speedy toilet without delay, and permit me to order the carriage. A very impatient old gentleman, who thinks himself on his death-bed, is anxious to have me married at once, and the lady is waiting. Will you go with me and witness the ceremony?"

Hyde turned livid; but a guest seized him by the arm before he could speak and hurried him away, startled by the bitter resentment that whitened his face.

"Go!" he said. "Do not let the man see that you feel it so deeply. We will both see him married."

"He is my guest," answered Hyde, "I must not forget that."

Hyde's carriage drew up in front of the mansion at Willow Bend, and, after a few moments' delay, the gentlemen were ushered up the broad staircase into Mr. Noel's chamber, where the physician and a clergyman were in attendance.

The sick man reached forth his hand when Waldon entered, and spoke with him some minutes, while the rest stood apart, waiting.

Waldon seemed greatly impressed, and grasped the hand held out to him with much apparent ardor, as if some sacred promise were confirmed by the act.

Then the door opened, and, with a soft flutter of lace, the bride entered, followed by her maid, who stood just within the room, smiling till her teeth glimmered like ivory.

When the sick man saw his child in all the snowy cloudiness of her bridal array, his hand dropped that of Waldon, and, drawing her gently down to his pillow, he kissed her fair cheek, and left a trace of tears upon it. Then the hands of those two were joined, the clergyman stepped forward, and they were pronounced man and wife.

Then, one by one, those present stole from the room, and the sick man was left alone.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

BERTHA HEARS OF THE CHALLENGE.

"BERTHA! Bertha! what can I do? The wretch has challenged Egbert, and I have more than half been the cause of it!"

Mrs. Forbes had not observed the look of dead apathy on that locked face when she entered Bertha's chamber, for the blinds were almost closed, and the girl did not rise to receive her with the usual eager welcome.

"Challenge! Did you speak of a challenge? That means a duel! Who is to be killed now?"

Bertha's voice sounded hollow and strange, but Mrs. Forbes was too much excited for clear observation, and replied, almost impatiently:

"Who? Fletcher, my brother—the man who has twice saved your life, and now risks his own a third time in your behalf—a man who loves you better than all the world beside!"

"Loves me! Ah, yes, he did love me once, but that is a long time ago," answered Bertha, drearily.

"A long time ago! Bertha, this is cruel unbelief! He has always loved you—always will love you—without return, without a hope of return—and now, poor fellow, he is going to die for you!—for that man will strike him down just as gladly as he married Mary Noel."

Bertha started out of her numb apathy, and turned her eyes, enlarged and burning, on her visitor.

"Tell me what you have been saying. I heard you, but did not comprehend. Something is the matter with me here, and here."

Bertha pressed her heart with one hand, then touched her head with grave, pathetic meaning.

"I said, Bertha (but you did not seem to care), that Waldon was married, three days ago, to Mary Noel."

"Ha! I understand that! Poor girl! She was frail and childish, but not hard and bad. She did not deserve this awful fate!"

"Bertha, how strangely you speak! The last time I was here, you were wild with the thought of this marriage, and gave such evidence of love for the man as almost made me hate you."

"Love! Did I ever love that man? If I did, it was a wicked sacrilege, for which God has done well to punish me. Oh, I am punished! Don't be hard with me, for I am awfully punished!"

"How is this, Bertha? Can the marriage of a bad man affect you so?"

"His marriage! I only think of that to pity *her*!"

"And you have ceased to care for him?"

"Ceased to care for him! Oh, no! no! We have not done with each other yet!"

A singular smile rose and spread over that wan face, and Bertha pressed a hand restlessly against her bosom, to make sure that a paper resting there was quite safe.

"Bertha! Bertha! how wild you look! For Heaven's sake, do not tell me that the marriage of Russell Waldon has driven you mad!"

"His marriage! But you will not understand. It is not that! Oh, it is not that!"

"Then is it that you are afraid he will fall, instead of my brother?"

"Fall instead of your brother!—a fiend for an angel! But tell me more clearly—what has this man done?"

Does he threaten another life? Has he dared to outrage high Heaven again? This challenge—what is it?"

"Waldon has sent a challenge to Egbert, for his action, the other night, at Noel's dinner."

"What was that, Alice? I know you told me something; but, since then, so much has happened, and I have not been well. They quarrelled, I think you said, about some lady. Who was it?"

"Bertha, you will drive me wild! It was for your sake that Egbert dashed the wine in that coward's face! He had dared to slander you before Noel's guests!"

"Slander me! Is that true? Well, well! that is not much. Great crimes swallow up little ones so completely that we do not count them. Then your brother—your brave, noble brother!—stood up in my behalf the third time? Oh, how I wish this could be again! but it never will—it never will!"

The poor girl laid one hand on her heart, and pressed it there, looking at the anxious face of her visitor with such pathetic mournfulness that Alice began to cry.

"How pleasant crying must be!" said Bertha, shaking her head.

"Bertha, dear, do try and comprehend how I am suffering. I came here in some wild hope that you could help me. Waldon has sent a challenge to my brother. One of his friends brought it, demanding an apology. Egbert peremptorily refused to apologize for anything he had done, or take back a word he had said. Before this, Mary Noel came to me (upon my word I believe that coward sent her) and besought me to win an apology from Egbert; but I would not do it—no, not to save his dear life! But the alternative is terrible, Bertha. Waldon has no mercy. They tell me that his aim is deadly. What can we do, Bertha? Think of something."

Bertha was thinking keenly now. The haze had been swept from her brain; her great eyes filled with subtle meaning.

"When is this meeting to be, Alice?"

"To-morrow, in the morning."

"Where?"

"I do not know; they will not tell me. His second seemed afraid that I would complain to the authorities."

"They will not meet. There has been murder enough. This man shall perpetrate no more. Your brother saved my life and his. There shall be no foul play in return. Have no fear, Alice."

"But what can you do, Bertha—see this man?"

"Yes, I will see him."

"Perhaps something might come of it. Oh, Bertha, do try!"

Mrs. Forbes threw herself into Bertha's arms, trembling and sobbing violently.

"I know that you will save him—I know that you will! If all else fails, you might go to a magistrate. He would not forgive his sister, but you might."

"He shall be saved!" answered Bertha, and they parted.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

OUT IN THE STORM.

IT stormed heavily that night. The rain drifted across Diamond Island in sheets. The great trees swayed and bent under whirling rushes of wind, that

threatened to uproot them. The waters of the river were dark as midnight, save where the wind plowed them into furrows and the blue lightning struck them.

Bertha watched the darkness from her window while it gathered like a pall over the island. She had dressed herself carefully in the afternoon, braiding her rich hair tightly in a thick roll back of her head, and thrusting through its coils a small poniard, very slender and keen, but elaborated with jewels at the haft, as if intended for an ornament. It was a pretty trifle, which she had worn at private theatricals in her school-days. In the dead blackness of her mourning this bright object took the lightning now and then, as it flamed across the window, and seemed to flash back living fire.

When it was quite dark, Bertha threw a waterproof cloak over her, and, with her head buried in the hood, went out into the storm. Directly, another figure, also shrouded in a cloak, glided after her, close as a shadow—had one been possible that stormy night—until she came to the log bridge just as Bertha went down under it.

The second figure stood upon the logs, looking over. All at once it made a leap, and almost upset a tiny boat that Bertha was pushing out of the inlet toward the raging waters of the river. A shrill cry broke from her, which the storm seized upon and smothered. She dropped an oar, and it was being carried swiftly away, but Lydia snatched at it and dragged it back.

"Hand the oars to me; I am the strongest. You have been sick, and might give out," said the girl quietly, as if she had been expected to take that very place.

"Lydia! oh, Lydia! why will you follow me so? Is not one enough for danger like this?"

"No," answered Lydia, bending to her oars, and shooting her craft into the great stream; "one is not enough. Don't try to cheat me; it's not to be done. Up stream, I reckon?"

"Yes; but give me the oars now—I want the work."

"Take them, if you must; but keep to the bank. The current will be too much for us if you don't."

It would have proved too much at any ordinary time, for those round, white arms would have given way; but Bertha was gifted with superhuman strength that night, and battled the waves as if they had been wild beasts. She took no heed of the current nor the swirl of the winds, but cut through them both with mad heroism.

All at once the black shadows of some vessel, reefed close and swinging at anchor, rose in her path. She could just discern the skeleton spars piercing the darkness and veered a little, passing within a few feet of her. A crash of thunder, a lurid sheet of lightning, and for some seconds all the river seemed aflame, and the yacht they were passing lay upon that sea of fire with every rope and spar revealed with the vividness of noon-day.

Bertha saw nothing more than a flood of blinding light and a ship at anchor, but a sharp cry, which ended in a wail, broke from Lydia, who sprang up in the boat and flung out her arms, as if appealing to some one for help.

During some moments both the boat and that spectral craft had been wrapped in one great blaze of fire. The hood had fallen back from Bertha's face, revealing its deadly whiteness, and Lydia's slight figure rose at its full height in the boat, clearly revealing itself as she uttered that cry.

That picture created by the lightning vanished with it,

and was buried in darkness again. Bertha, always looking forward, like a sibyl inspired, kept on her way, giving no heed to the craft she had passed, nor to Lydia's cry. The storm was still unabated, the air was full of shooting rain which, pierced by lightning flashes, mingled gold and silver together for a moment, then merged into the inky darkness of the river through which that boat was so desperately urged.

Since that one wild cry Lydia had remained silent in the bow of the boat; but her frame trembled from some cause more potent than the wet or cold, and when a gleam of lightning shot athwart them she keenly watched the face of her companion, and saw that it was like marble, and that her eyes were large and glittering, as if they drank in fire from the lightning.

Indeed, Bertha was unconscious of danger. Lydia understood the peril, but braved it without shrinking; though she never expected to climb the shore alive. Occasionally they saw lights gleaming through the drifting blackness; but no habitations were visible, even in outline. Those glittering sparks of fire bespoke their presence on the bank, but that was all. Now Lydia pulled up stream. Bertha had fallen into thought, given up the oars, and sat motionless, folded in her cloak.

"Where are we going? When can we stop?" inquired Lydia, resting a moment and gasping for breath.

"We shall know—there will be light," answered Bertha, hoarse and shivering.

The boat was drifting back. Lydia worked her oars again. According to her best calculation, they must be near Willow Bend, possibly close there, for a dense mass of blackness lay at their left, heaving up and down like billows of ink; and, farther on, she saw two or three

star-like lights. That blackness might be those vast willows on the verge of Mr. Noel's lawn. The lights might burn in his windows.

Lydia, yielding to fatigue and a vague wish for shelter, pushed her boat close to the bank, until great sweeping branches trailed over them like wet banners, and the moan of heavy foliage, lashed by the wind, came out from the black masses over head, like lost spirits wailing in heaped-up thunder-clouds. Beneath these heaving branches, burning dimly through the storm, were those lights.

Lydia believed this to be Willow Bend, and rested a little, waiting for Bertha to speak. But the girl said nothing, and did not seem to know how those long wet branches were lashing them.

All at once another great sheet of lightning rolled down the river, poured itself into the writhing willows, and wrapped a great mansion house, near by, in quivering flame. Lydia bent her face down to her bosom, closing her eyes to the awful glare. Bertha rose so quickly that the boat rocked with dangerous violence, dipping water. She sank down again in a dark heap; for following this awful surge of lightning came a peal of thunder, booming over them with reverberations that seemed to shake the very earth; and out from the darkness, which rolled back upon everything, shot up a spire of flame, red and slender, like the tongue of some huge serpent, quivering through the awful gloom.

The lightning had struck a dead pine tree, up stream, and was leaping up the splintered trunk, devouring it in the midst of the black storm. Bertha once more lifted her head. Flashes of this lurid light shot in and out through the willows, gleams of it reached the house,

revealing its outlines, and blotting them out again, fitfully.

