

RUBY GRAY'S STRATEGY.

BY

MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

AUTHOR OF "FASHION AND FAMINE," "THE SOLDIER'S ORPHANS," "THE CURSE OF GOLD,"
"THE REJECTED WIFE," "THE OLD HOMESTEAD," "THE WIFE'S SECRET,"
"MABEL'S MISTAKE," "THE GOLD BRICK," "SILENT STRUGGLES,"
"MARY DEWENT," "DOUBLY FALSE," "THE HEIRESS."

Can the butterfly, born for bright sunshiny hours,
Ask aught but perfume as it flits through the flowers?
Can leaves from the roses, afloat on the breeze,
Share the strength and the glory of old forest-trees?
Shall beings who selfishly, meanly aspire
To trifle with souls, as the child plays with fire,
Claim love which is holy, and faith that must live?
Must they clamor for gold, with but tinsel to give?
No, offer them bubbles that dazzle the sun, —
And thistle-down, after the blossoms are done;
Give garlands of foam — the red sparkle from wine,
But barter no love; for God holds that divine.

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MARY DERWENT.

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TO MRS. MARY ANN MORRIS,
OF QUINCY, ILLINOIS.

*Dear Lady: — When I look around among all the friends who have written
their honored and pleasant names on my memory, I find none whose
regard I value beyond yours, or who has secured mine more
entirely. If the excellence of this volume could be mea-
sured by the affectionate friendship I feel for you,
it would be popular beyond anything I have
written; but I shall be content if it gives you
a moment's happiness, and serves to
bring me back to your mind as one
who respects you highly and
loves you well.*

ANN S. STEPHENS.

HUNTINGDON, LONG ISLAND,
JULY 31, 1869.

(17)

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RUBY GRAY'S STRATEGY.

CHAPTER I.

THAT HOUSE ON THE LONG ISLAND SHORE.

ON the Long Island shore, where the tranquil Sound seems to have broken away from the ocean and gone to sleep in a host of little coves and inlets, there is one spot of singular beauty, to which we intend to take the reader more than once before we have done with him in this story. It lies opposite the Connecticut shore, which can be seen distinctly from any high point of land in the neighborhood, with its village steeple and houses outlined either against the green earth or the blue sky.

The exact spot before us is a little bay shaped like a horseshoe, around which the shore slopes softly into a beach of white sand, and lifts itself up in pretty forests and rolling meadows to the upland country, which averages, perhaps, a hundred and fifty feet above its level. On one of the curving promontories that form this bay is a light-house built upon the sandy beach; on the other, which is lifted into a high ridge, stands a spacious mansion-house, built after some gothic model, and screened in by masses of fine old forest-trees. This beautiful place commands a splendid view of the water and the shore. Conservatories roll their seas of glass down the southern slope, and a broad, rich

lawn lies around it, broken up by masses of flowers and groups of shrubbery. The principal windows look down upon a little island which lies in the heel of this vast watery horseshoe—a perfect little gem of fairy-land at high water, but accessible, at low tide, from the shore, with a little wetting of the feet.

At this place, sweeping around the island, the tide sets in from the broad Sound beyond, filling the cove to its brim with what sometimes seems like liquid sunshine.

There is another dwelling to be seen from the bay, and still another which is visible only from one or two points from the land. The most prominent is a low, long farm-house, surrounded by a veranda, and lifted, by a gentle slope of grass and an abrupt terrace, some forty feet, perhaps, above the water, just at the graceful curve which forms the toe of a horseshoe. This building, which was built before the Revolution, has a broad, old-fashioned flower-garden at one end, and a belt of roses and white lilies along the top of the terrace, with a hedge of currant-bushes below. Some forest-trees, in groups and singly, are scattered along the shore in front, and a marsh meadow of rich, deep-tinted grass lies between the farm and the wooded promontory which lifts the gothic house into full view.

On the left of this house, as you stand with your face to the bay, is a magnificent orchard, where a hundred pear-trees lift their branches to the sky, and four times that number of grand old apple-trees file rows upon rows up the sloping hillside of the farm.

A private road, half a mile long, leads from the highway down to this old farm-house, shaded on both sides with cherry and pear-trees, that hedge in the orchard on one side, and some beautiful rolling meadows on the other.

As you descend this sequestered road, a small brown house may be seen to the right, built just in the verge of a young locust-grove, and with a broad wheat-field in front.

This humble dwelling is not always to be seen from the bay, but it is plainly visible from the entrance to the farm-house, and is the only habitation to be discovered in that direction.

As you look seaward, about half-way between the old farm and the light-house, standing back with some trees about it, is the large square house we have spoken of, with gable windows that look gaunt and solitary, as if life had died out of it years ago. Beyond that is a long, sheltered inlet, cutting right through the greenest hollow of the land, so distinct from the bay that you would not dream of its existence. But after a storm, when ships, like birds, are compelled to furl their wings and seek shelter, a forest of masts starting up through the greenness, astonishes you—they look so like blasted trees. These ships appear and disappear with storms and pleasant weather; for that strip of water is a famous harbor for such small craft as carry freight up and down from one point to another along the main shore and the island.

One lovely June morning, when the apple-trees of that vast orchard were just bursting into bloom, a young girl came out upon the veranda of this farm-house, and took a sweeping view of the bay and the pretty island that seemed floating upon its opaline waters like some picture in a dream. Far away to the left, some six or eight miles along shore, a steamboat from New York put in twice a week; and it sometimes happened that passengers acquainted with the country would come round to the bay in sailing boats sent out to meet them at the wharf.

No boat of this kind was in sight, though the girl seemed to be searching for one, for she took a telescope at last and swept it around every curve and angle of the coast, as if she fancied that some boat might be hid away in one of its green hollows.

“He will not come that way,” she said, at last, laying

down the telescope with a sigh of disappointment; "but it is possible, quite possible, that he will attempt the walk: it is such a lovely afternoon, too; and I haven't ridden out this week."

Zua Wheaton ran up to her pretty chamber, which looked like a union of spring and winter, with its bed all snow and its toilet laden with flowers, and, hurrying on a riding-habit, took her hat and whip in one hand, while she leaned out of the window:

"Billy Clark! Billy Clark! come here, I want you!" she called out.

A short, slender young man, with hair so pale that the color seemed all washed out, and eyes so weak that the lids always drooped over them, came close under the window, and looking up, said, in a thready, girlish voice:

"What is it, Miss Zua? I'm waiting."

"Have you anything very particular to do, Clark?"

"Not if you want me, miss. I was only watering the cabbage-plants; they looked a little wilted."

"And have you done with them?"

"Yes, just got through."

"Well, Clark, if it won't be too much trouble, please saddle Flash, and bring him round."

"Yes, I'll saddle him," said the man, in a slow, disappointed voice.

"And—and Clark—"

The man came back eagerly.

"If you can be spared, Clark, I should like you to go with me. Father thinks it is not quite safe for me to ride alone."

"Yes, yes; I will go. Why not?"

"Well, then, saddle the horses at once. I am ready now."

Zua left the window, put on her hat before the glass, smiled on the image she saw there, and ran down to the garden for some old-fashioned single roses that kindled up the

grass all along the terrace with their intense redness. She gathered some of the finest, and fastened them in the bosom of her habit; then stood whipping the rich grass at her feet while waiting, not patiently, for Flash to be brought forth.

The horse came out from his stable at last, champing his bit and curving his neck with playful grace. He pranced under the cherry-trees, and made a splendid show of himself coming along the greensward toward the gate, which Zua had eagerly opened.

Clark bent down, and she placed her foot in his hand. The fellow trembled under her instantaneous weight, and the drooping lids were lifted from his eyes with sudden animation.

"You can follow me, Clark," she said, touching Flash with her whip. "The creature is full of fire, and I will run him as far as the gate. Come up in time to open it."

"Don't, don't try him too far, Miss Zua; his eyes are hot with fire this morning!"

Zua did not hear this caution, but set off on Flash at a swift run, which the horse seemed in no way disposed to check.

A moment after, Clark came out of the stable well mounted, and dashed after her, calling out:

"Stop, Flash! Stop, Miss Zua! He'll throw you! He'll throw you!"

The wind was in Zua's face, rich with the fragrance of millions of apple-blossoms. Her horse was making speed at a famous rate, and rushed on swift as an arrow. It was like taking a dash into paradise. She would have held him in at the gate, for Clark was not far behind, but the creature had his mettle up, and would not be checked; so, with quick presence of mind, she settled herself firmly in the saddle, leaned slightly forward, and lifting her horse at the right moment, cleared the gate like a bird. It was a

dangerous exploit; still, both the horse and his rider gloried in it, and took the road with renewed spirit.

Billy Clark rode after them, making the best time his inferior horse was capable of, and entering a breathless protest, now and then, when Flash started off on a new race, just as he came within speaking distance.

The truth was, Zua had no great inclination for even that humble companionship which Clark offered while riding behind her. She had brought him as an excuse for the protection her father thought indispensable, and cared no more about the matter, enjoying the freedom and exhilaration of her ride with more zest because of its hardihood. But the remarkable spirit of her horse could not last forever. She broke up his speed at last, and was clearing the road with a regular canter, when something ahead made him point his ears and struggle backward. Zua looked around to search out the cause of this revolt, when she saw a light wagon overturned by the side of the road, and two black horses leaping and rioting away in the distance, with a portion of the wagon dangling after them.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN BY THE WAYSIDE.

CLOSE by the shattered buggy, which lay across the road, Zua Wheaton saw a man, prostrate, motionless, and with his face on the grass. There was a limp, dead appearance about this figure which frightened her. She drew up her horse, and called out for Billy Clark, in a voice sharpened by anxiety.

Billy rode up, stumbled off his horse while it was still going, and kneeling down by the prostrate man, turned him over with his face to the sun. It was a beautiful face, white as marble, and all the features exquisitely cut, as if some great artist had chiseled it from the pure stone.

"Does he breathe? Is he dead?" cried Zua, turning pale from the quick sympathy of a fine nature. "What can be done, Billy Clark?"

"I don't think he's quite dead, Miss Zua," answered Billy; "but he's limp as wet paper, and blue about the mouth — awful!"

Zua sprang from her horse, and gathering up her riding-skirt, came close to the stranger. There he lay, still as the grave, with a deathly blue, not only around his lips, but under the eyes. His face was uninjured, but through the light hair, of that rich chestnut-brown which seems to have sunshine imprisoned in it, drops of warm blood trickled to the grass, hanging thick and red where the morning dew had sparkled that morning.

"He has been hurt, dreadfully hurt," said Zua, trembling with fresh terror. "Lift his head to my lap — so. Now run down to the brook yonder, wet my handkerchief, and my scarf too."