"It lights me on!"

Bertha caught a branch of the willow and swung herself on shore as she spoke. The next instant she was gone.

CHAPTER LXXX.

IN THE BRIDAL CHAMBER.

LYDIA also leaped on shore, with the cable in her hand; she groped for a hook which she knew of, sunk into one of the willows, fastened her boat, and ran swiftly across the lawn, struck with unutterable terror. She saw nothing of her young mistress, neither on the lawn nor on the broad veranda, over which the storm was drifting.

The doors and windows were all closed. She listened, but could hear nothing—the trees moaned so loudly, and the tendrils of a great honeysuckle, that the wind had wrenched from its fastenings, was beating hard against the roof. In her anxiety the girl went out upon the lawn, searching for the lights she had seen. They came from two windows in the upper story, and shone dimly; for the glass was beaded with rain drops, that broke and smothered their light, which came through transparent curtains of muslin inside.

Still she saw nothing of her mistress. Once it seemed to her that she discovered a dark figure coming up from the willows, but, like everything else, it drifted out of

shape. She turned her eyes on the house again. A cry broke from her.

Passing one of these windows she saw the shrouded figure of a woman. The girl did not stop to ask how her mistress came there; but sprang at once to a pillar of the veranda, against which was nailed the lattice work of an interlacing vine.

With the speed and lightness of a cat, she climbed this frail ladder, and moving over the wet shingles of the veranda, swept the water from a pane of glass with her hand, and looked through.

Lydia saw a large white bed, standing in the middle of a chamber she was familiar with, and on it an old man sleeping. No other living soul was in the room, and, exhausted with past bodily suffering, the old man seemed to have slept heavily through the storm.

Lydia drew back—this was not the room she sought. She turned a corner of the roof and paused at a faint line of light that fell across the sodden shingles, through another window, covered with cobweb lace, which was scarcely more than a mist. From this precarious elevation, she looked into a luxurious bed-chamber, to which it seemed as if a storm could never come. The snow-white bed was broad, and so eluded with lace that the outlines of two persons sleeping within could only be indistinctly seen.

Flowers were in the room; roses and a tall stalk of white lilies filled a vase, which occupied a little marble table near the bed. Across the silken lounge a muslin dress was thrown, around which some blue ribbons fluttered suddenly, as if a draught of air had been let into the chamber through some open door. If so, the door was instantly closed, for the ribbons settled down to their

place, and the light, under its Parian shade, which had flared a little, burned steadily.

"She is there—she has been at the door," thought the terrified girl, shivering in the rain, but more from fear than cold. "Oh, if she would but come away now!"

Bertha Canfield did not come away, but stood at the door, that shut in her two enemies, holding her breath, while she drew the poniard from the coils of her drenched hair. Then Lydia, who was watching keenly, saw the lace curtains sway and ripple like drifting snow, a dark figure swept through them, as it seemed, and three persons were outlined through the lace. A man lay sleeping soundly, with his head half buried in the pillow, and one hand falling supinely over the counterpane—the other arm half circled the fair form of a slumbering woman, whose cheek rested on his shoulder, and whose hair of pale gold swept over the linen that veiled his powerful chest.

Over these two sleepers the dark form of Bertha Canfield bent in powerful contrast, her garments black and dripping, the hood thrust from her head, which was that of an avenging angel.

For one awful minute Bertha stood gazing upon those two—the man who had murdered her mother, the woman who had so shamefully broken faith with herself. How helpless the strong man looked in his unconscious sleep! how fair and pretty she was, lying with the warm flush of a slumbering child on her cheek! Many a time, in their school-days, she had slept thus, circled by Bertha's arm.

It was strange, but at the moment a gleam of tenderness for the woman found its way to that warped soul, and there, with her hand almost upon the man's throat,

she felt something like the softness of tears stealing into her bosom. But a thought turned them to ice. In the morning, another murder would be perpetrated. This man's path was not red enough. His next victim would be Fletcher, who had twice saved her life—who had rescued this man from the deep.

Sleeping there so tranquilly with another murder in his heart! No; that should never be.

A swift uplifting of the poniard over the spot where she could mark his heart beating; a shivering poise of a moment, an upheaving of her bosom, and Bertha fell upon her knees, pressing the bed-clothes to her mouth, thus smothering the despairing cry that sprang to her lips:

"I cannot do it—oh! I cannot kill him, in her arms!"

Even these words did not arouse the sleepers. The voices of the storm had been so tumultuous that lesser noises went for nothing. Nor was the unhappy girl herself conscious that the room was rapidly filling with moist air from a window.

Through this sash, cautiously opened, Lydia was about to leap, when a hand was laid on her shoulder, and a woman sprang by her into the bridal chamber.

Going softly up to Bertha, where she was kneeling, this woman raised her gently from the floor.

"Come with me, Bertha; come with me."

Bertha arose obediently, and came out from the cloud of lace, with both hands to her temples, looking weak and helpless.

"I could not do it! I could not do it!" she muttered, looking ruefully back at her enemies. "I was not strong enough."

"No, no! Do not think of it again, Bertha."

Lydia was in the room now. She knew the house well, and opening a door stood sentinel while Bertha was led through. Then she closed the latch, and followed those shadowy forms down-stairs, and out into the stormy night.

Bertha allowed herself to be conducted down to the water's edge. Indeed, she had no power. The terrible excitement that had kept her up so long gave way, when that poniard dropped from her hand. Now she had but one wish—to lie down, in some safe, warm place, and rest.

She was helped into the boat, with some difficulty, and slid down from her seat to the bottom, where she lay huddled in her cloak, shivering—almost dead.

Then Lydia stepped back under the willows, and fell upon her knees in the wet grass, with both hands fastened on the dripping garments of the dark figure that had come to her aid.

"Oh, Miss Clara—Miss Clara! Is it your ghost, or where did you come from if it isn't?"

"Hush, Lydia; hush, or we shall drive her wild. Here is my hand; you will see that it is warm."

Lydia seized the wet hand between both hers, and kissed it with passionate fondness.

"Oh, Miss Clara, is it you? or have I been a dreaming it, storm and all? What could have brought you here just in time?"

"I saw you from the yacht; saw your mistress, and her face frightened me, so I followed your boat."

"Yes, yes: I did see you leaning over. I did see you, but you looked like a ghost. So did the ship."

"Hark, Lydia! That is a moan coming from the

boat. Where can we take your mistress? She will die here."

Lydia started to her feet.

"Come down to the boat," she whispered. "It will be with the stream now, and we can soon get home."

Clara Anderson went down the bank, and gave some orders to a couple of men who sat waiting in a yawl, under the willows. Then she stepped into the little boat, lifted Bertha's head to her lap, and the yawl swept out into the river towing the smaller craft with it.

The storm abated before they reached the island, and a pale moon drifted in and out of the broken clouds, but Bertha took no heed of that, or anything else. She was neither asleep nor awake—only very, very desolate.

Unmindful alike of the friend that held her so tenderly, or the men who lifted her from the boat, she walked feebly up to the house, and entered her own room as if waking out of some dream too awful for comprehension.

Once under shelter, Lydia became wonderfully active. She found wood, and kindled a bright fire in Bertha's room; took the wet garments from her trembling limbs, heaped warm blankets upon the bed, and then heated wine, with spices, which she forced those quivering lips to drink. Then the girl thought of herself, threw off her own wet clothes, drank what was left of the wine, and laid herself down on a couch to sleep, muttering softly:

"Mistress—my poor, dear old mistress! Haven't I done my best? Oh, if you could answer one word, and just say, 'Lydia, I did well to trust you!'"

"Lydia," said a weak voice from Bertha's bed some time in the night, "Lydia, I have had such restless dreams. In one of them I have seen Clara Anderson."

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE DUEL.

MRS. WILSON FORBES had faith in Bertha, and went home comforted; but when she saw her brother so grave and calm, preparing for an event which might separate them forever, her courage gave way, and she grew wild with terror. How foolish she had been to depend upon a young girl like that, when her brother's life was in peril! Better far have gone over to Willow Bend. Waldon's bride might have been terrified into warning some magistrate, and having the whole party taken in charge. But Bertha—after all, what could the poor girl do?

"To-morrow morning I will take this other step. Without giving him mortal offence, I cannot carry warning myself. Oh dear, I wish that handsome creature had never come within a thousand miles of us. Poor thing! Poor darling! Brave girl! I have no right to say that, and I haven't said it in my heart; but this is terrible."

Such struggles and thoughts kept the poor lady restless all that night. She knew that her brother was up writing, in calm, stern quiet, as befitted a brave man forced into an unjust quarrel. More than once in the night she crept down, and, kneeling at his feet, besought him to find out some way by which both his honor and his life might be spared.

He received her with kindness, but smiled a little sadly when she spoke of avoiding the issue which Waldon had forced upon him with rude haste, when made

certain that neither persuasion nor craft could swerve him from the ground he had taken.

"You do not understand this question," he said, smoothing her hair gently with his hand. "There is some deeper wrong than we have yet learned. It may be that to-morrow will set all right."

"Oh, if I thought so!—if I only could! But he is an awful shot!"

"Well, Alice, we must take our chances, and hope for the best. One thing I have to say. If—if anything should happen—"

"Oh, Egbert! Egbert! do not speak of that! You break my heart!"

"Well, dear, I only meant to say that I have written one letter which you must take charge of and deliver yourself."

"Give it to me. If it is for her, I will see that it is sent, though she has been the cause of all this trouble."

"Hush, Alice! She is in no sense to blame. Now let me tell you—for we must not part, my sister, without perfect confidence—I loved Bertha Canfield dearly, and love her yet. Death, in her behalf, will be far less bitter to me, than the knowledge that she might possibly become that man's wife. When that union threatened her, I was indeed miserable, for he is a specious, brilliant, bad man."

"As if I did not know that! Egbert, I wish to tell you everything now. There was a time when I was blind, like Bertha—fascinated, carried out of my senses by Russell Waldon."

"You, Alice?"

"It is the truth. You will not despise me, Egbert,

though I shall always despise myself; but his own selfishness saved me, as it has saved Bertha. I told him, with honorable frankness, how little property might be given me, and after that, he permitted our acquaintance to die a natural death, keeping my poor, silly letters to terrify me with long after I married Mr. Forbes. But I told my husband at last, and he made that splendid wretch give them up."

"Oh, how I detest him, Alice!" said Fletcher, grasping his sister's hand. "I would far rather give my life than take that of a fellow-creature; but this man has no right to forbearance."

"No, no, Egbert; have no such generous thoughts. He will wring his young wife's heart as he has tortured others. To meet him with a purpose of mercy is to sacrifice your own life. That you must defend bravely for my sake, and—and because I think that there is great happiness for you in the future."

"What do you mean, Alice?"

"No matter now, dear. I have my own little secret, which you shall know, if I can get leave to tell it you, after this awful danger is over; but now I am without permission, and you must think how to protect yourself, and of nothing else."

"Then you must leave me, dear."

Mrs. Forbes took her arms from her brother's knees, where they had been affectionately resting, and wound them around his neck as she lifted her quivering lips to be kissed, perhaps for the last time.

"Oh, Egbert, tell me when and where it is to be?"

"That you may save me from danger by betraying me to suspicion? No, no, Alice; I read your face too well. You shall not be so tempted."

A flood of burning scarlet rushed over the lady's face. She bowed her head to his knees again, and burst into a fit of hysterical tears.

"I know it; but you think too well of me, Egbert. I should have been base enough to have frightened that white goose over yonder into doing it for me."

Fletcher smiled, in spite of the heavy thoughts that possessed him, and lifting that shamed face between both his hands, kissed it tenderly.

"Now go, Alice, and remember what I have told you about the letter."

"I will remember; but, perhaps—"

"Perhaps what, dear?"

"Nothing. Only—oh, Egbert, tell me something more?"

"For your own sake, no."

"Then we may be parting forever!" said the poor lady, turning white, and questioning Fletcher with her wistful eyes.

"No, sister; it will not be forever. Now go to your room."

"And you?"

"I am going to mine; so good-night, once more."

"Good-night, Egbert."

It was scarcely more than daylight in the morning when Mrs. Forbes left a pillow where her sleep had been brief and broken. Some noise below had aroused her. She ran to the window, and saw two men driving rapidly from the house. One was her brother.

"Oh, he is gone—he is gone!" she cried, dropping on her knees; "and I have seen him for the last time!"

CHAPTER LXXXII.

USELESS STRUGGLES.

EARLY in the morning, Mrs. Forbes rode furiously down to the banks of the river opposite Diamond Island. She found no boat on the shore, and looked wildly up and down for some means of crossing. She saw nothing but a yacht that had drifted from its mooring, and lay anchored near the island. She flung up her hand in hopes that a boat might come to her from that quarter; but every minute seemed an hour to her then, and in her desperate haste she plunged her horse into the stream, knowing well that it was at the risk of her life. The brave beast took to the water gallantly; but was soon lifted from his feet, and given to the mercy of the current, which ran deep and strong against him. Borne down by the lady's weight, and disturbed by the heavy drag of her skirts, the poor beast was losing all control of himself. His rider, wild with fear, shrieked for help, in a voice of terror that rang from shore to shore.

Out from the yacht a tiny boat flashed, cutting its way down the swift current with the speed of a bird in flight. The lady saw this, and the horse seemed to understand it with human intelligence, for he made no more effort than was needed to keep his head out of water. How the rescue was accomplished, Mrs. Forbes scarcely knew. She remembered a cry of encouragement, a slow gliding of the boat close to her horse, and a great rush of thanksgiving that she was safe, and lying prostrate, half buried in her own wet garments, at the feet of her preserver. She arose to her knees with a struggle to

sit up, and saw that the person who had saved her was a woman. Wild, thankful, overwhelmed, she looked into that face dumb with awe and unbelief.

"Clara! Clara Anderson!"

"Yes, Alice Forbes, it is I. Give no time to that, but tell me how it is that you have plunged to your death in this way?"

"I was wild—I was mad—but it was to save my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Not the one you think of. Not the poor fellow who is mourning you as dead—but Fletcher—my brother Fletcher, whom Waldon means to murder before the day is out. Oh, God save him! we are talking here while they—and any moment it may happen—give me the oars. I am strong now."

"No; which way?"

"The island—the island!"

Clara bent almost superhuman force on her oars, and landed at the mouth of the little inlet just as the horse staggered up the bank, and went thundering over the log-bridge across the island.

"Out yonder, if you would help me," said Mrs. Forbes, pointing down to the picnic grounds. "If you reach them first, stop this bloodshed. I cannot say how, but do it."

Clara Anderson turned at once, and walked swiftly in the direction thus impetuously pointed out.

Mrs. Forbes gathered up her skirts with both arms, and hurried up to the house.

Without heeding old Celia, who peeped through the window with every hair on her head in wild commotion, she opened the door and went directly up-stairs.

Bertha was asleep; utter exhaustion had done its work upon her, and she lay like a dead creature, scarcely breathing. Lydia, too, was curled up on the couch, with a blanket over her head, plunged in slumber so profound that no ordinary noise could arouse her.

Mrs. Forbes dragged her wet skirts across the room, and took Bertha by both shoulders, in a fury of impatience.

"What! sleeping here? Do you know that the sun is up—that he might be dying for your sake this minute? God forgive you, girl! Get up! get up!"

Bertha started wildly from her bed, and encountered that white, eager face, and a panic seized upon her.

"He has gone! They took him off this morning! Tell me what you have done toward saving his life?"

Bertha looked upon the distracted woman wildly for a moment, then fell down, with her face upon the pillow, crying out:

"I could not do it—I could not do it!"

"Then get up and do something now! I have found out, no matter in what way, that they are coming over here—to this very island. Thank God, I got here first! There was no sign of them. Dress yourself, Bertha, dear. Bertha, I don't mean to be harsh, but it is a human life. Don't you understand? My brother Egbert, I love him so! If he dies, Bertha—by that man's hand, too—Wilson Forbes will be a widower in less than two months."

Bertha understood it all. Two men, who had loved her, were to fight on that island, and one would be killed.

"Oh, God!" she cried out, in the depths of her soul, "not that one!—not the man who has twice saved me!"

Thus the girl prayed, while she put on her garments, one by one.

Mrs. Forbes stood by the window, looking out for a sign of human disturbance, her eyes burning with terrible dread, her lips parted with intense anxiety.

"They have not come. We shall be in time. You and I will throw ourselves between them—front their weapons with our bosoms. Let Waldon's bullet lodge there! You and I know how he can wound, and we have learned to bear it. Oh, I wonder from which direction they will come! Hyde's is above here—our house below. Who will come first? Egbert, I will be sworn! He is the only brave one of the lot. Where is that girl? She might watch in one direction, while I keep sight of the bank on this side."

Lydia, by this time, was stirring under her blanket. Mrs. Forbes saw that some one was on the couch, and running to it, shook the girl thoroughly awake.

"Get up, child, and dress yourself, quick!—no matter about your hair, let it fly loose—put on anything, and run down to the bridge! Here is a red scarf, fling it up if you see strangers on the other island! There, there, let me button your dress! I can't, I can't, my hands shake so—do it yourself! But, oh, for mercy's sake, be in haste!"

Lydia lost no time; she understood the situation at once, and hurried on her clothes with wonderful rapidity. Then, with her dress but half-buttoned, and barefooted, she tossed the hair back from her face, seized the red scarf, and ran toward the bridge.

Mrs. Forbes went back to the window, drawing a deep breath. Bertha was striving to dress herself, like one in a dream, where garments disappear or are deficient. Her

wet clothes lay in a heap on the floor; she was compelled to look for others, and that took time, agitated as she was. This delay almost drove her friend mad.

"Come! come at once!" she cried out. "Don't look for a hat! They will land at the other island, or where the ground is cleared for picnics. We will be in wait for them to come in sight, Bertha. Come!"

The impatience of these crowded utterances shook every nerve in Bertha's body with the force of a shock. Her limbs were powerless. The hair she strove to gather up broke loose from her trembling hands.

Mrs. Forbes saw this, and came to her aid. In absolute desperation she twisted that mass of hair in a coil, and forced garment upon garment—exclaiming at last:

"That is enough! Come, I say!"

That instant a shout reached them from the bridge, where Lydia was shaking her red scarf with frantic violence. They had reached the door, and darted through it, like mother birds answering the cry of their young. In less than two minutes they were on the bridge, but as their feet touched the logs, a sharp report, followed in the same breath by another, that seemed to cut both hearts in twain, rang through the island.

Down upon the logs these pallid women sunk, looking wildly at each other. They dared not turn one glance toward that green spot, from which the smoke was curling upward in two places, and where a man lay stretched upon the grass, with his face to the sky, and drops of blood trickling down from his breast.

Lydia flung away her scarf, and went slowly forward, with a bitter wish in her heart that the upturned face might be one she had such good cause for hating.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

UPON THE DUELLING GROUND.

FACE to face upon the velvet turf where that party had danced only a short time before, Waldon and Fletcher stood ready for a fight of life or death.

The ground had been measured. A doctor was in waiting. One of the seconds held a white handkerchief in his hand. It dropped. That instant a female figure darted up from the spring, and laid her hand on Waldon's left arm.

"Stop!" she said. "Stop! I charge you!"

Waldon did not lift his eyes from the pistol; but while she grasped his left arm, fired with cool deliberation. A man fell. He took no heed of that, but turned his white face upon Clara Anderson, whom he had believed dead, and a gleam of sarcastic light shone in his eyes.

"Ah! Miss Anderson, I am at your service now, but really you almost made me miss my aim."

"I meant to save your soul from a murder!" she said, dropping her hand from his arm. "It is too late for that—for your victim there may be some hope."

The girl left Waldon with a sneer on his lips, and walked toward the man who had fallen. Gathered around stood two or three persons, who regarded the man in dead silence, while one knelt down and tore back the garments from his bosom.

"Is it dangerous? Is it fatal?" whispered some person in the party, while the rest looked the question he alone had power to ask.

The doctor shook his head.

"There was formerly a house on the island," said the doctor; "if it stands yet, we had better carry him there."

"Up yonder, across the bridge—you will find a bed made up," answered a female voice.

The doctor looked up in surprise. It was Lydia who spoke. The girl seemed capable of commanding an army.

Several persons present had seen the girl before; but, with her hair floating free, without shoes or stockings, and but half clad, they did not recognize her. Beside this, excitement had turned her eyes black, for the time, and all the quaint humor had left her face. To them she was only a barefooted girl, frightened by the firing, who had pointed out a shelter for the man whose life was so near spent that a removal to his home would be certain death.

"How shall we carry him?" inquired the doctor, looking around.

"On this," said Lydia, dragging a wide board from under a tree, where it had answered for a table. "I will run for a pillow. Bring him to the house. Only, one thing"—here she pointed her finger at Waldon—"that man mustn't come with him. We don't want any murderers there, and won't have 'em!"

With this Lydia darted away toward the bridge.

"Tell us! tell us!" cried the two death-white figures cowering there, as Lydia came toward them. "Which is it?"

"The one you would rather die than see as he is. The devil has taken care of his own!"

"My poor brother!"

"Now hush up, marm! This isn't the place for wringing of hands or moaning. If his life can be saved, we have got to save it, and tears won't be of any use in doing it. They're going to bring him up to the house; I am going after a pillow. You and Miss Bertha will have a bed fixed by the time we get there."

"He breathes! Then he is not dead!" cried Bertha, flinging her arms around the stricken woman by her side. "Oh, take comfort! If there is life, we will save it! Lydia is right; let us make haste to the house and get things ready."

"Old pieces of linen; plenty of water; brandy—these are the things he spoke of," said Lydia, darting away. "Ask Aunt Celia."

"Oh, if I could but make sure that he still lives!" cried the wretched sister; "that would give me strength!"

"Go, then, and I will make ready for him!"

Bertha arose as she spoke, and went toward the house. Mrs. Forbes left the bridge also, shaking like a leaf, and faint with apprehension. She wandered toward the group of men, who seemed a great way off to her dizzy brain, and after toiling forward—it appeared to her hours and hours—she fell on her knees by her brother, and finding him senseless, lifted her face to that of Russell Waldon, and would have cursed him if her white lips had found power to syllable the words.

Directly Lydia came back with an umbrella and a pillow. The poor girl forgot nothing.

"The bed will be fixed. Lift him softly, and carry him along careful, while I hold the umbrella over his head, and she—poor, dear soul!—keeps his head from falling down."

Lydia gave these directions with a prompt energy that made the doctor smile.

Waldon, whose friend shrank away from that ghostly presence, came forward, and offered to lift the wounded man, but Lydia opened her umbrella with a sudden flare, and ordered him back with it, as she would have driven a wild animal from her path.

"Don't you dare to touch him!" she said, fiercely.

Waldon grew angry, and attempted to put the girl aside with a disdainful sweep of his white hand; but she shut her umbrella with a jerk, and drawing close to him, whispered:

"This was more manly work than murdering a poor, helpless, blessed woman! But don't come near him! I won't stand it!"

Waldon started, and would have searched Lydia's features to assure himself if he had ever seen her before; but she opened her umbrella, swung it over her shoulders, and kept it as a barrier between her face and his, until young Fletcher was lifted from the ground. Then she carefully shaded that death-white face, and moved from the spot, leaving Waldon standing there alone.