Billy Clark picked up the two articles which she flung to him, and went off, dragging the camel's-hair scarf she had unwound from her neck in a wave of burning scarlet across the grass. Directly he returned, with a mass of wet cloth in each hand, and found the pale head lying on Zua's lap, lifeless as he had left it.

"Is he dead? Oh! is he dead?" she cried, lifting her frightened eyes to the poor fellow's face. "He lies so still! He does not breathe. I have listened. Oh, Clark! he does not breathe!"

Clark laid the wet handkerchief on the man's forehead, and taking a little travelling-bottle from his pocket, with a

half-frightened look at the girl, was about to apply it to those cold lips.

Zua snatched at the bottle, with a little cry, and attempted to force some of the liquor it contained upon the insensible man; but her hands trembled so violently that she only spilled it, and not a drop penetrated through those white teeth, which were still firmly clenched, as some spasm of pain had left them.

"Oh, help me! Try and help me, Billy Clark!" she said, piteously. "It seems to me that he is growing heavier and heavier."

Billy applied the flask with a more firm and steady hand. A very slight contortion of the throat followed, and then the white teeth fell apart from their vice-like pressure.

"He is alive! Oh, Clark, I saw him swallow! More! more!" cried Zua.

"Steady and sure! Steady and sure!" replied Clark, in his thin voice. "He's coming to, safe enough."

"Yes, yes; his eyelids begin to quiver. He clenches his hand. Lift his head a little more on my arm. That is right. Now another swallow. Ha!"

The man opened a pair of large, gray eyes, and looked wonderingly into hers.

"Are — are you better?" she inquired, lowering her arm a little, and turning away her face that those eyes might not discover the tears that brimmed and swelled in hers. "I — I fear that you have been badly hurt."

"Yes," answered the man, very faintly, "I am hurt here."

He lifted one hand in a wandering way to his temple, and let it fall again, as if the motion had made him faint.

"Give me that scarf, and wet the handkerchief again," said Zua, seized with fresh terror. "He is going off again."

"No," whispered the man; "only — only —"

His eyes closed. The still look came over his face.

"Quick, Billy Clark! Oh, be quick!"

Clark came running up from the brook, with the wet handkerchief in one hand and a leaf-cup in the other.

A little of the pure water was given, and the man came slowly to his life again.

"Try and get up. It'll do you good," said Billy Clark, made restless by the sight of that handsome head lying so near Zua Wheaton's heart. "It — it tires her, I say."

The stranger attempted to sit up, but fell back with a spasm of sharp pain. Zua caught him in both her arms, and held him close, almost weeping, and trembling under his weight. He felt her tremble, and, opening his eyes, tried to smile.

"My leg is broken, that is all," he said, faintly.

Zua looked at Clark in despair.

"His leg broken, and we have nothing but our horses here! How far is it from home?" she inquired.

"Three miles, I reckon."

"Mount your horse — no, change saddles, and take Flash. Ride for your life, and bring the carriage back. Put in a mattress and furs, and all sorts of cushions and pillows, and — Why don't you go, Billy Clark?"

"'Cause I seem to hear a wagon on the road," answered Billy, who was more than reluctant to leave his young lady. "Perhaps it will be somebody that can help us."

Sure enough, the rattle of wagon-wheels and the tramp of horses came louder and louder down the road. Directly a country wagon came in sight, drawn by a pair of black horses, in which two men were seated.

"It is papa! It is papa!" cried Zua. "Oh, how thankful I am!"

The two men drove faster and faster, as they saw the strange group by the wayside, and lost no time in coming to the rescue. One was a tall, middle-aged man, very erect and gentlemanly; the other, a little, bustling fellow, who would have rubbed his hands, after a cheerful fashion, pro-

bably, at his mother's funeral, so inveterate had become the not unpleasant habit.

"What have we here? What have we here? Nothing serious, surely! Only a break-down! Buggy upset, and your daughter in it! Goodness gracious!"

"Oh, papa, I'm so glad you have come! This poor gentleman is badly hurt," said Zua, lifting her pale face to that of her father. "Could you carry him to the house?"

"Give him to me. Just hand him over to me," bustled in Mr. Turner, reaching out his plump, short arms. "Tired with holding him. Enough to make you cry. Who is he? Where on earth was he going? Know anything about it?"

"My name is Moreton. I belong in the city — was going over to Mr. Van Lorn's," said the wounded man, with an effort. "Can I be carried there?"

Mr. Van Lorn lived in the gothic house, with that noble view of the Sound, which occupied the right curve of that horseshoe bay; but the house was isolated, and the road rough, while the distance was double that which lay between the scene of this disaster and Mr. Wheaton's house.

"Could n't be done," answered Turner, pushing himself forward, as usual. "Six miles, and some of it roughish enough for a well man."

"What can I do, then?" inquired the stranger, anxiously. "Is there any doctor hereabout? He might take me in."

"There is no need," answered Mr. Wheaton, silencing little Turner by a gesture. "My own house is much nearer than Van Lorn's, and the ladies will not think it a burden to nurse you awhile. Ask Zua here?"

The man struggled upward to his elbow, and, for the first time, looked Zua Wheaton in the face with a clear vision. It was a beautiful face all in commotion — for a warm, sympathetic nature broke over it, with a power of loveliness which no living man could have looked upon unmoved. This was a beauty which slept sometimes; but now it was

so vivid and brilliant that his own eyes lost their expression of pain while gazing into hers.

"You have already been more than kind to me; but — but I must not be a burden."

"It is no burden — we will not let you think it one!" she exclaimed, eagerly. "Ask papa if I am not a good nurse; and if any one on earth can beat Aunty Test? Just try us, and see."

"I fancy the gentleman will not be able to help himself," said Mr. Wheaton, with one of his grave, pleasant smiles. "Come, Turner, let us see about arranging the wagon; fortunately you have some blankets under the seat."

"Yes; and there is plenty of straw in the barn we just passed. Billy Clark, jump in and fill the wagon half-full. Take out the seat, and let us have a clear field. Oat-straw, remember, and lay it in even."

Billy Clark seemed especially eager to get the hurt gentleman into the wagon. He lifted the seat, and drove back to the barn; and in fifteen minutes returned with a comfortable bed arranged in the bottom of Turner's wagon.

The three men lifted Moreton into the wagon. Mr. Wheaton sat down at his head and supported him. Turner knelt on the straw in front, and prepared himself to drive carefully, rustling the reins between both his hands in high relish of the post assigned him.

Zua mounted Flash in saddened and subdued spirits, which threw Billy Clark into a state of dejection, which made itself manifest in his very seat on the saddle, for he rode in a slow, drooping fashion, utterly unlike the dash with which he had followed Miss Zua, only a brief time before, along that same highway.

CHAPTER III.

THE ARRIVAL AT SHADY BEND.

OLD Mrs. Test, the housekeeper at Shady Bend—for that was the name of Mr. Wheaton's farm—stood in the broad hall which cut the low-roofed house in twain, leaving a low, old-fashioned parlor and bedroom on the right, and a large dining-room and sitting-room, with kitchen beyond, on the left. Through the open doors, back and front, the blue sparkle of the bay and the still bluer curve of the sky could be seen, broken only by a huge apple-tree in full blossom, and the little island which floated, like a dream, where the waters of the Sound flowed into the bay. Directly against this water-view, half cutting it off, stood Mrs. Test, a neat and not uncomely old gentlewoman, with a white sun-bonnet on, and a muslin kerchief folded over her bosom. She was a little astonished as she saw the wagon coming down the lane, with Mr. Wheaton's head just visible, and Turner on his knees in front, softly jerking the reins, and looking pleasantly important, like a man to whom a post of high honor has been assigned.

While the old lady was wondering at all this, Zua gave Flash his head, and came swiftly toward the door, riding through the open gate, among the flowers and the rose-thickets, in quick haste.

"Mrs. Test! Mrs. Test!" she cried, bending forward, "there is a sick man coming—thrown from his wagon—a limb broken. I have sent Billy Clark for the doctor. Is the parlor bedroom ready?"

"The parlor bedroom always is ready, Miss Zua," answered the old lady, all undisturbed by this sudden excitement; "linen sheets, ruffled pillows, the room well aired, and smelling of apple-blossoms. But here he comes. This

way, Mr. Wheaton. Hold up his head, Turner—through the parlor. Oh, here comes the doctor!"

That moment the doctor rode up with a case of instruments on the seat beside him, and looking a good deal excited; for a fractured limb did not come within the range of his everyday practice. He followed Mr. Wheaton and his guest into the parlor bedroom, put his head out once or twice, asking for bandages, brandy, and various other things—which might have disturbed a less thrifty housekeeper, but which Mrs. Test supplied with prompt zeal—and at last came out smiling.

"How is he, Mrs. Test? Why, nothing could be more satisfactory. A compound fracture of—of—well, of the left limb; the neatest thing which has come within the line of my practice. Don't know as I ever saw one exactly to be compared to it. A case for Dr. Mott, that great and good man, who is now lost to the profession. Danger? Not the least. Fever may set in—some pain, no doubt; but as for danger, a piece of work like that don't leave danger behind. Tea! did you mention tea, Mrs. Test? I am busy, very busy, but a cup of your tea, with such accompaniments, is not to be resisted; besides, I had, perhaps, better wait a little and see how our patient gets along. Splendid young fellow; built after the best models, as they say in Italy. Handsome, too, or will be when he gets a little color back. Have you the least idea who he is, Mrs. Test?"

"Some gentleman from the city, I believe, doctor. Miss Zua told me so much; but I don't think she knew anything more herself."

"His name is Moreton, and he was on his way to Mr. Van Lorn's," said Zua, who entered just then. "Now tell us, doctor; is his hurt a very bad one?"

"I should rather think so, Miss," answered the doctor, laughing one of his long, mellow laughs. "A compound fracture that will chain him down for six weeks or two

months, spite of fate or Mrs. Test's splendid nursing; but you said that he was a friend of Van Lorn's."

"No. I only said that he was going there."

"Another dashing fellow after the young widow, I dare say. Upon my soul, that fair woman is turning every masculine head in the neighborhood, and out of it too—beautiful creature. Don't you think so?"

Now any girl but Zua Wheaton, who was honest as the sun and fearless as innocence, would have answered yes, fearing some unjust interpretation of her motives; but Zua did not think Ruby Gray beautiful. She said so frankly; but added that she had never seen the lady, save at a distance.

"Not think her handsome? Well, now, I come to reflect, there may be something in that; but it is the first time I ever heard her beauty questioned. Well, then, we will call her fascinating—will that do?"