Bertha had prepared her own chamber for the wounded man. A bed, pure and white, waited for him. Upon a table near by was laid everything that Lydia had spoken of as necessary for the doctor's use. She had torn her most choice and delicate handkerchiefs in strips, with fragments of lace clinging to them, that no substance which was not soft as down should touch his wound. She had uncorked her choicest cologne, and sprinkled the room with it. A flask of brandy stood on the table, and some of its ruddy liquid was poured into a glass, ready for instant use.

Old Celia stood by, in open-mouthed astonishment, while all this was done. Now and then she put in an active protest by seizing the broom, or snatching at the sheets which Bertha was spreading; but the girl put her gently away, and went on with her preparations. This man, who had for the third time perilled his life for her, should be cared for by no menial. If there was one breath left upon his lips, she would wear out her last strength in saving it. These men should not see her—no human being but those already in her secret should know that she was there. He would, perhaps, never be conscious of her voice or touch, but the sister who loved him so should in this give way to her.

Bertha looked through the window, and saw that mournful cavalcade coming across the log bridge. How white and still he lay! Was it a lifeless man they were bringing to the dainty whiteness of the bed she had made? They all looked ominously grave. Alice faltered in her walk, and sometimes bent her head drearily to kiss the limp hand which lay, so cold and still, between hers.

The doctor stopped on the bridge to feel the wounded man's pulse. It was scarcely perceptible; and when the sister's great, wild eyes questioned him, he gave her a desponding shake of the head, which turned Bertha faint. Poor, poor girl! She staggered off into another room, and fell upon her knees, praying God, with passionate vehemence, to spare that one precious life, and permit her to make some atonement for the sorrow she had brought into it.

Now she lifted her head and held her breath. They were carrying him up-stairs in dumb silence. How heavily their steps sounded! Some one spoke: they

were inside the chamber, but the voice was low and muffled. Then came a long, wailing cry. Great Heavens! was he dead? Had her anguish of prayer won only that?

While she was on her knees a hand was gently laid upon her shoulder, and a face troubled like her own bent over her.

"Bertha, do not despair. He is not dead, and I think he will not die."

Bertha looked up. She had thought Clara Anderson dead; but it seemed the most natural thing in the world that she should be there, in her great need, with words of hope on her lips.

"Oh, Clara!" she said, with piteous gratitude, "have you come from Heaven to comfort me?"

"I have come out of such affliction as you are suffering, Bertha. Heaven lies beyond that."

Then Bertha began to realize that some great blessing, that was not a miracle, had brought her friend back into her life—when it was most dreary—and reaching up her arms, she fell upon her bosom, and in that close embrace found the relief of tears.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

WATER LILIES.

TRULY Russell Waldon was a good shot. His bullet had gone so close to that brave, true heart that the variation of the smallest portion of an inch would have cleft it. After that it had been so near the

spine that death might have come in that direction. It was a long time before the murderous bit of lead could be found, and the pain of its extraction was terrible to bear. Even then the doctor hardly ventured to give a breath of hope—the exhaustion was so complete; but, if no fever set in, recovery was just possible.

Fever *did* set in, and with it delirium, during which the sick man's voice grew sharp, and his cheeks hot with an ever-burning flame.

Those devoted women watched him day and night, relieving each other at intervals, thus keeping up the strength so much needed by efficient nurses. It was well known that Mrs. Forbes was with her brother; but the old negroes kept Bertha's secret well, and no one else even guessed that she was in that sick-room, or of Clara Anderson's presence there—not even the doctor, who wondered a little at the almost superhuman endurance for which he gave Mrs. Forbes credit.

In her sweet ministration, Bertha almost forgot the terrible wrong that had driven her mother into the grave, only to fall upon herself with double bitterness. The fearful excitement through which she had passed seemed incapable of reaching her in the sanctuary of that sick-room. On that little island she was so completely cut off from the whole world that every thought and pulse of her life could be devoted to the man who had suffered so much for her. She scarcely thought of Waldon; or, if she did, it was with such sick loathing that her whole nature recoiled from receiving him into her mind.

One piece of news did come to her through the doctor. Waldon and his wife had left Willow Bend. Mr. Noel, who had been slowly recovering since the marriage, had been persuaded to try a sea-voyage, and the newly-

wedded couple went with him to New York, from whence they would visit Saratoga for a short time. Bertha heard this with a sense of relief which she had not experienced since her mother's death. It was a respite—almost oblivion—the terrible idea that haunted her grew less cruelly real.

In those hours of affliction these three young women became more than friends. From one evil source they had all imbibed poison, and came forth in new strength, and with grander purposes of life. They spoke little of the man Waldon, and turned from his name with shuddering; but even his sins had made a bond of union among them, which would never be broken again.

When Bertha questioned Clara of her disappearance from the old house in Connecticut, she told her story gently, and in few words. With fever in her brain, she had entered Ben's canoe, lured there by its gentler motion, and the coolness of the water. No oars were in the little craft, and in that, perhaps, lay her safety, for she might otherwise have attempted to use them in her delirium. As it was she drifted on and on, from river to river, until salt air from the sound swept over her, and the waves rocked her little craft till water sometimes dashed over her. She did not care for that. It cooled her fever and cleared her brain.

All at once her craft floated up against some vessel that lay anchored near the mouth of the Housatonic. She was seen from the deck, and taken in, not insensible but delirious.

The vessel was a pleasure yacht, that had been cruising along the New England coast, with its owner and his wife on board. These people were now going southward, and finding her unable to tell her name, or give any

account of herself, took her with them to their home in Richmond. On the voyage she told her little history, so far as was needful to gain their trust, and had since remained in the family as governess to the children.

"A place you will never hold again," said Mrs. Forbes. "Hereafter my home is yours."

Clara shook her head; but Alice Forbes was ardent in her friendships.

"You have forgiven me, Clara; but never on this earth shall I forgive myself. It will be cruel to refuse me a chance of atonement. My father, too—no man could regret his action more than he does. No man will be more rejoiced to know that you are alive."

Such conversations were frequent between these young persons during those days of anxiety.

Mrs. Forbes was no longer passionate in her grief. The solemn dread, which great danger to a beloved object is sure to bring, subdued her into gentle patience. She was no longer disposed to blame Bertha for anything, but clung to her with gentle commiseration, claiming and giving entire sympathy.

Sometimes, in his delirium, Fletcher called Bertha by name, and talked over that first terrible scene that they had enacted together on the old wooden bridge in New England. Then he would reproach some one for snatching her away from him after he had wrestled for her with such hard strife.

At such times, Mrs. Forbes would lift her eyes to the girl with such touching appeal that Bertha was forced to turn away her face. How could she answer that look with anything but means?

Up to this time, Fletcher had been so tortured with

pain, or tossed with delirium, that he was utterly unconscious of Bertha's presence in his room.

One day, when Fletcher had been quieter than usual, and had sunk into a soft slumber, Lydia came to the door with her apron full of water lilies, which she had just gathered while unfolding from their snowy night sleep.

This strange girl had taken, of late, to wandering alone on the island, without any apparent aim, or going off in the confiscated "Firefly," pillaging ponds and swamps of magnolias and water lilies, which she brought away in boat-loads, and often scattered on the water, while rowing home. A portion of her flowers she always brought to Bertha, knowing her passionate love of them, and how she must pine for their sweetness, shut up, as she was, in that dull room, tortured with anxiety.

The morning we speak of, she had been out early, and ferried old Sam over to the main shore in her boat. It was not often that the old man got a chance to say that his soul was his own, if he ever desired to claim that particular property, when his better half was within hearing; but now, with a broad space of deep water between him and the female darkey, he became eloquent.

"Dus yer know, Miss Lider, I'se drefful anxious 'bout dat gemman in dar? He's bou'n' for kingum cum, or dis darkey am awful mistook 'bout it."

"Oh, I hope not! Indeed, Sam, I think he's a little better. Last night he scarcely talked at all."

"'Pears like he's worn out—jes a goin' off—when dat am de case—"

"No; we must hope for something better than that. Good nursing is everything, and no one ever had better care than Mr. Fletcher."

"Bress de Lord, old Sam hopes so! for he am a gemman, ebbery inch on 'em; and de odder feller is noffin but old Marse Noel's son, by de holy law ob matrimonus. If Marse Fletcher had done gone and shot fair, it ed a been all day wid dat white Yorker."

"Why, didn't he shoot fair, Sam?"

"Dus you call em fair to hist your pistol in de air an' bang it off ober your own head? case that's jes what Marse Fletcher done."

"Did Mr. Fletcher do that?"

"Sartin sure! Dis darkey was peekin' out from under-side de bridge, an' see him a-doin' it. But dat York feller, he aimed sure; no 'stake 'bout dat."

"Did the men who were by know of this, Sam?"

"Dat am more 'en dis darkey kin say for sartin, but dey hab eyes."

"So he spared the man who shot him down like a dog—spared him when there was a chance of punishing him, as the law ought to, if laws are laws!" muttered Lydia, falling into thought. "Will he always get clear so?"

"He! he! he! Well, Miss Lider, dat white Yorker cotched it good when he got back to de Bend. De young missus went right off inter 'sterics, an' allowed dat she'd go tell ole marse; but, somehow, dey made up, an' went off ter York wid ole Marse Noel, afore he knew 'bout dat duel."

"When will they come back again, Sam?"

"Well, honey, white folks are mighty unsartin, but 'fore long—case Marse Noel guv out, afore he done gone, dat ebbery 'dential darkey on dat plantation should hab a barb'cue on de island, in confirmation ob de weddin', which none on 'em ebber got a sight on. Den, Miss

Lider, yer goin' to see jes what ole 'Ginny kin do. Roast pig, wild turkey, fiddlin', dancin'—an' oh, such a day! dis nigger can't tell you nuffin' 'bout it!"

By this time Sam was over the river, and Lydia set him on shore, and came back, after a short row among the lilies, bearing an apron full to the house.

Bertha took them gladly, not having had a full breath of the morning air, which had given its sweetness to the lilies, for more than a week.

"Miss Bertha, step out here a minute," whispered Lydia, showing her wealth of flowers, but drawing back into the passage.

Bertha closed the door softly, and stepped into the passage. Lydia had only seen her in the darkened room for days, and looked at her earnestly now. How large her eyes had grown! but the wild, hard look had disappeared. Indeed, there was a languid softness in the faint violet shadows beneath them, which Lydia had not seen there since the death of her mistress. The girl drew a deep breath, and her face brightened.

"I have brought some of these fresh from the pond," she said; "and then, Miss Bertha, I want to tell you something. Do you know why the young gentleman in there got his death?"

"I suppose so," answered Bertha, shuddering.

"No, you don't; nor did I till just now. He fired in the air. That—oh! I haven't words for him—aimed straight at his poor heart, and I believe hit it. Isn't that murder in the second degree?"

"Are you certain of this, Lydia?"

"Am I certain that these lilies are lilies? Sam saw them both fire. One lifted his pistol overhead and shot upward; the other took aim. Look in there for what he did."

Bertha smiled—the first natural smile Lydia had seen on her face since that awful night at the New England farm-house.

"I am glad you told me this, Lydia," she said, reaching out her arms for the lilies, "for I think God will spare a man so noble and good as this one is. Kiss me, Lydia! for you and I are friends now—close friends. Her death made us so. If I have not said this often and often before, it is because the subject was so painful that I shrank from it. My own girl—my good, good Lydia, there is not in the wide world a person that I trust so thoroughly, or to whom I feel such tender gratitude."

"Oh, Miss Bertha, stop there. Don't—don't. It sets me to thinking of her—of that night when I was all alone with her. It swells up my heart so. Please don't say another word."

Lydia gave up her flowers, and threw both arms around the neck of her young mistress, as it drooped toward her.

"Oh, Miss Bertha, I should love to die for you!"

With these words, Lydia darted down-stairs, leaving her flowers with Bertha, who entered the sick-room, holding them to her bosom, and stood, minute after minute, gazing on the pale, still features of the wounded man. Many a change came over her face, many a sweet and painful thought swept through her brain. At last she stooped over the pillow and kissed him as he slept.

Then his eyes opened.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

HIMSELF AGAIN.

BERTHA CANFIELD sunk to a chair by the sick man's bed, and dropped the lilies into her lap, utterly dismayed. For the first time in many a weary day her face was bathed in blushes, and her eyelids drooped to avoid the dreamy gaze fixed upon her. Was he conscious? Did he know what she had done?

"It is the scent of water lilies," he murmured softly, "and she was among them, walking in the midst of their whiteness. Dreams! dreams! long, weary dreams; but so real that they grow more and more like life. And the image! Oh, that seemed like her—beautiful, downcast, always avoiding me!"

Bertha heard this, and dared neither speak nor move, lest she should arouse these half dreams into perfect consciousness, and thus betray herself; but her heart beat loudly in its growing joy. The wildness of delirium had passed. There was method in his speech, pathos in the struggle of his mind to separate the actual from his vague imaginings.

All at once the sick man reached out his hand and touched Bertha's hair; then that white, feeble hand wandered down to the lilies, and was drawn back, trailing one of the blossoms with it.

"It seems real! it seems real! The golden spray trembles in its heart; the light strikes through the leaves. This long stem is what grows under the water, like a snake with a flower in its mouth. There, now! that idea came out of my old, bad dreams, when I could

not see her—only when *he* was looking over her shoulder. Stop now! Let me count the leaves; let me twist the stem around my fingers; let me drink in its breath. Oh, it is real, and I have seen her!”

Fletcher dropped the flower, closed his eyes suddenly, and great tears came welling through their lashes, falling one by one to the pillow.

“Mr. Fletcher—Egbert!”

“That’s her voice—that’s her voice!” whispered the sick man, holding his breath, afraid to open his eyes lest it should prove one of his old, wild dreams.

“Egbert, do you know me?”

A beautiful smile illuminated that pale face; those large, humid eyes were turned upon Bertha.

“Yes, I know you. Why not? How long is it since I have loved you, Bertha?”

“So long that one poor life will hardly repay it,” answered the girl, in a low voice, fearing to excite him by hope or denial.

“What does that mean?”

The smile died out from his face, and a slow frown gathered there.

“Oh, yes, I am sick and very feeble; so you treat me like a child that must be refused nothing. I do not like that.”

“No, I treat you as a good, brave man, who has almost died for my poor sake.”

“Bertha!”

“There! there! Be tranquil or I must go away.”

“Let me look in your face.”

Bertha half arose, and her eyes, full of tender gratitude, looked into his. Again that radiant smile beamed upon her, and his lips broke into a soft, child-like laugh.

“Bertha, I dreamed that you kissed me.”

“So I did; and—and I will kiss you again, if you only promise to fall asleep, and let me put all these lilies in water.”

The girl stooped forward and pressed her lips lightly to his, then sealed both his eyelids with touches soft as the fall of rose leaves, whispering:

“Sleep now, for I love you! Sleep well!”

The sick man was so weary that he did sleep well; but that brightness never left his face, while now and then a soft, deep sigh would escape the parted lips, leaving smiles upon them.

Bertha sat watching him a long time, quiet and thoughtful, wondering that so much power of happiness was left for her to give—so much for her to feel. By-and-by she stole out of the room to put her flowers in water—a sweet, dreamy task, which harmonized with her gentle mood.

While she was at this pleasant work, Mrs. Forbes came in, from the long morning sleep that followed her night watch, and huddled up in her sweeping white robe, sunk to a chair, and rested both arms on the table where Bertha’s vase stood.

“Ah, Bertha, this is sad, weary work!” she said, irritated a little by the girl’s tranquil employment. “I sometimes think he never will get well, or know any of us again. How has he rested since I left?”

“Better than usual, Alice. He is sound asleep now.”

“But he had a restless night, Bertha. Once or twice I thought he was coming to a little, for he kept asking for you, as usual; and when I attempted to soothe him by saying, ‘Bertha is here,’ he called me fairly by my own name, and might have been angry, if he could have found strength, poor fellow!”

"Then he must have known you, at least for the moment," said Bertha.

"But only to quarrel with me for not being you. Bertha, it does seem a little hard to see one's brother wasting his last strength on a girl whom no generosity or tenderness can move. Now, I leave it to yourself. If he were dying, your name would be the last on his lips; yet no sister ever was more devoted than I have been."

Bertha's eyes filled with tears, for she had begun to cry again, like other tender-hearted women, and these reproaches touched her deeply.

"You cannot blame me more than I blame myself," she said, with gentle humility. "If I could give my life for him—"

Alice interrupted her, sharply:

"I hate these high-flown ideas, Bertha! What does any human being want of another's life? A cup of cold water to a thirsty man is of more use, by far; besides, life is not our own, but God's. Egbert wants your love, not your life!"

Bertha arose, and lifting the vase of lilies, reached them out to the excited woman, with a strange smile.

"Take them in, softly, and see how your brother sleeps."

"Forgive me, Bertha; but I am so worn out—so utterly hopeless, this morning—and trouble comes so hard upon me! If I could only know that he recognized me again; but I never, never shall. You forgive me, dear girl?"

"Can you ask that of me?" said Bertha, gently opening the door of Fletcher's chamber, that his sister might pass through, bearing the lilies with her.

Bertha stood near the door, listening. She heard a

low murmur of voices; then Mrs. Forbes came out, radiant and empty-handed.

"He awoke—he knew me! Oh, Bertha, he called me Alice!"

"He called me Bertha, too—and I—I told him that I loved him!"

Then the two women fell into each other's arms, crying like children.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THAT LETTER AGAIN.

WEEKS went by. Egbert Fletcher gained strength every hour. The perfect stillness of the island, the bright, pure atmosphere, and, above all, the presence of those devoted women, made his convalescence a tranquil dream of Heaven. Bertha, the brilliant, beautiful Bertha, would have made herself his slave, and gloried in the title, had he permitted it. Alice was her own generous self again, and even Lydia came back to snatches of the quaint humor and rollicking mischief that had forsaken her at the period of that mournful death at the farm-house; Clara alone remained gravely sad.

"She'll marry him," Lydia would assert to herself, jerking her thumb toward the window of Fletcher's room, "and maybe never give that other rampageous scoundrel a thought. There's some one up there that will see about him, safe enough. He may marry rich girls, and flourish like—like a yellow pine tree on a hill; but, by-and-by, he'll be struck with lightning, root and

branch, you'll see! As for her, I wish she didn't know all that has nigh about killed me. It will always hang about her. I can see it now, when a girl ought to be happy as the day is long, pulling her down and covering her with blackness. She thinks I don't see it, but I do, I do! While that Judas Iscariot is within a thousand miles of her, she'll be breathing poison. Why didn't he go down to Norfolk and catch the yellow fever or cholera like a man!"

These thoughts haunted Lydia, who was young, poor thing, to be burdened with the dark secret that had been laid upon her. She had no confidant, but sometimes told her troubles to the winds and waters, when her boat was far from shore, and she could give the fears that possessed her free words. It was well that she had this small relief; for her mind was getting fearfully warped and dark; fatal ideas of duty were gathering about the secret which occupied her entire mind. The scene which she had witnessed in that bridal chamber haunted her. Her young mistress must never be so tempted again. Had she not promised in the presence of the dead mother, to stand between her and all temptation? If there must be retribution, Bertha should not take it.

These were awful thoughts to trouble a young creature like that; but they fed upon her brain day and night.

Bertha, too, had a heavy burden of thought. She had accepted the love of a man so feeble that a word of the truth which oppressed her might have taken his life. She loved him now with a still, solemn, intense passion, so at variance with anything known to her before that her mind could scarcely comprehend it. Rather than have brought one shade of disgrace, or one hour of absolute sorrow on that man, she would have died. From

him she would have no secret. That which her mother had felt bound to reveal to the bad man, at whose very name she shuddered, must be honestly told before she became the wife of Egbert Fletcher. Beyond this, her mother's secret should be locked up sacredly forever.

One day when Fletcher had regained so much strength that he talked of trying the open air a little, Bertha—who had been watching the craving avidity with which he looked out upon the world, while she sat at his feet with a volume of poems lying open on her lap—took that sudden courage which seizes upon a brave heart when some duty is to be performed, and spoke out:

"Egbert, I have something sad to tell you. Will you hear it now?"

Fletcher turned from the green trees and soft grass that he had been longing for, and saw that the girl at his feet was white as the dress she wore, and that her hands were clasped firmly, like one who meditates jumping off a precipice.

"Yes, now, Bertha; but it must be sad, indeed, to make you tremble so. If there is anything in your heart that I ought to know—if you have one lingering regret—"

"Oh, it is not that! it is not that!"

"Then there can be nothing that I shall shrink from."

Bertha took a letter from her bosom. The paper had been wet, the ink in some places had run together, but the writing had been pressed on the paper with a desperate force, which no water could wash out. She gave this letter to Fletcher, and leaning her head on one hand, waited in dead silence for him to read it.

The young man flushed and kindled with keen indignation as he read that mournful and most touching appeal to a man who had no mercy in his heart; but through it

all arose a glow of infinite tenderness for the young creature at his feet, and such compassion for the mother who was dead, as strong, merciful men have for women who have died in struggling to redeem a great fault.

When the letter was finished, he folded it reverently, and lifting Bertha's head from its drooping position, drew her up to the bosom pierced by the man who had so cruelly wounded her.

"My beloved! my darling! Did you think that I should love you less, or that I would not have sheltered this wronged lady? Look up, Bertha, my own, own wife!"

"And I could love that other man!"

This thought stung Bertha like the remembrance of a crime.

"One thing more, and you know all," she said, avoiding his lips until the last drops of her secret were told. "There was a time when I almost thirsted for that man's life—when I meant to take it in order to avenge my poor mother, and save you; but I was not strong enough. Being a woman I could not do it; I tried, but failed; but still I sometimes pant to strike him down as he struck her!"

"My poor darling, forget these thoughts—they belong to men!"

"But there was no man to defend her."

"At any rate there is one to defend you. Now, Bertha, that all your secrets are mine, will you refuse to kiss me?"

Bertha gave him her quivering lips to kiss, and went away to her room with a feeling of tender worship for that man, in a heart which had never fathomed its own depths of emotion before.

Fletcher was but mortal, with all his self-command, and that letter had stirred up the pride and honest rage that drives a man to avenge the honor of a beloved woman. He began to hate himself for the mercy which had spared that bad man from the peril of his most certain aim. Why had he refrained from shooting that magnificent villain on the spot? A single touch of his finger might have done it. That he magnanimously flung away this one chance of taking the man's life was a subject of stern self-reproach now. He was no duellist, but in the heat of his indignation reasoned thus: Wrongs that deserve the deepest punishment are such as no law can reach. Half the crimes for which men are imprisoned and executed deserve less condemnation than those inflicted on helpless women, who hide them, like vultures, in the hearts they are consuming rather than cry aloud for the redress that never comes.

Russell Waldon had just as surely driven that gentle, helpless and long-suffering woman to her death as if he had stabbed her to the heart with his own hand. Yet where was the law that could reach him? In her whole life she had done him nothing but good. With gentle humility, she had asked a little mercy at his hands—a little forbearance for her innocent child, whose future he had rudely grasped. The return was insult, desertion—in the end, death! Was there a penalty for all this in the law?

Beyond all this, Waldon, after murdering the woman, and, as he thought, burying the guilty secret in his conscience, to save his own miserable vanity had cast insidious slanders on the person whom he had once craved as his wife, and proudly proclaimed as his betrothed.

In his horror of the cruel thing that had been exposed

to him, Fletcher allowed thoughts like these to sway him into a state of burning rage against the man he had spared. If such thoughts were wrong, they sprang out of a generous nature, thrown into sudden tumult when his frame was weak, and his heart tender with the love of a woman.