"Perhaps. I can only say she never was near enough to fascinate me."

"You do not like her, then?"

"Yes, and no."

"Yes, and no! What does that mean?"

"Oh, doctor! let us find something else to talk about! Mrs. Gray, or Ruby Gray, as she prefers to be called, is a pleasant, agreeable woman enough. Very young to be a widow, very rich, and, altogether, a desirable person to know. But I am not among her intimate acquaintances, simply because there is a stretch of three miles between us, and she is visiting on no road that one usually travels."

"Still so near that you can see her on the beach, yonder, at this moment, if you care to look, Miss Wheaton. Let me regulate the glass; just where you see that spot of red against the green of the trees."

Zua lifted the telescope, and saw a woman standing on the beach, with a background of green trees, and the waters

of the bay flashing brightly before her, just as they were taking the first opaline gleams of the evening sunset. By the air and gesture of the woman she recognized Ruby Gray, who wore a scarlet cloak or mantle, which usually distinguished her in her out-door walks, and thus became a prominent object in the distance.

This woman, who had, indeed, made a sensation in the neighborhood from her fair, blonde beauty and singular attractiveness, was walking up and down the beach, shading her eyes with one hand, and looking out upon the water with visible impatience. As she looked, a sail-boat came in sight, sweeping around the little island, and apparently making toward the point of upland on which Van Lorn's house stood.

The woman in the scarlet cloak walked hastily up the beach to where the boat seemed about to land; but the little craft veered suddenly and headed up the bay. Certainly the young widow was waiting for some one, for she clasped her hands with a passionate gesture of disappointment when the boat veered another way, and, sitting down on a fragment of rock, which had rolled on the beach, appeared to be crying bitterly.

Zua watched all this through the glass with unusual interest. There was a sort of fascination in the woman which thrilled her with vague sensations, which she could neither define nor suppress. What was Ruby Gray to her, that her movements upon that beach should bring the heart into her mouth, though seen in that vague distance?

The doctor disturbed her.

"Come, Miss Zua, Mrs. Test is ready for us, and your arm must be tired. A cup of tea will do us good after this heavy run on our sympathies. If you have not yet attained a fair view of Mrs. Gray, she will soon give you one, if the chap in yonder happens to be one of her crowd of admirers."

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"Why, what should I mean? When the fair widow — she is very fair, remember — hears that one of her admirers is in this house, tied up with a broken leg, she will of course try that bit of rough road, either on horseback or in her pony carriage, and swoop down upon you, either to offer services in a neighborly way, or bravely claim admittance as a friend of the suffering party. Depend upon it, you are bound to make Mrs. Ruby Gray's acquaintance within the week."

"Well, doctor," answered Zua, laughing pleasantly, "if she is so fascinating, as you seem to think, all this will be a great delight. Let her come; both papa and I are ready to be enchanted."

"Your papa will be enchanted. She is particularly dangerous to men of his years; professes to doat on gray hair; and hangs on an elderly gentleman's arm with such trusting tenderness. Oh! make sure that Wheaton will be her first victim under this roof!"

"I hope you do not speak seriously," said Zua, flushing crimson. "It seems strange to hear my father's name used in a connection like that."

"Why, silly child," answered the doctor, laughing, "isn't your father rich, handsome — very, for his age; every inch a gentleman, calculated for society? In short, a capital match."

"Ah! doctor, remember poor mamma has not been dead quite two years," said Zua, with a look and tone of mournful reproof. "She was your friend, too."

"Indeed, she was as true and lovely a friend as ever a man had; for her sake and for yours, dear child, I hope that no person whom you do not dearly love will ever fill her place. There, now, take my arm, and let us go in to tea."

No wonder that the doctor was easily persuaded to accept Mrs. Test's hospitality, for a more delightful tea-table was

never spread than that which stood like a square of crusted snow in the middle of the dining-room. The windows, which looked out upon the orchard, were open, and every gust of the soft, south wind brought a shower of blossom-leaves into the room, and with them came rich wafts of fragrance that made the air delicious to breathe.

The soft murmurs of a rising tide could be faintly heard; and up from the garden came the delicate scent of violets, mingling richly with the heavier perfumes of the orchard. There was no need of pulling down the blinds, for all the windows were curtained with honeysuckles and climbing roses, which cast their soft shadows into the room, giving whiteness to the table-cloth, and a cool, golden hue to the butter, which was, in fact, fragrant as the flowers that sent their breath over it.

In this sweet atmosphere Zua took her place at the table, as lovely a picture of youth as could be found in a day's journey. The doctor thought so, as her white hands poured the cream into his tea; and her father thought so, when he came in from the sick man's room, to join his family and entertain his old friend.

But the doctor's words, carelessly as they had been spoken, preyed upon the young girl. She tried to cast off the impression they had made, but could not. All her anxiety for the wounded man was merged in a vague feeling of dread regarding the woman, Ruby Gray, whose distant figure she had seen wending along the beach, illuminated, as it were, by that cloud of scarlet, which seemed a part of her own being.

Turner had already driven away in his wagon; the doctor left that tea-table with a sigh of reluctance, and his friendly old horse trotted off with him, as only a doctor's horse can trot, solemnly, and with a full sense of the great responsibility of his position.

Billy Clark was in the stable, looking more washed out

than ever, muttering fragments of discontent to his horses, and wiping them down with vicious emphasis, now and then, as some unwelcome thought forced itself upon him. Once he broke into the nearest approach to an oath that ever passed those thin lips, and called Flash a ranting Ishmaelite, which so startled his conscience that he looked around in dismay, and was infinitely thankful that nothing but the horses had witnessed this proof of total depravity.

CHAPTER IV.

LISTENING.

ZUA WHEATON'S glass had not deceived her. Ruby Gray had been watching with keen anxiety for the young man who was moaning and tossing on the pillows of that snow-white bed in Mr. Wheaton's spare room. He was not exactly her lover, though many expressions of half-hidden tenderness had been uttered by his lips, and answered by such glances from those blue eyes as would have driven an ordinary man point-blank into a proposal, whether he wished it or not. As for Ruby Gray, she did wish it earnestly, ardently; first, because Moreton was a splendid young fellow, manly, handsome, and difficult to secure; next because he was rich, and held a higher place in society than the young widow had ever been able to attain, with all her own wealth and rare blonde beauty.

During the preceding winter, Ruby Gray had been in young Moreton's society more than should have happened to a lady who, as yet, had received no positive proposal from the gentleman, and who, in fact, based all her expectations of one on such tender looks and soft whispers as

enter more largely into a fashionable flirtation than are usually found in a direct and honest passion.

Ruby Gray had her experiences, and felt this, much to her discomfort; but she reflected that a fashionable hotel, in which they had both lived, was not exactly the atmosphere in which genuine feeling was apt to take root. With all her efforts at fascination, she found herself, at the end of a most brilliant season, about where she had commenced. Moreton had given her compliments without stint, had told her that she was the object of his idolatry a hundred times with his eyes, and even with his lips; but never once when she was alone with him, or in that earnest voice which trembles with the love it can neither express nor subdue.

Ruby Gray, with all her elaborate softness of manner, was a resolute person, keen upon the scent when her own interest was at stake, and full of resources. She was patient too, and would bide her time without much feeling of revolt, when the object was worth the trouble.

The season was over; spring came, and Ruby, seized with a strong desire to spend the blossom-season among the orchards and meadows on Long Island, came to visit the Van Lorns. She longed to see those great apple-trees, sheeted with pink blossoms, like those remembered with so much tender regret under which she had played when a little child. She would go early, when the cherry and pear trees were white. Two or three months in the country would make a child of her. That splendid city-life was getting to be oppressive. Would Moreton come down to her solitude, and see how she got along? There was pleasant boating, and such lovely walks around the point; a little island, too, which Tom Moore must have been thinking of when he wrote those exquisite lines:

"Oft, in my fancy's wanderings,
I've wished that little isle had wings,

And we, within its fairy bowers,
 Were wafted off to seas unknown;
 Where not a pulse could beat but ours,
 And we could live, love, die alone."

Ruby Gray repeated more than these lines with downcast eyes, and lips that almost trembled with natural emotion, but lifted her eyes, all at once, to his, with a practised glance that disenchanted the man it was expected to inthrall. After all, in love, as in morals, "honesty is the best policy." The feeling which strikes home to a noble heart must be genuine.

Will Moreton, if not in love, was what men call enchanted. So he promised Ruby Gray to run down and visit the friends she was staying with, who happened to be persons whom he knew. A little note or two had passed between them, and Ruby was well aware of his coming, or she would not have been upon the beach in that scarlet cloak, you may be certain.

But she went away grievously disappointed, and the friends she was visiting found her dull and sad during the rest of the evening, which she spent in drawing forth broken snatches of music from the piano, or making sudden escapades into the moonlight, where she wandered back and forth among the rose-thickets, wondering what excuse she could make for returning to the city at once.

The apple-blossoms were in full flower, and the loveliest moonlight that ever trembled over water shone upon the bay. But what she had seen of all this certainly must have satisfied all her childish reminiscences; for she dashed a rose-bush aside with passionate violence, when quite by herself, and turned with distaste from the wind, which swept over her, laden with the breath of many an apple-orchard.

"Two weeks of this childishness, and all for nothing! What is this? Crying—crying fool! Do I love the man? Is

this ache here really from the heart?" she cried with passionate vehemence.

Yes, the pain was from that proud, passionate, but most calculating heart. You could not have doubted this had you seen the hot red in that cheek, or the tears which the woman dashed from her eyes as they swelled there. She was angry with the first genuine feeling that had stirred her heart for months.

When Ruby Gray went into the house that night, she found a working-man near the side door leading into the grounds, in conversation with one of the servants. The words he was speaking arrested her, and she stopped to listen, holding her breath.

"Yes," said the man, "the buggy was all smashed to pieces. Them black horses of ours make clean work when they once get right scared. Come racing up the street full blazes, with the thills bouncing about their heels, a-snorting, and plunging, and rearing, like wild tigers. It was a New York chap as hired the team, and I agreed to come over after it in the morning."

"But what became of the man?" inquired the servant, who seemed deeply interested in the relation.

"Don't know. I followed up the road to the spot where the horses took fright, but no one was there. The ground was all torn up with hoofs, and swooped about with the wheels when they twisted off; but no living creature was in sight."

"And you saw no sign of the gentleman?"

"Nary sign, except a lady's scarf, all wet, and spotted with something besides water, which lay all in a heap, trampled down in the grass."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, I do; and, between ourselves, I reckon I know whose scarf it was. Seen it fifty times flying out from Miss Zua Wheaton's neck, shining like a streak of fire in the sunshine."