A sharp pain in his chest reminded him at what cost this man had been spared to wrong other women, and carry his wicked powers more deeply into the social life such men poison.

"Oh, that I had known this!" cried Fletcher, walking the room in feverish excitement—for he could not forgive himself that a generous impulse had stayed his hand when Waldon was in his power. "His punishment would have been just, his doom well earned; but in my weakness I left two women unavenged, and thought myself acting right. Poor, poor Bertha! no wonder she was driven to attempt the life I was fool enough to spare! Oh, this pain! this pain!"

Fletcher flung himself on the bed, breathing hard, and feeling as if a girdle of iron were tightening around his chest.

As he lay, writhing in pain, a little hand was laid on his forehead, and a kindly voice inquired, with comforting lowness, if he would just lift up his head and take a drop or two of medicine.

It was Lydia, with a spoon in one hand, which she held steadily to his lips.

"There, now, take a good, long breath, and I'll sit by you still as a mouse. Miss B. is on her bed, having a sweet, soft cry all to herself. Mrs. Forbes is off to the mainland, on some sort of an errand, and Uncle Sam is off fishing; so you and I have got the house to ourselves,

and nothing but the flow of the river to disturb us; for Aunt Celia rests on her oars when Uncle Sam's gone, taking in wood, and getting up steam for a new explosion. Now, Mr. Fletcher, being all alone, haven't you anything to say to me?"

"What should I have to say, Lydia?" answered Egbert, smiling, in spite of his pain; "only to thank you for being so kind!"

"Oh, yes; that, of course. Every one thanks some one else for being kind; but that isn't just what I mean."

"Then, what *do* you mean, Lydia?"

"Mr. Fletcher, my old mistress loved me and trusted me. I knew all that Miss Bertha has been telling you, long and long before you did."

"How can you know what she has told me?"

"This way: she is up-stairs, crying softly, like a girl who is thankful to lie down. Ah, Mr. Fletcher, secrets like this are a load to carry. You are lying here, red in the face, bloodshot about the eyes, and throwing out your arms and feet like a deer with a bullet in him. She has given up her secret, and you've got it. I knew she would; but it weighs on you, don't it? You would give the whole world to lift it off of your bosom, but it lies there like a great stone."

"Lydia, you are a strange girl!" said Fletcher, losing all sense of his pain in astonishment.

"Yes," answered Lydia; "things make people strange. But I have this to say: Don't talk any more to Miss Bertha about this matter. Her great stone is rolled away. She has done her duty. The angel, in unlocking her heart, has let in ever so much sunshine. Don't shut it out again with dark looks, as if her burden had

settled too heavy on you. Keep that man's name from her ears. Make her forget him—forget him yourself, if you can. She will never let you fight another duel. When it comes to that, she won't break down a second time. Do you understand me, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Yes, Lydia; I think so."

"Then just snuggle down in that pillow and go to sleep. You want it bad enough, gracious knows; and, when the worst comes, trust me."

Fletcher obediently closed his eyes, for he wanted to think over what the strange girl had said.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

ANOTHER BLOW.

THAT night Fletcher was worse. High fever came on again, and the anguish of his wounds, both in soul and body, kept him restless.

Old Sam came to him, rather late in the morning, with a letter or two and some papers which he had brought from the post-office. In the parcel was a New York journal, directed in a strange hand, with more than usual care.

Fletcher tore off the wrapper, indolently wondering what person could be sufficiently interested in him to send this one isolated number of a journal he could not remember having seen before. A couple of pen dashes drew his attention to one article. It was a poem, headed "To One Who Will Understand Me," and signed Russell Waldon.

The very name of this man sent the hot blood to Fletcher's face. He began to read the poem, his eyes darting from line to line in sharp haste at first; then he re-perused it more steadily. It was Bertha's story, with that of her dead mother, written in such burning verse as genius alone can give to human sorrow. A flimsy veil of mysticism was thrown over it all, craftily calculated to stimulate curiosity, and the writer clothed himself in generous romance, like a Bayard, whom fate had entangled in a web of deception from which nothing but the nobility of genius and most sensitive honor could have redeemed him.

"I will follow him to the ends of the earth for this! I will have his base life! That man and I cannot live in the same universe together!" cried Fletcher, when the poem had burned itself into his brain. "To let such men prowl unchecked through the world is a wrong to humanity!"

The young man forgot his wounds and everything else but the cruel outrage of that last insult to the woman he loved.

He sprang up from his seat with the energy of a strong man, and trod the floor to and fro in such feverish wrath that Lydia had been standing with the door half open since his first bitter outbreak, and he knew nothing of her presence.

"His life! Oh, that will not be enough! I could tear the craven limb from limb! Bertha—my pure, beautiful Bertha—what has she done that her proud heart should be so tortured? She shall never know of this. It would wound her to death, and she is so happy now! I was so happy only an hour since! But she shall be spared!"

As he spoke, Fletcher wrenched the paper in pieces, and flung the fragments through the open window; then he turned, and saw Lydia standing in the door, as if she had just opened it.

"Mr. Fletcher, Miss Bertha wants to know if you are ready to see company? Mr. Forbes has come from New York, and your own brother too."

"Wait a few minutes, Lydia. Yes—yes! tell Edward—tell Forbes to come up; and Lydia, my good girl, I have just thrown a torn paper out of the window. Go down at once, pick up the pieces, and burn them in the kitchen fire. We must not litter Aunt Celia's grass plot, you know. I think you had better do that first of anything; then send the gentlemen here."

"I'll attend to it," said Lydia, disappearing.

She found the paper, put it in her pocket, and went in search of Mr. Forbes and young Lane, who were walking along the banks of the inlet with Alice, whose happy voice was heard now and then swelling into mellow laughter.

"We will take Bertha and her queer little maid home with us," she said; "then Egbert will follow; and some one will have tremendous wedding expenses to bear. All the city shall ring with the marriage; for if Alice Forbes and Bertha Fletcher (that is to be) cannot put down that pink-and-white doll, with ten Waldons to back her, never own us as clever women again. Here comes Lydia. Well, kitsey-witsey, is my brother ready to see us?"

"Mr. Fletcher wants the gentlemen to come up; but I don't think he mentioned any one else," answered Lydia.

"Very well. Then I will give Aunt Celia directions about the dinner."

"It is a great bother for her, poor old soul! But the doctor will be here to-day, and unless he forbids it, we can all break up camp and go back to the plantation."

By this time Forbes and his wife had reached the house, when she gave up his arm, and went to her consultation in the kitchen.

Mr. Forbes and young Lane mounted the stairs, and found Fletcher pacing his room like a caged lion.

"Forbes—Edward, I am glad you have come! Never were friends so wanted! My hand burns, does it? No wonder. Something has just set every drop of blood in my veins on fire!"

"I can guess what it is," said Forbes, gravely. "Some one was good enough to send me a copy before I left New York."

"Then you can understand what I wish. We have both an account with that man."

"I have already paid him with contempt," said Forbes.

"But that was different. I, too, was unwilling to take his life for what appeared to me only the language of a bravo in his cups; but now, when I have searched that black heart to its depths, it would be either superhuman mercy, or meanness too vile for manhood, were he to escape. If you would not have me shoot him down like a dog, stand by me in this, my brother."

Forbes reached forth his hand, taking that of Fletcher with a firm clasp.

"Not a word to the women, Edward."

"I think you can trust me," said the young man. "But you are not strong enough yet. Your hand quivers like a reed."

"I shall grow strong; till then you must wait for me."

"We came to stay till you were quite well. Edward has graduated with honors. Alice proposes to take Miss Canfield home with her as a lure to get you out of Virginia. I think she is afraid to leave you in the neighborhood of that man, who is coming down here soon."

"Is he? When?"

"Before you will have strength enough to challenge him, I fear."

"I think the very sight of him would make a giant of me," said Fletcher, with a stern smile. "What could have tempted him to run this risk? Does he expect me to shoot in the air a second time?"

"I think he was rather driven to it," said Forbes. "His engagement with the young lady had been so public, he had triumphed in it so openly, that society would only believe that she had rejected him at the last hour. This idea cast a certain amount of ridicule on his marriage with a person totally unknown in the dilettante circles where he wished her to shine. His vanity, no doubt, led him into this infamous act, as it urged him on to that speech at Noel's dinner table."

"And for that I gave him his base life!" cried Fletcher, grinding his teeth.

"He had a cool reception among his old friends," said Lane, "for the papers had been busy with this duel, in which he was made to appear the craven he really is, and besides, the bride was savagely criticised. It is always a remarkably severe test of any man's popularity when he attempts to introduce a strange wife in a set to which his own individual genius has been the principal recommendation. Bertha was bright, beautiful, gifted, already a favorite in those circles where Waldon introduced his bride. What had become of that splendid

young creature? Had she been put aside for that delicate thing of pink and white? Or had she, after discovering Waldon's faults, chosen to cast him off? These were questions which met the literary autocrat at every turn. He saw that his influence was in danger; that the appendage of a pretty, self-sufficient, and utterly unintellectual wife would be a sufficient drag upon him, where her wealth was of no account whatever, without the odium of this broken engagement. In order to defend himself and still retain his social pedestal, he wrote the poem which some one who hates him forwarded to you and me."

"At any rate he has made his infamous venture, and it will be my fault if he does not pay the penalty," said Fletcher. "But here comes the doctor and Alice."

"Who has besieged him already about taking you home, I hear. Well, it would be pleasanter in the roomy old house, though I think you very fortunate as it is."

"Well," said the doctor, in answer to Mrs. Forbes, who had intercepted him on the stairs, "I am not sure that we can keep him here with any comfort after this week. The young couple are coming home to Willow Bend directly, and there is to be a grand barbecue on the island here, in celebration of the wedding. This island has been the resort of picnics, barbecues, and impromptu camp-meetings so long, that we have almost forgotten it is your brother's property, Mrs. Forbes."

"It might have been quite as delicate if the family up yonder had remembered it," said the lady, frowning a little.

"I thought of that," rejoined the doctor; "but here is my patient. After I have seen him, we shall be able to decide on something."

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE TORN NEWSPAPER.

CLARA ANDERSON had resolved to return to her friends at Richmond as soon as Egbert Fletcher could be removed from the island. Bertha was safe under the protection of Mrs. Forbes, and, in her new-born happiness, had no need of her. In fact, it seemed as if she really had no place in the world. The past had, to her, been full of bitterness; the present offered nothing but a hopeless monotony, without love and devoid of interest. Like Bertha, she felt only dull, cold loathing for the man who had, in sheer vanity, taken the first bloom from her heart. If this was mingled with some degree of self-contempt, it only proved that her cure was complete.

Sometimes she thought of Edward Lane, of his chivalrous devotion, the manliness with which he had turned from that downward path and exerted the energies of a noble character. She remembered that day of bitter misery when he had come, in the very depths of her humiliation, and offered to sacrifice everything—brave everything for her sake. Now, when her brain was clear from fever, and her heart was free to feel, these memories came back upon her with tender force.

But all was over now. The man she had loved as a god had sunk beneath her scorn. The man who loved her had, doubtless, shaken off his passion, and, in doing this, redeemed himself before the world.

Yes, Bertha was happy in the chivalrous and most faithful love of a brave, good man. Alice Forbes had

no need of help from any one. What, then, should detain her at the island? These thoughts had oppressed Clara that morning with unusual persistence. There was no need of her in the house, and a short time before the appearance of Mrs. Forbes and Edward Lane, she had gone down into a remote part of the second island to indulge in thoughts that might cast a shadow over the happiness of her friends.

While Clara was lingering around the spring, listening dreamily to the soft whispers of its waves among the grass, she saw Lydia coming across the bridge with something grasped tightly in her hand. There was a keen look in the girl's face, a nervous spring in her walk, that drew Clara's attention.