"But how came it there?"

"Don't know no more than you do. Did n't get there without help, I suppose. Thought it was a pool of blood when I first saw it in the grass. Scared me half to death."

Still Ruby Gray listened. She had heard no name, and did not venture to speak. A post, wreathed with climbing honeysuckles, stood between her and the speakers. They had not heard her light step on the grass. Filled with vague apprehensions, she leaned against this post, and waited for something to be said which would confirm or dissipate her fears.

"But did not you inquire of some one about the gentleman?"

"Who was there to inquire of, I should like to know?"

"If he was moved, some of the neighbors must have seen him going along."

"None of 'em had, though; and I came over here to see if he had n't got along so far."

"Why, was he coming here?"

"Yes, that was what he hired the team for."

"Now, did you ever? I should n't wonder if it was that York chap that was coming down to shoot partridges; between us, I reckon he was after other game."

"What?"

"That young widow, rich as a Jew, and handsome as a picture. Almost in love with her myself."

"Just as likely as not it was the same fellow; but how did you know that he was coming?"

"Took a peep into his letter, and hers too."

"Well, after all, what was his name?"

"Moreton — P. Moreton."

"That's it. That is the name he told me to inquire after."

A rustling of the honeysuckle-vine, a faint cry, and the quick closing of a door disturbed the two men, and they left that portion of the grounds, wondering what the sounds meant.

CHAPTER V.

THE CLARK FAMILY.

BILLY CLARK did not live at Mr. Wheaton's house, though his whole support was derived from the farm. The little brown house, with a wheat-field in front, and that locust-grove behind, belonged to the place; and in that Clark had an old mother, who took in washing, and did extra help at the farm; he had a sister also, who lived upon the idea that she performed a fair proportion of her mother's duties, which, being a matter of pure imagination, proved that Amanda was rather disposed to be intellectual than otherwise.

To this couple Billy Clark went home on the night of young Moreton's accident. His eyes were red with suppressed trouble — for, as Amanda often observed, he had the most exquisite feeling, and was sensitive as a canary-bird, especially about his eating. Well, Billy went home to his mother that night, anxious, miserable, and sick with jealousy. The great secret of his heart had, as yet, been revealed only to the widow and her daughter, who, determined to know what had occasioned his loss of appetite during the last three months, had at last won his confidence, after many promises and expressions of deep sympathy.

Clark found his mother in the kitchen getting supper. She was a tall, powerful woman, full six feet in stature, and with massive features, that had once been almost handsome; but a long scar shot redly down from her shock of iron-gray hair, and slanted across her forehead, cleaving it almost in twain, like the ravine left after a storm on some fair field. There was a history about this scar, which the old woman never referred to, let who would comment upon it. She had evidently experienced a hard life; and there were few sor-

rows or misfortunes which she had not wrestled with up to the time when we find her, with a short-handled frying-pan full of perch, freshly caught from the bay, hissing over the stove, and filling the little kitchen with appetizing smoke.

Amid this savory fog, the old woman loomed up grimly as her son entered with his soft, timid step, his downcast eyes, and varying color, denoting, in all his movements, the deep depression of mind which had seized upon him from the moment he saw young Moreton's head in Zua Wheaton's lap.

"So you have got home at last," said the old woman, kindly. "Saw you coming across the meadow, and set the fish a-frying. You'll have 'em smoking hot in no time."

"Thank you, mother; but I don't care for fish to-night!"

"Not care for fish? Why, Billy Clark, what has come over you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's because I have n't no appetite," answered Billy, with pathetic meekness.

Mrs. Clark turned one of the perch over with her case-knife, and laid it daintily down in its bed of hot gravy, before she spoke; then, drawing a splint-bottomed chair up to the stove, she rested the handle of her frying-pan on the back, and came toward her son, smiling upon him with grim kindness.

"Why, William, what does all this mean? I saw her riding up the lane like a bird, and you after her, looking happy as a lord, with your hat on one side, and long stirrups that you almost stood up in. 'There,' said I to Amanda, 'there goes a fine couple; match 'em, if you can.' Then says she, 'Mother, I can't. It's no use pretending, Billy has made a lovely choice.'"

"But what is the use of choosing when a feller has n't a chance to speak? What's the use of thinking of her? You know, as well as I do, that I ain't no match for a lady like that."

"I know that you're a match for a queen; to say nothing

of an empress, which is higher yet," protested the stalwart mother, leaning over him with ponderous tenderness. "What makes you so faint-hearted to-day, Billy?"

"Mother," said Billy, rising up to the altitude of her shoulder, and burying his face on her bosom; "mother, there is a man down yonder — a handsome man."

"Well, Billy, what then? He can't be handsomer than somebody I know of."

"Oh, my! Yes, he is; tall as you are; and — oh! it's no use talking — I tell you, it's no use. Why, she left that red scarf of hers trod down in the grass all for his sake; but I stamped on it."

Here Clark broke into a little hysterical giggle, which ended in a sob.

"But who is this fellow?" asked the mother; "and what is he doing at the farm?"

"He's a chap from the city, and was going over to Mr. Van Lorn's in a hired buggy. I suppose he didn't half know how to drive, for the hull concern smashed up, and he got his leg broke."

"Poor gentleman!" said Amanda, coming softly into the smoke of the kitchen; "young, handsome, and wounded. Oh, mother! let me go down to the house; who knows but —"

Here Amanda paused, blushed ruddily, and cast a glance toward a little seven-by-nine looking-glass that was just visible, like a gleam of still water, through the fog of the room.

"You!" answered the woman, curtly. "What for?"

"Because — because I want to see something of the world as well as William," answered Amanda, with a flush of coming tears about her eyes.

"You'd better not," answered William, as she alone dignified him; "you'd better not. What has it done for me? If I'd never left off planting carrots and setting out cabbage-plants, to go and tie up rose-bushes under her window, it'd a-been better for me in the end. It was almost like

heaven to have her come down and hold up the branches for me to nail. Once her hand touched mine, and I jumped away as if it had been a brier. She looked at me sort of pitiful, and asked if a thorn had hurt me. I said, 'No, not much,' and went off trembling like anything, till I got behind a great snowball-bush; and then I kissed the spot she had touched, and felt as if the angels were all around me—"

"Oh, Billy, she might have seen you," said Amanda. Billy lifted his hand reprovingly.

"By-and-by her voice came floating over the crocus-beds, calling out, 'Billy Clark! Billy Clark!' just like some pretty bobolink singing out in the morning. I went round, hiding my hand, for fear she'd guess what I'd been about; but she only looked over her shoulder and laughed, while she held a branch full of crimson roses up against the wall.

"'Billy Clark,' says she, 'where have you been?—and where is the hammer and nails? My arm aches holding this up,' says she.

"I got up on the wooden bench where she stood, and began to nail up the branch; but my arm shook so that the leaves fell over her like a snow-storm while I did it. She jumped down and shook them off, laughing so sweet, and looking so handsome in the sunshine, just like those pretty creatures you see in books."

Here Billy Clark clasped his hands in a sort of ecstasy, and sat lifting his weak eyes to that tall, strong mother, as if expecting sympathy even from her. But the old woman snatched her knife from the table, and, going to her frying-pan, turned over each separate perch it contained with cool deliberation.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. CLARK TALKS OF HERSELF.

NEVER mind; don't be afraid of me," was Mrs. Clark's comforting speech, after the last hiss had issued from her frying-pan. "I was in love once myself."

"With my father?" said Billy, timidly.

"Well; yes, I may as well own; that was the man I was in love with, Billy, just as you are now—only more so."

"And you married him?"

"Yes. Have n't I said so—ain't you there?"

"Was he—that is, did you work for his father, or anything like that?"

"Yes, I worked for his father. But who told you about it?"

"No one—no one in the wide world, mother. Only I was thinking if you loved a gentleman, and married him, why should n't I dare to lift my eyes to her?" said Billy, with great humility.

"Well, I loved him, and he loved me; and one night we went off and got married."

"And you were happy, mother?"

"I was, and so was he as well—that is, at first; but there came a time when we had to tell the old people—and they were proud as Lucifer—hard as iron. They turned us out to get our own living. He had no trade, no profession—nothing but a gentleman's education, and that was of little use. I worked hard—took in sewing, washing; any kind of labor came natural to me; I was brought up to it. He was n't. His father died, and never left him a cent—not one. It broke his heart. He seemed to wither up after that. The doctor said he must have a sea voyage, or die. He went a long trip—to China. A friend of his father's,

who pitied him, owned the ship, and gave him a free passage; but he never got to China; they left him in the ocean."

The old woman's voice grew husky. She lifted her apron and wiped the moisture from her forehead, passing the rude crash swiftly over her eyes, afraid that her children might see how moist they had become.

"Were you handsome then, mother?" questioned Amanda, innocently.

"Handsome enough for him to love me dearly," answered the woman, with a pained smile.

"And he never was sorry for marrying you?" asked Billy.

"No, he never was sorry."

"But you? When you saw how his love had dragged him down, were you never sorry?"

"No. He loved me, and I loved him. I gave him all my strength, all my life, because of this love, and he knew it. I even told him to go home to his family, and give me up, promising to love him just the same forever and ever; but he would not hear of it. 'Death was better than parting with me,' he said, and they gave him his choice; for the old widow was more bitter than his father had been."

Amanda went up to her mother and took the knife from her hand, which was shaking as neither of her children had ever seen it shake before.

"Go sit down, mother, and let me fry the fish," she said, kindly.

The old woman opened her large gray eyes wide as she comprehended this touch of sympathy; but shook the girl off with an impatience which was half tenderness, half resentment.

"This is a new streak," she said. "Why should n't I fry my own fish? Get away with your curls and your muslin dress, or the fat will spatter over 'em."

Amanda drew back, repulsed in the genuine kindness which had led to her unusual offer of assistance.

"And he died because you loved him?" muttered-Billy Clark, looking wistfully at his mother.

"Your supper is ready; come and eat," was the curt reply.

CHAPTER VII.

MOTHERLY CONSOLATION.

A RUDE but not unwholesome supper was that which Mrs. Clark set forth in the kitchen where it had been cooked. The leaf of a side-table, which stood against the wall, had been extended and thoroughly wiped off; then, on the dark old wood was placed the platter of smoking fish, a plate of newly-cut bread, and a japan tray, on which were some cups and saucers of blue china, with an earthen teapot, and some sugar in a cracked bowl.

Billy drew his chair up to the table, and helped himself to a small portion of the fish; but something had taken away his appetite, and, after the first attempt, he made no pretence of eating. The mother, also, put by her plate in apparent disgust.