The girl came down to the clump of trees that had sheltered the tent that day of the picnic, and, seating herself at the foot of an old forest oak, unfolded a mutilated paper on her lap, and carefully laid the torn edges together.

Then she seemed to read diligently.

It was indeed Lydia reading that poem in which Waldon had written his greatest infamy, from end to end.

Clara could see her face grow hard and stern, like that of an old woman, as she laid it down in her lap and pondered over it.

What the girl thought, during the half-hour that she sat on the earth, so silent and immovable, no human being ever knew; but, after a time, she folded the paper carefully, and put it in her pocket again.

There was something so strange in this proceeding that Clara left the spring and was close to the girl before she became aware of her presence.

"What is it, Lydia?" she said. "Something in that paper troubles you; may I look at it?"

Lydia clapped her hand against her pocket, and shot a volley of defiant glances up at the intruder's face.

"If it is anything that interests our friends up yonder you can safely trust it with me," said Clara.

"No, I can't—no, I won't. 'Burn it,' he said, and burn it is. Only this, Miss Clara, don't you think of going back to Richmond just yet. You'll be wanted here, I tell you; so don't go!"

"How came you to think I intended going, Lydia?"

"As if I didn't know! What's the use of eyes, Miss Clara—double shooters, too—if one don't see? Of course you meant to go; but it's of no use; you'd have to come back again, sure. Now just go on and take your walk out, for I'm a going."

On her way to the house, Lydia met the doctor, and spoke to him, as she had frequently done when Fletcher's illness made her anxious about his life.

"Doctor," she said, "can't you tell by a person's face when anything's the matter with them?"

"Sometimes, Lydia; and just now I should say that your face is not quite natural—something about the eyes."

"Oh, that's nothing, doctor! I always was a cross-eyed little witch, looking two ways for Sunday. It is worse than that. I believe there's some trouble here about my heart."

Lydia laid one hand on the right side of her chest, with a rueful look of inquiry at the doctor, who began to laugh.

"Why, that would be your liver, child. Your heart is on the other side, lying a little crosswise; this fashion."

"What! there? Almost under your vest pocket? Why, I can almost see it stir. How strange! Could one feel it now?"

"Lay your hand here and try," answered the doctor, putting the lappel of his coat back, greatly amused by her curiosity.

Lydia pressed her hand on the white vest thus laid bare.

"How it beats—mine don't stir like that, or I should know it. Well, my pain is on the other side, so it can't, in reason, be my heart."

"Well, Lydia, I have told you where to find yours, when you are old enough to have one, so don't let any of the young fellows run away with it."

The doctor broke off short. He was astonished to see tears gathering thick and fast into the girl's eyes.

"Why, Lydia, child, are you really ill?"

"Yes, doctor. I shall never live to have any one want my heart!"

The girl spoke with inexpressible mournfulness, and scanning her face closely, he saw that she was pale, and looking really ill.

"Come back with me to the house, child, and I'll see what can be done for you," he said.

"Not to-day, doctor; I can wait. This is a pain that has been on me a good many months now—some other time will do just as well."

"As you please, only do not fail to remind me when I come again. By-the-way, Lydia, there is to be a splendid barbecue down here, some time next week, I think. All the darkies from Willow Bend and the near plantations are coming down to celebrate Miss Noel's wedding. The bride and groom, with their white friends, are com-

ing to show themselves. That will be something worth seeing for you. Dear me, child, how pale you are! Take care of yourself, or we shall have trouble."

Lydia was indeed pale. She sat down on a log near the bridge, and remained some minutes gazing down on the grass at her feet.

"Why, Lydia, what are you doing here?"

The girl jumped up in sharp haste.

"Oh, Mr. Lane! Oh, my! but won't somebody be glad!"

"I have seen them all, Lydia, and am going home now."

"Not now! Oh, Mr. Lane, not just yet!"

"But I must. We intend to remove my brother early in the morning, and things must be got ready at the plantation."

Lydia seemed to reflect a minute, then she brightened with some new thought.

"But you needn't go just yet, you know; a lot of people are coming down here for a barbecue, and after that no gentleman, as is a gentleman, will ever want to come over here again. Now there is a spring back of them trees, that is worth looking at. You'll find it down in a holler, choked up with brakes and swamp lilies. Such a spring; it does one good to drink of it!"

There was something in the girl's manner that aroused Lane's curiosity. He was in no great haste to leave the island, and this description of the spring interested him. Scarcely conscious that he was acting from the suggestion of another, he crossed the bridge and sauntered down toward the spring.

Then Lydia dropped back to her seat again.

"He's read them verses. I can see 'em in his eyes.

He'll be the next one sure. Oh, my! how dreadful close it comes!"

These were the only words Lydia spoke for half an hour, during which she sat vacantly gazing on the earth. All at once she started.

"There they come, arm in arm. Light in her face, joy in his. It'll be hard for him to risk his life now, and the other is not well enough yet."

A few minutes later, Lane and Clara passed the spot where Lydia had been sitting so long, but she was gone.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE EMPTY PISTOL-CASE.

DIAMOND ISLAND was deserted. Old Sam and Celia were once more left alone. The wounded man had been taken home. There was no reason now why Bertha should remain in that lonely place, so she became a guest at the Fletcher mansion, and after much solicitation from Mrs. Forbes, Clara Anderson went there also, with Lydia of course.

But unrest and lingering anxieties followed them all. The gentlemen were grave and kept much alone together. This made the ladies thoughtful, and vague apprehensions haunted them, without seeming cause; for they were ignorant of that cruel poem which was so often a subject of conversation between the husband and brothers.

But the greatest change of all was with Lydia. Every day the girl became more strangely silent and hollow-eyed. She was devoted in her attentions to Bertha, and

every night would hang around her bed in silent watchfulness, as if she longed to say something which her heart refused to give up. She haunted Clara Anderson with the same affectionate unrest. At daylight she would be at her post again, still silent and strangely gentle.

When either of the young ladies noticed this, Lydia would answer with a pathetic smile, that she was not very well, and had a constant pain in her chest; but Aunt Celia was doctoring her up with herbs. That was why she went down to the island every day, and remained there so long.

Thus things went on till a company of negroes from Willow Bend came down to the island, to clear up the grounds and plant rude tables for the grand barbecue, which was to celebrate the marriage of Waldon with Mr. Noel's heiress.

Lydia was there at the time, and asked them many questions. They informed her that the York gentleman had brought the young mistress home, for a week or two, just to give the darkies an old-fashioned Virginia breakdown. Mr. Noel had gone out to sea, and couldn't be present, but the young couple were coming to the island, sure. So was Mr. Hyde, with ever so much company from New York and Richmond. Of course Mr. Fletcher's people would get invitations. Perhaps she might be among them.

All this Lydia heard from the men themselves, or from Sam, who talked incessantly while rowing her ashore.

In due time the invitations came to the servants on Fletcher's plantation, including Lydia. Perhaps Waldon, who had arrived, knew nothing of this, for the colored committee of Willow Bend had a certain number of invitations, and sent them independently.

Fletcher, who was busy with more important thoughts, ignored the whole affair; but his people, true as steel to the old family loyalty, one and all, refused to join a celebration given by the master's open foe.

Lydia alone reserved her decision.

The night before this celebration was to come off, Mr. Forbes and his brother-in-law, young Lane, were shut up for an hour or more in Forbes' private room, with the door locked and the blinds closed.

During this time, Lydia was walking up and down on the veranda unnoticed, for there was no moon, and the night was cloudy and dark. Besides, the girl moved stealthily, like a cat, and turned the bars of that window-blind with such slow caution that the men deliberating together had no idea that they were observed.

The sash within the blinds was up, and Lydia could hear as well as see. A pistol-case was open on the table, and the gentlemen were looking at each other in blank surprise.

"The case is here, but the pistols must have been left on the island," said Lane, closing the lid with an impatient movement. "I'm afraid that man has gained another day upon us. Their jollification comes off to-morrow. I would not have any of Fletcher's people seen within a mile of the place; besides, I don't think one of them would go, even to obey my orders. We must wait till this is over. Hand the letter this way. We shall know where to find it."

Forbes took up a letter, folded in its envelope, but unsealed, and reached it across the table.

Lane placed it in a drawer, and was about to turn the key, when a shower of light knocks came rattling upon the door, and he started up, motioning Forbes to put away the pistol-case.

"What on earth are you both about?" cried Mrs. Forbes, gathering up the silk of her long train, as she swept into the room. "Talking, and without cigars, too! while here are a poor forsaken wife and lady-love pining for company. Why, how guilty you look! Bertha—Clara Anderson, what have these two wretches been about?"

"Hatching treason against you both, of course," said Forbes, turning from the cabinet where he had locked up the pistol-case. "But we are detected; so arrest us, and let our prison be the little back drawing-room, where you can torture your wretched captives with music, if such cruelty is possible to the female heart."

"March on in front, then," laughed Mrs. Forbes, stamping her foot.

The two men obeyed her.

The moment they were gone, Lydia threw open the blinds, leaped into the room, and had that letter in her hands.

It was a challenge from Edward Lane to Russell Waldon! The young man had determined that the next encounter should be his; and, unknown to Fletcher—who was worse—had taken the affair into his own hands.

CHAPTER XC.

THE SERVANTS' FESTIVAL.

DIAMOND ISLAND was running over with joyous life that day. Tables of rough boards were arranged in the form of a horse-shoe around that open space

of forest turf just within the shadow of the woods. Around these, a crowd of servants were busy as ants, spreading delicate damask linen, forcing masses of gorgeous flowers into Aunt Celia's broken pitchers and cracked mugs, rattling plates, jingling glasses, and building up pyramids of cut tissue paper, in which great sugar ox-eyes, frosted drop-cakes, and balls of parched corn, tinted red, yellow and green, were arranged with tempting splendor.

In this way some hours passed, when a distant sound of music came floating down the river. Directly a convoy of boats and barges, full to overflowing, appeared, steaming for the island, with a burst of music loud and lively enough to make the heart leap in an anchorite's bosom.

"Dey's cumin! Dey's cumin!" rose in a shout from all sides.

The great flag was run up a bare liberty pole, around whose base it had till now been lying in masses of rich drapery.

A swivel gun went off, giving a grand military dash to the occasion, and, at the same moment, warning the men who had charge back in the woods that it was time to bestir themselves.

The servants crowded down to the shore, and formed double lines of dusky faces and waving hats, through which the bride and bridegroom walked to the seats prepared for them.

The festival had reached its sublimest point when that haughty man landed from the boat, and led his bride, in her sumptuous array of soft lace and rustling silk, up those double rows of retainers, whose greeting might have satisfied a queen. From the crown of her blonde

head to the sole of her pretty gaiter boot, the fair creature was perfect.

Thus the party from Willow Bend and some neighboring plantations moved up the island and formed on the greensward for a dance, while the servants looked on, or busied themselves at the tables.

From the moment that swivel fired, the excitement down by the woods became intense.

One table, reserved for the bride, at the curve of the horse-shoe, soon became a marvel of culinary ingenuity. At each end, two pigs, with lemons in their mouths, and their heads lifted high, knelt, each upon his broad china dish, in a marsh of curling parsley, set thick with water lilies, cut from young turnips, and looking like nature.

Besides all this, vases of flowers, rush baskets of summer fruits, and an immense cake, surmounted by a temple overrun with sugar Cupids, formed a centre group in honor of the bride.

When she was led to her seat, spread with crimson cushions, and canopied by a young larch tree, the glory of the occasion was complete. A new band, that had come down with the white party, swelled the music into a perfect jubilee, and, for once in his life, the craving vanity of Russell Waldon was satisfied.

Toasts were offered by some of the guests which embodied this grand idea. Waldon arose to answer. Never had his heart been so uplifted with pride—never had his grandly handsome face glowed with such triumph. He spoke in a voice deep, sonorous and mellow with feeling. The eloquence of his words carried a wonderful power with them. The faces of his friends lighted up with enthusiasm. The servants went wild, occasionally inter-

rupting him with shouts. Even old Sam and Celia joined in lustily, as if the whole thing had been a camp-meeting, and the bridegroom a preacher.