"No wonder you can't eat it," she said. "I never did fry anything so badly in my life; the first taste is enough. But take a cup of tea, good and strong; and I'll toast a piece of the bread for you."

"It ain't of no use," said Billy, shading his weak eyes with one thin, slender hand, which no amount of work seemed capable of rendering tough or hard. "After seeing that man's head a-laying in her lap, I don't feel as if I ever should eat again—at any rate, with a relish."

"His head in her lap! What do you mean, Billy Clark!"

"Just what I say, mother. When she saw him a-laying

there, face downward in the grass, she jumped down from Flash, and, before I could speak, lifted the fellow's head in her arms, and held it right against her heart; and there she sat looking into them shut eyes so pitiful as she never looked at me, mother."

"No wonder. You've never been flung out of a buggy and broke your leg, to say nothing of fainting away," said Amanda, who was doing unromantic justice to the fish. "Why should she?"

"But — but I would. Only to make her look at me like that and hold me so, I'd go right out and break my leg now, if that'll do it."

"William, dear brother William, how you do go on!" said Amanda, laying down her knife and fork. "I never heard of breaking one's leg for love. Only think of it!"

"But I would, Amanda dear. You don't begin to dream of the lengths that a fellow will go when he's in for it as I am."

"I should n't mind breaking my heart, you know, Willy; but — but the other thing — weeks and weeks in bandages and splints, and all that."

"With *her* to nurse you," put in the brother, with a gentle protest.

"But she would n't. Old Mrs. Test will do that, depend on it."

"Do you really think so, Amanda?" cried Billy, arousing himself. "Won't she go into his room and hold him, and all that?"

"They do in books sometimes, I know," answered Amanda, thoughtfully; "but not in country houses, I reckon."

"Miss Zua would n't, I'm sure of that," spoke in Mrs. Clark, determined to console her son. "With all her high-flying ways on horseback, she's modest as can be in general. Catch her nursing a young fellow from the city, or anywhere else, while there is an older person to do it."

"Do you really think so, mother?"

"Of course I do. Why, she never spoke to this man in her life. He was hurt, and I have no doubt the poor child thought that he was dead."

"She did look frightened," whispered the son.

"Besides, she is so tender-hearted. Don't you remember, when that little boy from across the bay upset his boat, how she plunged right over the terrace-wall and swam out to him, and came dragging him up, bringing whole armfuls of sea-weed with him, and there, all wet as she was, held him up, calling out for blankets and brandy and hot fires? I never shall forget it."

"Nor I," whispered Billy, brightening; "never!"

"But you didn't think she was in love with that little shaver?"

"No; who could?"

"Then don't think the other thing. It's in her to be kind and to help everybody that wants help. She'd have jumped off her horse and wet her scarf and done her utmost for a Newfoundland dog, or any other dog. You know she would."

"I know it, mother."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"Oh, mother! he is such a splendid fellow."

"The world is full of splendid fellows; but a girl like Zua Wheaton does not drop into love the minute she sees one."

"True enough; this is n't the only one in the world."

"Besides, ten chances to one, he's himself over head and ears in love with the widow Gray — she that is visiting at Mr. Van Lorn's, and drives that pony-carriage over to town so often."

"Ha!" sighed Billy, opening his eyes wide.

"You said that he was going there."

"So I did."

"What else could take him to the Point?"

"Shooting," muttered Billy.

"Shooting! Why, it's out of season — against the law to shoot birds so early in the spring."

"So it is. I never thought of that."

"And Mr. Van Lorn has no young folks to tempt him — only this widow, just on a visit."

"God bless her! I hope she's stunning handsome."

"That she is," broke in Amanda; "beautiful as a damask rose, pure white and red, with such hair! none of your dull yellow hair, but rich and bright, like — like — well, I cannot tell what it is like."

"I hope *he* likes bright yellow hair; I don't," said Billy.

"No, you like black hair, curly, with the glow of a plum in its waves, braided over the head, knotted up behind, with a curl dropping on the neck. I know the style."

"Oh, don't, Amanda, dear! don't! it makes me catch my breath."

"If it made you chirk up like a man and eat something, it would be more worth while. I would n't give up so at the start, if I was a young fellow; that I promise you."

"But I can't eat. Fried fish — without table-cloth, too! What if she was to see me? Besides, I've no appetite."

"Wait till I bring the dessert," said Amanda. "Don't be too sure till then. Mother, do clear these things away."

"What for?" protested Mrs. Clark, sharply. "If you've got anything worth eating, crowd the plates back."

"No, no! that is n't the way to give William an appetite. I have a little dessert ready, such as we read of in the books you hate so — strawberries."

"Strawberries! Why, how you talk! they ain't half ripe yet," said Mrs. Clark.

"Oh, yes, they are; one of them beds with glass over 'em, in the southern slope of the garden, is red with 'em."

Billy Clark sprang up, clutched his hands, and turned an angry and flushed face on Amanda.

"You have n't! you haven't dared to touch them?"

"Oh! yes, I have," answered Amanda, half frightened. "Why not?"

"Why not? Haven't I been tending them, and watching them day by day for her? Didn't my heart rise as they grew redder and redder every blessed morning when the sun shone on 'em, thinking how she would look when I gave them to her? Now you've broke it all up."

"Don't look so. Don't take on like that, brother William. I meant nothing but good. How was I to know that you was raising 'em only for her? I saw 'em ripe and red, and thought we'd have a genteel dinner for once, like other folks. But the berries ain't eat up yet; you can give them every one to her in the morning, and no harm done. See!"

Amanda opened a cupboard and took out a delicate rush basket, fresh and green, piled up richly with ripe strawberries. A wreath of apple-blossoms and sweet-scented violets lay around the basket, holding the fruit in place, and a prettier object could not well be imagined. The girl, too, as she held it up, looked picturesque and handsome, in spite of her commonplace surroundings.

"Say now, will you eat them or not? Here is a mug of sweet cream that Mrs. Test gave me, and enough white sugar for you. Mother and I can get along with the brown."

"No, no; I would not touch one for the world. How splendid they are! Do take them out of the room, or they will smell of fish. He could n't give her anything half so tempting. Just hand them to me, Mandy; I know how to keep them cool. Won't her eyes sparkle when she sees them?"

He took the rush basket, went out into a clover-patch at the end of the house, and, parting one of the bunches, set it down among the cool leaves, which closed over it, heavy and moist with dew. Then he broke off a flowering branch from an old apple-tree that sheltered the spot, and marked

the place with it. This done, he returned to the house in triumph, smiling his little weak smile, and rubbing his palms together.

"Amanda, dear, you are a precious good girl. I sha'n't forget this. It was so kind of you to give 'em up," he said, walking up and down the room in futile enjoyment. "So prettily done, too. How came the thought into your head?"

"Never mind that," answered the girl. "Mother and I have lost the best part of our supper, that's all."

"I—I thought you did 'em up for me, and was only making believe to want them."

"What's that?"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

MRS. CLARK and her children started and looked toward the door; for a knock at that time of the evening was unusual. Amanda was the first to recover herself. She gave her back hair an extra twist, thrust a hair-pin through it, then giving her head a shake to assure herself that all was firm, went to the door with a hot red in her cheek.

Poor Amanda was always expecting some one who never came—some one who was eternally travelling through the paper-covered novels that she never tired of reading, as a flickering light in her little garret bedroom, burning deep into the small hours, could have testified, at least five nights in the week.

"Was he coming at last?"

Amanda opened the door with bated breath, silent, and in vague expectation. It was a lovely moonlight evening, full of those mysterious shadows which make the silvery

glow on the waters and the dewy earth so dreamily beautiful. As Amanda opened the door, a rich gust of perfume from the dew-laden orchards swept through, driving all meaner scents back into the kitchen, which, in the excitement about the strawberries, the family had left for the front and more general sitting-room.

Standing upon the door-step, fresh from the night air, and bathed in the moonlight, stood a woman, with a scarlet cloak wrapped about her. Its hood was drawn over her head, just far enough to shade, without covering her hair, and a bright, anxious face looked out from under it.

"Does Mrs. Clark live here?" inquired the lady.

"Yes; the widow Clark. Do you want anything of her?"

"She has a son. Is he at home?"

"What, William? Oh, yes!"

"Can I step in?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

Amanda stood aside, and the lady passed into the sitting-room, her black silk rustling along the rag-carpet, and her scarlet cloak flashing out in gleams where the candle-light fell directly upon it. But though Ruby Gray came into the house with her usual self-possession, she became visibly embarrassed in the presence of that stalwart woman, who stood regarding her with those large, gray eyes, which seemed to question her more firmly than words could have done.

"The dew is very heavy," said Ruby Gray, shaking the wet from her long, silken skirts. "I could find no footpath to the house."

"You came up from the water, then?"

"Yes; the moonlight was so lovely, it tempted me across the bay; and, being so near, I thought it would save time to come up myself. You—you sometimes do up muslins and laces, I am told."

She turned, in her soft, winning fashion, to Mrs. Clark, and smiled sweetly in that stern, old face.

"Yes, marm. I sometimes wash laces, flute ruffles, and do up fine clothes, and coarse clothes generally."

"Will you do some for me—fine Cardinal point, old as the saints? I cannot trust it in common hands."

"Yes, I can do it. Have you got it with you?"

"No; I will bring it over in the morning; or—or next day."

"Just as you like! But it is my day for washing down at Mr. Wheaton's to-morrow."

"No matter. It will save me a walk over that wheat-field. How lovely it looks from the water? but it's horrible to cross."

The lady shook out her ample skirts, and scattered fresh drops over the rag-carpet, in her desperate effort to keep up the conversation.

"Have you a fire?" she said. "I should so like to dry my feet a little."

"There is plenty of fire in the stove here," said Mrs. Clark, taking up the candle and walking into the kitchen.

Mrs. Gray followed her, smiling, and pushing the hood back from her beautiful face. She sat down on a rush-bottomed chair, and put up a pair of dainty little boots to the stove-hearth. They were evidently very wet, and soon began to smoke visibly in the heat.

"Really, I am so sorry to trouble you in this way. These moonlight evenings are so delusive. That young girl is your daughter, I suppose; what fine eyes she has! Yours, with a dash of blackness in them; but, perhaps, that comes from the long lashes. You should let her wear hoops."

"But she won't; she never would," broke in Amanda, turning upon her mother.

"We've got ways enough for our money, what little we can get, without spending it on them things," answered the mother, looking scornfully down on the sweeping train of Mrs. Gray's dress, which certainly did look somewhat like the wet plumage of a peacock.

Mrs. Gray laughed a soft, mellow laugh, which quite filled the room with music.

"True," she said, bending her head on one side, and glancing backward at her dress. "It does look forlorn enough; but that is no fault of the poor hoop; on the contrary, how could I move without it?"

"Mother, do stop; *she* wears one," whispered Billy.

"But speaking of the lace, Mrs. Clark, I will bring it over as I said."

"Amanda can come after it," said Mrs. Clark. "It must go against the grain for you to come across lots."

"Oh, not at all! Still I should be glad to see your daughter, if she chooses to come over. Perhaps we shall be able to find some ribbons and bits of trimming that will suit her. But, as to the lace, I must give personal directions. Good evening, Mrs. Clark."

"Good evening," answered the old woman; while Amanda went to the door all in a glow of gratitude; and Billy began to flutter about the room, feeling that he ought to escort the lady across the wheat-field, but afraid to offer his services. Mrs. Gray broke up his indecision by coming back from the door-yard, which she had half crossed.

"If Mr. Clark would not find it very much trouble, it would oblige me if he would go with me to the water."

Billy seized his cap with both hands, and went eagerly forth.

"This way, marm; here, along the fence, is a footpath; the shadders hide it, but it leads right down to the house. Then there is a short cut to the shore across the garden; you need n't have got so wet if you'd a-known the way better."

"You are very kind to point it out, Mr. Clark. So we pass close by the house down yonder. Who lives there, pray?"

"Who? Why, Mr. Wheaton. I thought everybody knew

him in these parts. He was born in that old house, he and his father before him."

"But I am from the city, and cannot be expected to know."

"From the city? That is, New York. How I should like to go there!"

"So Mr. Wheaton is an old resident?" said Mrs. Gray, ignoring poor Clark's meek aspiration. "Married, I suppose?"

"He has been married; but his wife is dead!"

"Poor man! Left with children, of course?"

"Ye—yes, marm. Mr. Wheaton has got a daughter, I believe."

"Indeed! Is she a pretty child?"

"Child! Why, marm, Miss Zua is a young lady!"

"Is she, indeed? Pretty, I suppose?"

"As a pink, marm; pretty as a pink."

"Indeed. But in what way, light or dark?"

"Not light, like you; but—but—oh, marm, she's beautiful!"

Mrs. Gray turned round in the moonlight and looked hard at Billy Clark, who blushed like a girl; though the shadows from a cherry-tree he was passing under prevented her seeing it. Still she discovered enough, and, uttering a soft ejaculation, went on smiling to herself.

CHAPTER IX.

WATCHING THE SICK-ROOM.

MRS. GRAY and Clark came upon the grounds, close to Mr. Wheaton's house, and passed into the garden through a wooden gate.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the widow Gray, giving a little affected start, "we must be intruding. There seem to be lights all over the house."

"Oh! that is because of the sick man."

"The sick man! Why, is anything the matter with Mr. Wheaton?"

"Not him; but that eternal chap that came from the city, and broke his consarned leg this afternoon. I wish he'd been farther with his buggy and black horses."

"Why, Mr. Clark, what are you talking about?"

"Just what I said, marm. There is a feller in that corner room with the honeysuckle hanging over it like a curtain, that has no business there. Come down to shoot partridges, did he? Why, the feller had n't even a gun."

"What is the gentleman's name? I may have heard of him."

"Moreton—P. Moreton, Fifth Avenue Hotel. There was a case full of cards in his pocket, and that was on 'em."

Mrs. Gray drew a deep breath. She knew all this before; but not that a young lady of exquisite beauty was under the same roof with her undeclared lover. Just at that moment her feelings were not at all unlike those of Billy Clark, who uttered a little cry of pain, and thrust both hands into his thin hair, as if suddenly seized with a panic.

"There she is! Oh, my gracious! There she is in his room; she's coming this way. Stand back, marm, behind this snowball-bush, or she'll see us and think we're watching—a thing I'd scorn to do."

Mrs. Gray quietly stepped behind the massive bush, which swayed in the moonlight as she touched its branches; but she still kept a view of the window, from which the rich honeysuckle-vine was drawn back in a profusion of fragrant foliage.

Directly a beautiful picture presented itself to those

eager and almost fierce blue eyes. A young girl came to the window, and, throwing up the sash, leaned out. There was a warm, red flush on her cheeks, and her dark eyes seemed full of painful anxiety. The poise of her head was like that of an antique cameo; for a light from within revealed its peculiar grace, and even gave out that rich, purplish lustre which was the glory of her hair.

Ruby Gray held her breath; this vision came upon her with a pang so sudden and sharp that she lost all self-possession. Zua Wheaton's voice reached her where she stood; for an old woman came up to the window, and seemed to protest against the cold air. As Zua turned her head to answer, the lamplight lay full on her face, and all its pure outlines and rich coloring was vividly thrown out.

"No," she said, putting back the old woman's hand as it approached the window; "this fresh, sweet air will do him good. His head is so hot, his eyes so heavy with smouldering fever, that something cool and refreshing must be of use. He grows more and more delirious. Just now he took me for some one else."

"No, it was, Ruby, he said; and that is a precious stone, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. Oh, yes! but he spoke as if it was a name. Hark! what is that he is saying?"

"It's of no use listening," answered the old woman; "the fever is in his head, hot and strong. He's calling for the waiter now, and wants ice-water and cold lemonade. I wish the doctor were here."

"Shall I call papa, Mrs. Test? He is not well this evening—that is why you find me here in his place—but if there is great need of a doctor, we must let him know."

"If Billy Clark were only here," muttered Mrs. Test.

"I could go up and call him; the moon is almost as bright as day."

"What, with that heavy dew on the grass? Why, Miss Zua, it would be the death of you."

"Well, suppose you and I go up to the stable and saddle Flash. I should so like a sharp run through the moonlight."

"You, Miss?" expostulated the housekeeper, horrified.

"Why, there is no danger; and the night is so lovely."

Billy Clark was about to start forward; but Mrs. Gray caught him by the arm.

"Be still," she whispered, so sharply that he turned round and stared at her, doubtful if it was the same voice.

"They will know that you have been listening," she continued, forcing a smile that reassured him.

"But she must not go alone," marm, answered Billy, trembling with an eager wish to be of service.

"Never fear. She seems quite capable of taking care of herself," said the widow, so bitterly that Clark lifted his face to hers, wondering what had changed her so.

"No, she isn't. At any rate, her father thinks not, and always wants me to go with her. Only to think of her saddling a horse?"

"She is so deeply interested in—in this sick man, that it seems nothing to her, I dare say," answered the widow, cruelly; for she saw how poor Clark winced.

"For all that, she sha'n't saddle a horse while I have got two hands, nor ride alone, moonlight or no moonlight. If he was the old serpent himself, I'd go after the doctor for her."

"That is right; that is noble," answered Ruby Gray. "But draw back softly, and let us find the footpath again. I am only keeping you. As the night is so calm and lovely, I should n't mind floating about here awhile. When you come back, and after the doctor has done his best, I should be glad if you would step down here and tell me what he says."

Clark hesitated, dug his heel for a moment into the wet sand, wondering why she cared so much about the sick fellow, and at last said, abruptly:

"Well, I'll do it."

"Thank you!" she said, with a real burst of gratitude, while something came flashing through the moonlight and fell at Billy's feet. He stooped to pick it up.

"Why, it's gold, bright gold. I hain't seen anything like it since the war began. Marm, did you know it was gold you flung me."

"Yes, I knew, and meant it. But that is nothing to what I will give if you will come down here every night and tell me just how he gets along."

Clark put the money slowly into his pocket, and came close down to the water.

"Marm," he said, in a clear whisper, "is it because you love that feller? Is he anything to you?"

The lady thought a moment, and, with quick tact, threw herself on his confidence.

"If I said so, Clark, would you tell of it?"

"Not to a living creature. I know how hard it is to be troubled about such things. Oh, marm! I can feel for you—I can."

"And if you thought I liked him?"

"Say loved, and I'll go to the ends of the earth for you," cried Clark, with an infinite sense of relief. "Without the gold, too."

"Well, Clark, use what word you like; I will deny nothing you think. Only let all this rest between us two."

"Whipping could n't get it out of me; no, nor shooting, either."

"I believe you, Clark. We understand each other, and will be firm friends. Every night you will come down here and tell me how he is and everything about him?"

"Yes, you may be sure of me!"

"And oh, Clark! take good care of him."

"That I will."

"Now you can go. I am keeping you while he is consumed with fever. But, Clark!"

The youth retraced his steps.

"Not one word to her nor to your mother and sister."

"Not a word. Never fear!"

This time Clark sprang up the bank, and ran at full speed up the terrace toward the house. Without any pretence of concealment, he mounted to the back balcony which opened upon the bay, and knocked at the window. Zua Wheaton raised the sash, looking pale and anxious.

"Who is it?" she said; for Billy saw the sick man through the window, and shrank back half frightened.

"Only me, Miss Zua; don't get excited nor nothing. I'm ready to go after the doctor. Only say the word."

"Oh, Billy! how faithful and kind you are. Take Flash, and don't mind running him; the old rogue likes it. Wake the doctor up and hurry him off at once. Tell him the gentleman is burning to death with fever, and completely out of his head; tell him I am so anxious, and shall feel terribly till he comes."

"What shall I tell him that for? He'll come quick enough without carrying a pack of lies to him."

"But—but—Well, Clark, say what you please. Only bring him at once."

"Yes, I'll do that; and—and, Miss Zua, if I am sharp and uppish about anything, especially him, don't seem to mind it. Somehow the old Adam will rise here when you—but that is n't the consideration. I'm off after Flash!"

Away the single-hearted creature went under the cherry-trees and into the moonlight, making braver efforts to subdue himself and be generous than many a brilliant man would have attempted.

Zua watched him kindly.

"Dear old Billy," she said, "how could he guess how much I wanted him? Always ready, always kind; and I treat him shamefully sometimes. After this I will do better. Why, no Newfoundland dog was ever half as faithful. There

he goes, riding Flash like lightning; I wish he could be as swift."

"Miss Zua." It was old Mrs. Test, who had come to the window, startling the girl.

"What!" she cried. "Oh, Mrs. Test! is it you? Ice-water again! Give me the glass; he looks so pitifully into my face. The cool tinkle of the ice puts him in mind of some mountain-spring. Hear him grumble because the trout will not bite. Lift his head a little, Mrs. Test, while I hold the glass to his lips. Mercy, how he drinks! how eagerly he crushes the ice between his teeth! It is more like breaking up diamonds than anything else; but it is Ruby! Ruby! with him."

"Don't speak her name," said the sick man, kindling up with sudden excitement. "It isn't quite fair, and I won't have any one speak of her irreverently. She is a bright creature, so witty, so — well, fascinating, if you insist upon a word I hate."