Another person seemed to have been drawn by the fascination of that voice, closer and closer to the bride's table, until she stood at the foot of it, with her pale face uplifted, and her great, wild eyes fixed on the speaker. That person was the girl, Lydia.

Waldon closed his speech amid the wildest enthusiasm. The bride's face was one glow of pleasure. She took a half-open moss-rose, blood-red as it came from the stalk, from her own bosom, and gave it to him. He kissed the bud, fastened it in his coat, just over the heart, with a whispered compliment, and standing erect, held up a foaming glass of champagne, calling out:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I offer a toast to the dearest wife and fairest lady—"

That toast was never finished. The sharp crack of a pistol cut it short in his throat. The red rose on his bosom was cleft in twain, and through his heart a bullet tore its way, taking life with it, and sending him down upon the green sward a dead man!

Amid the shrieks and consternation that followed this awful act, the girl, Lydia, walked slowly through the crowd, and reached the log bridge. There, standing conspicuously, she waited a full minute; but, in the confusion, no one followed her; then, casting one long, wistful look back on the crowd, she leaped over the bridge, landing in the "Firefly," which lay rocking in its shadow, and urged it down the inlet, still without haste or apparent fear.

Some men saw her as she swept into the open stream, and running down to the shore, pushed off a boat in

pursuit. One of these men held the pistol she had flung to the earth after it had done its work, and threatened, in a voice that swept over her like a trumpet, to shoot her if she did not stop.

The girl flung down her oars, and stood up in the boat, still and white, like a marble statue, her fearfully brilliant eyes bent on the man that threatened her, and her lips apart, waiting to be struck.

The man had no heart to murder the young thing who gave herself up with such quiet heroism. The muzzle of his weapon dropped, and he only urged the oarsmen to swifter pursuit.

Lydia saw this cruel mercy with a despairing groan; but one thing was left for her now. She clasped her hands, lifted them high above her head, and plunged into the stream, where its current was both deep and swift.

The "Firefly," half filled with water by the force of that death-leap, drifted slowly downward. The pursuing boat came up, and waited, ready to capture the girl when her head should appear above water.

But never, in this world, living or dead, was that poor, faithful girl seen again!

CHAPTER XCI.

THE LETTER.

"MY OWN, OWN MISS BERTHA:

"I am going to leave you now, forever and ever.

"Miss Bertha, your mother died to make you happy.

She was a good, good woman—one that I owed everything to—more than everything.

"You remember, Miss Bertha, when I came into your kitchen, so hungry, and shivering with cold. *She* came down, and saw me sitting there, with a bundle in my lap, trembling, for fear she would make me go before I had warmed myself.

"It makes me cry, Miss Bertha, when I think how happy we all were up to the time that—well, I won't use hard words now; things are getting too serious for that—but we lived so nice till that time when we all went to Connecticut and saw *him*. You were not the first one. He came to old Mrs. Anderson's, and curled up like a snake in her parlor, while Miss Clara listened. Oh, my, it was awful to see all that, and do nothing but look on. But I didn't know how bad he was till after we all went down to New York.

"Oh, Miss Bertha! Mr. Waldon left nothing but misery behind him wherever he went. Oh, your poor, poor mother, how she drooped—how she withered after he came! For your sake I tried to like him; but it was of no use—I couldn't.

"Every time he came, she grew weaker and weaker. He poisoned the air she breathed; he poisoned me. I never knew what hate was till I saw him.

"I heard him tell her that he never would marry the child of a woman like her, who would be a disgrace to his house. I heard her plead with him, beg of him, not to break your heart because of her. Oh, it is enough to make one wicked, as I am, to have such things on the brain! All that time I knew he had an eye on Miss Mary Noel. Hadn't I heard? Didn't I watch them? I knew that all his cruel talk was only a mean excuse.

"You know how she died. I never, never would have told you, but he threw her letter on the waves and waters, and God sent it to you, after many days. Then you grew wretched as I was, and the same thought came into your brain that had been eating into mine. That man was not fit to live. Murderers forfeit their own lives, and every man they meet has a right to slay them. Is that scripture? I think so, but can't remember the words exact. You remember that night when your heart gave out and your knees bent under you? I was watching all the time. You never should have done it. I was ready to save you from the misery of it, but gave him another chance.

"That poor gentleman who loves you with a grand, beautiful love was his next victim. Two murders, and no punishment; but out of his sins sprung a beautiful joy; for you began to love Mr. Fletcher. I saw it, and felt like a lark; though my heart was still aching for Miss Clara, who had come up from the dead. Ben Vose told me in his letter that she was dead, which letter you will find in my bosom, and will please bury with me just as it is—with my tears wetting it worse than the water can, they being human.

"Yes, Miss Bertha, I saw you growing happy, and it made me glad. Miss Clara had come out of her grave, and that made me happier yet. But this bad man—I won't call names, hard words are not in me—somehow he would not let us rest in peace. You were happy enough. Mr. Lane came and found Miss Clara. No matter about that. If I do not do what I have on my mind he would have been shot too; that man loves to kill people who are too grand-hearted to shoot back.

"In the paper with this you will find a torn newspaper, which was sent to Mr. Fletcher.

"It came the very day that Mrs. Forbes and Mr. Lane reached the island. They kept it private. I knew they would, but I saved the pieces, and read them; then I knew what would happen. I read it in Mr. Lane's face. Mr. Fletcher wanted to fight that man, good and strong that time, but he was not well enough yet to hold a pistol. Mr. Lane meant to have it all over before his brother knew of it. In the drawer of the library-table you will find a challenge all written out. I hid the paper away from you and Miss Clara, afraid that she might be tempted, as you were that night of the thunder storm. I hid the pistols from Fletcher, knowing what he would do with them. One you will find under the pillow of your bed in the old house on the island; the other I shall use, for this bad man's blood shall be on no head but mine. If I let him live to aim once more at Fletcher's brave, honest heart, the murder will be mine, and you will never have another happy day on earth.

"This is why your own Lydia has done this thing, for I know it will be done. There is no other way. Mr. Lane is in dead earnest. If he is killed, or kills that man, Miss Clara will never smile again. If he gives up, Mr. Fletcher will challenge him, and be killed, or that wicked serpent's blood will make his hand red, and your soul ache, forever and ever.

"I promised *her* to watch you, wait upon you, save you from temptation, and make you happy. There is but one way left for me, and I mean to take it. That man shall die, but neither you nor the man who loves you shall raise a hand against him.

"The one precious thing that I have in the world—your mother's letter—I fold up with this. My poor heart feels

cold since I have taken it away; but it will be, oh, how much colder, before long!

"For days and days I have been down in the woods, firing at a mark with one of the pistols I stole from Mr. Fletcher's case. Five times I have put a bullet through a bit of paper the size of a dollar, and I know where the heart lies in a man's bosom. The doctor explained that to me.

"To-morrow they are all coming to the island. The next day, Mr. Fletcher means to send that letter. He shall never have a chance." "LYDIA."

While Russell Waldon's body was slowly passing up the river, with that bridal party following it in mournful silence, the band playing a death-march, and a train of servants singing a slow, plaintive melody, inexpressibly mournful, old Sam took his way to the Fletcher mansion, and delivered Lydia's package into Bertha Canfield's hand.

The next morning dawned upon two houses wrapped in profound mourning. In one, Mary Noel knelt by the cold form of her bridegroom, lost in wild, bitter grief. In the other, Bertha Canfield and Clara Anderson bent, praying for a soul that had drifted into eternity, that they might be saved from threatened misery. A soul that should be judged here with great leniency, as it will be at a higher tribunal, according to its knowledge, its loyal steadfastness, and the spirit of martyrdom that gave painful sublimity to crime.

CHAPTER XCII.

THREE WEDDINGS.

A YEAR had passed—more than a year—for violets were out on the river banks, and lilac flowers were budding around that New England farm-house in which Bertha Canfield was to be married.

There was no pomp or hilarity in this wedding. Those kind-hearted old Quakers looked upon this as a species of dissipation which required at least some frosted cake and a bottle or two of old currant wine, which no one in that party was cruel enough to refuse because it did not promise to be as palatable as it was antique.

The good old lady had thought it best to indulge in a new dress of dove-colored satin, gored to her heart's content, which had a soft shimmer on it like the sunlight shaken from the plumage of a dove when it flies, which she did not think out of place, considering it was the wedding of her only grandchild—one of the sweetest, brightest, and best girls that ever lived.

In this quiet fashion this young couple entered the little Episcopal Church for which the old people had great tolerance, remembering the God-fearing and most noble man who had given his honored name to their granddaughter; and in the holy quiet of that sacred edifice, within sight of her poor mother's grave, Bertha Canfield became Egbert Fletcher's wife.

On the same day and almost at the same hour, Edward Lane and Clara Anderson stood within the shadows of the meeting-house her grandmother had worshipped in so many years. The minister who performed the ceremony was the man who had defended her so gently from the

assaults of his congregation ; and Judge Lane stood near the altar, giving the bride away with a smiling and happy countenance.

Among the first to congratulate the bride when she turned from the altar were Deacon Jones and his wife. Among the last were Ben Vose and his mother, who lingered about the meeting-house door till she came forth, and went home smiling, because she had put back her veil to smile on them.

Judge Lane and Mrs. Wilson Forbes did the honors of the great house that evening to as large a crowd as ever was seen under its roof. After that, Clara became mistress of the mansion, and her husband became the acting partner in the law-office of Lane & Lane.

Another wedding was about this time going forward in old Virginia.

The young widow at Willow Bend had just come out of her double mourning. The bright hair was released from the crimped snow of her widow's cap, and crowned with white roses. The pall-like, double veil of English crape, with which grief for her father's death had enveloped her, was cast aside, and in its place a magnificent cloud of Brussels point trailed its frost-work down to the very edge of her sweeping train.

Around her was a crowd of friends, who had come to let the sunshine into that old mansion, and turn it from a house of mourning to the brightest and gayest of festive halls.

By her side, holding her hand in his, was a young man, who lifted that sumptuous bridal veil, and kissed the smiling lips beneath, whispering, in a voice that had more triumph than tenderness in it:

"At last you are all mine, Mrs. Hyde !"



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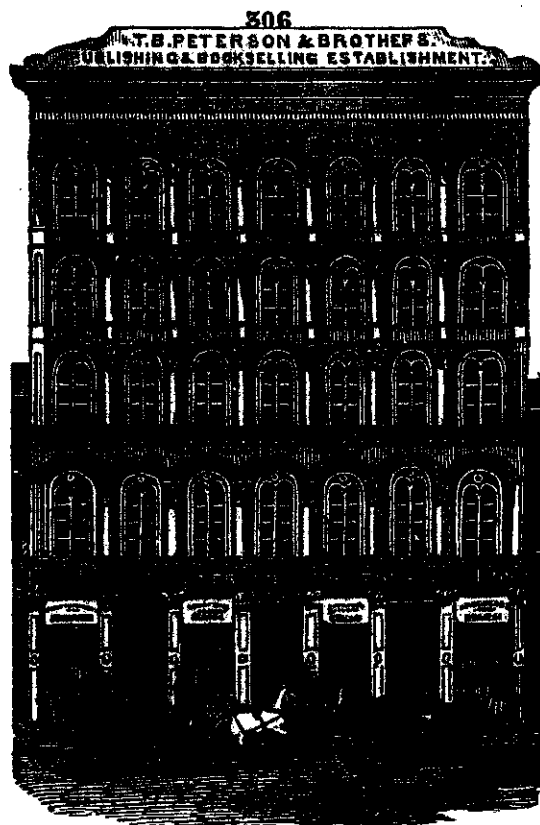
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