CHAPTER X.

WATCHING AND WEEPING.

I — I insist upon nothing, sir. Only that you keep quiet and try to sleep."

"Give me more ice, then?"

She held the glass to his lips; but he was impatient, and, seizing the lumps of ice with his fingers, ground them to powder between his white teeth. Then he looked up in her face and laughed, calling her Ruby, and asking if "it was n't a fair game to get all one could, and give nothing; a game she had played so often, and which he knew something of. Oh, yes! as some one might learn to her cost."

"This is all wild talk, and means nothing," Zua would say, speaking in a low voice to Mrs. Test. "People never do mean anything when out of their heads, except in books."

The young girl tried to believe this; but, somehow, the insane words that really sprang from this raging fever wounded her not a little. She began to hate the word that he used so often; and had she possessed a red jewel of any kind, I think she would have flung it over the terrace into the water that very night. As it was, she only listened the more attentively, and watched her father's guest with keen interest.

Mrs. Test wondered, as the patient grew more and more delirious, why Zua did not have her father summoned, and suggested going to him once; but the young girl seemed to prize her post in the sick-room, and would not hear of her father being disturbed on any account. The doctor would soon be there and set everything right.

The patient, hearing this, cried out that nothing could be right while he was forced to travel through that hot desert, with burning sand in his face, and not a green thing in sight; lame, too, and with fire in all his bones. Who dared to say that such things were right?"

Zua was a brave girl, but she had little experience, and all this wild language frightened her.

"Oh! I do wish the doctor would come," she said, leaning her head on the sill of the open window, and clasping her hands in some feeling that was almost a prayer.

A sigh passed her, like the wind sweeping the honeysuckle-vines that draped the balcony; but it came from a wild, human heart, so close to the window that Zua might have touched the woman. Anxiety had lured so close to the sick-room, had she but reached forth her hand.

Ruby Gray had left her little boat, and crept up to that veranda so stealthily, that even the sleepless house-dog did not hear her; and sitting down in one of those old-fashioned

hickory chairs that stood in that house, as parlor furniture, before the Revolution, she leaned her head against the clap-boards and listened greedily, as a thirsty traveller bends his ear for the first sound of running water. She could not hear much, certainly, for delirium is always rambling and indistinct; but once or twice her own name came, ringing loud and clear, from those hot lips, at which her heart leaped, like a bird at the call of its mate, and settled down again, taking her breath with it.

Then came the tramp of horses, and a faint sound of wheels rolling down the turfy, private road, which caused a commotion in the sick-room. Zua Wheaton ran to the end window again, making a splendid picture of herself, as she had done once before that evening. Mrs. Test went into the hall, where she flung open both leaves of the broad double-door. The breeze rushed through, and set her lamp flickering till her old face was surrounded with dancing shadows as the doctor entered.

Billy Clark sat on Flash, and, leaning down, looked through the door, thinking that Zua might come out of the sick-room to thank him. Poor fellow! when he saw only Mrs. Test, he rode slowly back to the stable and put the horse up. Then he crept back into the hall, and, standing by the open door, listened to what went on in the sick-room.

All this time Ruby Gray was gliding down the veranda steps, and clearing the terrace in breathless haste; for she feared detection, now that the doctor had come, and escaped to the shore like a criminal. There she sat in her tiny boat, gazing with wistful eyes, half full of tears, upon the light which streamed from that sick-chamber, so overcome with natural grief that the friends she had left in that grand hotel in the city would not, one of them, have recognized her. With the quick feeling which springs from real sorrow she watched that dim light, wondering if the man would ever be conscious of her presence again, and working

herself into a terror of apprehension, which was more natural than any feeling she had experienced for years.

At last she saw a flitting shadow coming down the terrace, and held her breath till it took the form of Billy Clark.

"Marm, marm, I come to tell you that the doctor thinks he'll die, sure enough. It's on the brain."

Up from that boat came a wailing cry—a struggle—and Ruby Gray fell, insensible, into the bottom of the little craft.

Billy Clark stepped down into the boat and lifted the senseless woman, with a great strain of all his powers, from her prostrate position. Holding her head up with one arm, he dashed cold, salt water into her face by handfuls. For a time the still, white face lay upward to the sky, like that of a dead woman; but after a few dashes of the salt water, a spasm passed over it; mouth, nostrils, and those long, golden eyelashes began to tremble, and, with a sudden effort, Ruby Gray started up, looking wildly into Billy Clark's face.

"Was it you that told me?"

Her words were sharp; her frame quivered all over, as if the reckless use of cold water had chilled her through.

"Yes, it was me; but I didn't mean to hurt you so!" said Clark, penitently.

Ruby put a hand to her left side.

"Yes, you did hurt me. It came so sudden; but—but, perhaps, I did not hear rightly. He, that is, the gentleman up yonder, is worse. Was not that what you were saying?"

"No. I said more than that, I'm afraid."

"More?" she whispered, shrinking away from him; "then it was all true? God help me!"

"I said the toughest and cruelest thing that ever was said to a fellow-creature, when—but no matter. If I'd known, I would n't a-done it, on no account whatever. Perhaps he'll live, in spite of the doctor. Since I've seen how it makes you feel, I almost hope he will."

"Almost hope that he will! Oh! my good fellow, pray for it, if you ever prayed in your life. If I only knew how! If I only knew how!"

Ruby Gray wrung her hands in a wild rush of grief as she said this; and at last lifted them toward heaven, calling out in piteous helplessness:

"If I only knew how! If I only knew how!"

CHAPTER XI.

TRYING TO PRAY.

POOOR creature, with all her accomplishments and exquisite powers of fascination, Ruby Gray did not know how to ask a merciful God to lift the pain from her heart; or to spare the man who lay suffering almost within earshot of her moans.

"Just try to remember, 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' if nothing else seems to come natural," said Billy, brimming over with sympathy; "perhaps I could help you out a little in that."

Ruby Gray turned her large, blue eyes on that meagre face, and answered, with a sad shake of the head, "Oh! that asks too much, and too little! All I want on earth is *his* life."

Billy made a great struggle against something that rose up in his heart like a mountain of lead.

"If I was to die to-morrow, nobody would feel like that," he said. "But if he dies, consarn him! two of you would be going into fits, and harrering a feller's heart in his bosom with your tears and screeches, all because he's six feet high, and has a great black mustacher polished with

bear's-grease, and white teeth shining through. Did n't he grit them, though, when the doctor sot his leg! It would have made you shiver all over to hear the bones grate."

"Oh! don't, don't!" pleaded Ruby Gray, shaking visibly, and putting the wet hair wildly back from her temples.

"*She* didn't give up so; but stood close to the door while the doctors did it, white as chalk, with her teeth sot, and her eyes a-shining like stars. When he yelled out that once, she gave one sharp scream; but that was all. Nobody heard her but me; and I could a-given him an extra wrench just where he lay, choking back the groans, and quivering all over, with great drops pouring like rain down his face, and his thick hair all limp and wet through — just as yours is now. Yes, I could a-done it. She'd no business to scream for him. What's he to her? She never sot eyes on him before to-day."

Ruby Gray trembled less now; and Billy could see, even in that dim light, that life and fire were kindling in those blue eyes. Her voice, too, changed when she addressed him again.

"You are right, Mr. Clark. Why did she hang about the door? It was no place for a lady!"

"No, she ought to have known that."

"But he did not know," she added, more gently.

"What of that? I did. I saw it all."

Ruby sprang up in the boat.

"Hark! what is that?" she said, listening.

"He's getting wilder and wilder. It's of no use; doctors can't save him. Besides, this one has just gone away. I must go back; they expect me to set up with him the rest of the night."

"You, and alone?"

"Yes, that's the way it is settled. The doctor says Miss Zua is tired out, and must go to bed, and the old lady too.

They have got a tough siege before 'em, he says, and must have all the rest they can get."

"And has she gone?"

"Yes, I reckon so. The doctor said she should before he left the house; and he's a chap that usually has his own way."

"And that old lady?"

"Oh! she'll be glad enough to go. Old women like her are not so fond of setting up nights. But I see her looking out of the window. She must wait, though, till I row you across to the Point."

"No, I will not permit it."

"But how will you get home?"

"As I came. One pair of oars is enough, and I can pull them."

Billy looked anxiously over the little bay and back upon the farm-house, where the gleams of a shaded light stole faintly through the clustering honeysuckles.

"Let me push your boat off then," he said, wading knee-deep into the water, and preparing to put forth all his little strength. "It's a shame to let you go alone; but I can't help it. That fellow is strong as a lion, and might scare the old woman out of her senses."

Ruby Gray put her hand on those with which Billy grasped the edge of the boat.

"No, don't push it off, Mr. Clark; I've a great favor to ask of you."

Billy dropped his hands from under her touch, and stood knee-deep in the rising tide, looking at her.

"Let me wait here, Mr. Clark; and when you are quite alone, open the door softly which leads to the veranda. I—I will steal through, and—and—oh, Mr. Clark! if he must die, let me see him once more! I shall never be happy again if you refuse me."

"Refuse you! Don't I know what it is? Haven't I

lain under them currant-bushes half the night just to see the glimmer that comes and goes in her chamber?—Sometimes she steps to the window and lifts the muslin curtain; then I feel tears come up, warm and full, into my eyes, and I go home thankful. Refuse you! I'd as soon turn away the lamb that comes bleating to my door when its mother is lost."

Ruby Gray leaned forward, took Billy's wet hands in hers and kissed them, spite of the briny water with which they were dripping.

"How good you are! how I thank you!" she said, her sweet voice rendered deeper and richer from the tears that swelled into it.

"Oh! if she would only do that once. I would n't ask to live a minute after," said Clark, plaintively. "But she never will—no, never. That sick fellow has come straight between us."

"No! no! that shall never be!" cried Ruby, with a passionate gesture. Whatever else may happen, *he* shall not interfere. Only let me see him for one little half-hour. Give me some signal when *you* are quite alone. Come to the window, or change the light; I shall understand."

"I'll come to the window and lean out. But first let me drag this little craft farther on to the beach, or the tide will wash it away. There, it's all safe. Keep a good lookout for the window; you shall see him, and no one the wiser for it."

"Thank you! oh, thank you! but don't be long."

"The minute they are all safe in bed, you will see a fellow about my size leaning from that window. There, she's looking out again!"

Billy ran up the beach, and, taking a short cut across the gardens, went toward the house. Ruby Gray watched him with anxious looks till she saw him pass, like a shadow, across the veranda, and enter the house. Keeping her eyes

on the open window, she saw the shadow of a woman crossing and recrossing the room. Then a light gleamed in the hall, mounted to the upper story, and went out suddenly in one of the gable-windows, leaving everything in that part of the house dark and still.

CHAPTER XII.

SEEKING FOR PAIN.

MINUTES went by, numbering in all nearly half an hour; then the spare figure of Billy Clark framed itself in the window and beckoned Ruby forward.

Ruby had been cowering in the boat, cold, shivering, and oppressed by her wet garments; but she sprang up with a little cry of joy, and, passing recklessly over blossoming tulip-beds and golden crocus-borders just dying out of flower, glided, with the noiseless step of a ghost, on to the veranda.

Clark heard the trail of her garments across the boards, and stole softly to the door on tiptoe to let her into the hall.

"Hush! this way!" he whispered, leading her toward the parlor bedroom. The hand which touched hers trembled, and Ruby shrank back, shocked by a sudden fear.

"So dark, so still! Is he dead? is he dead?"

"No, not a bit of it!" said Clark, with feeble bitterness. "He's getting quieter and quieter. Should n't wonder if he cheats the doctor and gets well, after all. Then, again, it's because he's tired himself out with talking. There's no guessing about such a chap as that; it's a sort of fellow that don't show himself in this part of the country often. I wish they wouldn't come at all. They're of no sort of use, only to set quiet families into an uproar."

Ruby did not hear half of this, for it was spoken under the breath, and her attention was fully occupied, for they were now in the parlor; and through the open door she saw Moreton lying upon a bed that was all whiteness like a snow-drift, and which threw out the rich color which fever gave to his face in splendid relief. His bright eyes, full of the fiery glow of suffering, wandered restlessly about the room; the hair lay in masses around his forehead, and was just breaking out from the damps of agony into bright curling waves. His lips were slightly parted, and the hot breath came panting through, parching them as it went. One arm was flung over his head, the other clutched fiercely at the white counterpane. His eyes fell upon the beautiful woman who came toward him in breathless agitation, and a laugh broke from his hot lips, sharp and quick, like a flash of fire-crackers.

"There comes my Ruby, gem of gems! pearl of pearls! the woman of women! I knew that she would set forth to meet me. Why not? Did she not invite me to come? Did I offer? No, no! Come here, *côquette*! beautiful *côquette*! Queen of flirts, come here, and let me look in that face. Why, how natural it is! the hair all down, half in curl, half out; the eyes, why, they look like weeping! Ruby! Ruby! if you had always been like that, no angel could have stepped between us; no angel with — No matter what she is like. Why did n't you look like that before, womanly and human, all the art washed out? Are you sorry, or is this only a part of the whole?"

These words, half insane, yet with an underlaying of truth in them, struck the woman with a pang of sudden illumination. In all her intercourse with the man lying before her, she had not dreamed that he thought of her thus. Had all his honeyed flattery and chivalric homage meant only this? Did he deem her artful, capricious, merely the flirt which so many had, in fact, found her to their cost? The thought

stung her like a serpent. Up to that very day she had been quite unconscious how much of real natural passion had mingled with her intercourse with that man. Now she felt in every fibre of her being how dear he was to her—how dark and dreary the world would be without him.

Ruby had encouraged, nay, sought this man's attentions, as women sometimes will who have mingled much with the world and become worldly: first, because he was the handsomest and most brilliant man who made the hotel his headquarters; and, again, her taste and vanity were both satisfied by his seeming preference of herself. But now, when he lay before her, ill and suffering, with fever-fires lighting up his face and mocking words on his lips, she knew, by the pang at her heart, how deeply he was beloved, how little his possessions or standing in society—things she had prized so highly—had to do with this love.

At first, Ruby might have thought only of these things; for this new passion could alone have lifted a character like hers out of its natural selfishness. But now she thought only of the man—of the sweet words he had whispered in her ear, and the attentions which were more precious, even in their memory, than the adoration of a thousand lovers could ever be.

Then the sick man spoke again:

"Is she here yet?"

Ruby Gray fell on her knees by the bed, natural, ardent, and full of womanly affection.

"Preston, Preston, I am here!" she said, suppressing the passionate grief in her voice till it came forth in a low wail.

He attempted to lift himself from the pillow; but something held him fast to the bed, and he only struggled to no avail. Then, turning his head so as to look her in the face, he murmured:

"Oh, it is only Ruby! only Ruby Gray!"

Ruby looked back on Billy Clark, who stood by the win-

dow, and said, in a plaintive voice, claiming sympathy even from him:

"He is wholly out of his mind!"

"Crazy as a kite with the string broken," answered Billy; "and what's worse, he ain't likely to come out of it. By-and-by he'll flash up and go off."

"No, no! They cannot say that; see how full of rich life he is!"

"Scorching hot fever! That's what it all means!"

Ruby took the white hand which had been wildly tossed over the bedside, and pressed her quivering lips upon it.

"No!" she murmured; "no! he must not die. If he only knew how I love him, it would drive death back. Oh! he sought for it, he pined for it; he will prize it so much—this love which seems to render me and him immortal. Great heavens! if I could only make him understand it!"

"Oh! I understand, I understand," muttered the sick man. "It is you who have strapped me down as they did the poor martyrs of old, burning me up with fire; but you shall not see the pain. I have held hotter things in my bosom, and nobody knew. What are you crying for, pretty witch? Go away! Go away! It is the other one I want; she brings ice, ice, ice!"

"How he raves! Oh! if he could but listen and comprehend!" she cried, wringing her white hands, and looking piteously at Billy Clark, who was crying like a great boy.

"But he won't. I tell you, he's bound to die, cutting about, right and left, like that. Better leave him alone."

"Leave me alone! Who says that? Leave me alone; that is exactly it. Then the angels come and minister to me; black-eyed angels, with red scarfs streaming on the air, and such sweet looks, full of mercy and love. Just now I saw her floating away among the roses. Who says that angels have blue eyes, and hair like sunbeams? Oh, yes! I remember that sort of thing took with Ruby. She

loved her hair, those great blue eyes, and all the rest, so much that there was no room for another love to creep in. Did you ever see her in the German, whirling, whirling, whirling, with the snow of her dress drifting about her, and — and — But my angel, with the black eyes, never dances the German. No man's arm ever girds her waist. Besides, she gives me ice — cool — cool ice; gathered with her own hands, from the springs of heaven."

Ruby arose from her knees, sad and disheartened. She knew well enough that all this was delirium; but it smote her on the heart all the same.

"Give me some ice," she said, humbly; "he needs drink. It is the fever which makes him talk so."

Billy brought the dish of broken ice, and gave it to her, muttering, "It's no use your trying; he's sure to go!"

Ruby took a fragment of the ice, with a wan smile, and placed it between the red lips of the patient. But he shook his head angrily, and the ice fell back against her hand, shocking her like a wound.

"He will not take it from me! Oh! what have I done that he should hate me so!"

"Crying, crying, crying — always crying! as if there were not tears enough in the world without that. Come here, young man; I want to know something. Does a fellow always die after he sees angels, or is he dead before?"

"Oh, Preston! try to recollect. Try to know me," pleaded Ruby Gray.

"Oh! I recollect, of course. Have n't I been in your parlor a hundred times? Have n't I — But what is the use? Why can't you let a poor fellow rest? It puts the other to flight every time you come. She don't like you, and never will. Go away! — that is a good little witch. I like you well enough — indeed, I do; but you keep her away, and that troubles me."

Ruby Gray went off to an open window, and sitting down

by it, sobbed piteously; just then a low knock sounded at the door. Ruby started up in affright, and looked wildly at Clark, whose thin face waxed white at the sound.

"It is her knock," he whispered.

Quick as lightning, Ruby sprang through the open window into the veranda. Clark caught one glance of her tear-stained face, as she looked back, and then opened the door.

Zua Wheaton stood on the threshold, in her loose, white morning dress, over which she had wrapped a scarlet shawl.

"Is he worse, Billy?" she inquired, stealing into the room on tiptoe. "I have heard his voice rising and falling for some time. Is he worse?"

"Not particularly, Miss Zua," answered Clark, trembling like a culprit. "He's out of his head, and rampages a good deal in his speech; but it ain't at all likely he'll go off before morning."

"Go off," questioned Zua, in affright. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing; only what the doctor said, Miss Zua. 'If the fever sets in,' says he, 'there isn't no chance for him, it'll sweep him off like a tornado,' says he."

"And has the fever set in?"

"Good and strong — burning, I should say."

Billy spoke with a sort of glee, for he watched her pale face cloud over with sudden terror, and grew bitter at the sight.

"Billy Clark," said Zua, trembling and white, "go after the doctor again. If there is danger, he must be called."

"No, Miss Zua, I am obeying orders, and mustn't leave this room till daybreak. It might be his death."

"His death! His death! Is that possible? Is there really so much danger?"

She went up to the bed and took Moreton's hand in hers. It was hot and dry — so hot that she almost cried out with

sudden dread. But Moreton, who had been lying with his eyes closed for a time, opened them and smiled upon her. Then he fell away again, muttering something which she did not comprehend.

Just as that smile crossed the sick man's lips, a pale face was looking into the window, and shrank away again like the visage of a ghost. Then the shrubbery near the terrace-steps was disturbed, and directly there came a line of silver rippling over the water, where a tiny boat cut through it, making for the Point.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MOTHER AND SON

A WOMAN, too meanly clad for a lady, yet with a look and air which bespoke gentle breeding, came timidly up the broad staircase of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and, approaching the kind-faced man who stood there, asked if Mrs. Ruby Gray was in, and if he would tell her where to find that lady's room.

The man, who, from his position, had learned to know the signs of a gentlewoman, answered the stranger respectfully, as if she had been an empress, that Mrs. Ruby Gray had gone into the country, and might not be back for a month.

The woman seemed greatly disappointed, if not distressed, by this intelligence. She leaned against the wall, and looked wistfully at the servant's chair, as if she longed to sit down a moment. Theodore pushed it toward her, scarcely thinking what he did—for with him a kindly impulse came before thought, and there was something in the woman's face that touched him deeply. She sank into the chair, thanking him only with a silent motion of the lips. It was

just after the general dinner-hour at the hotel, and a crowd of persons was passing up and down the corridors on their way from the dining-room. The lady saw this, and made an effort to move on; but her limbs trembled and gave way, failing her as she attempted to rise.

"Sit still, sit still; no one will see you," said Theodore, standing purposely between her and the people, who went smiling and chatting up and down the long front corridor, forming a gorgeous panorama of prosperous life. The ladies sweeping the carpets with their silken trains, and massing rich colors together in groups which an artist would have been puzzled to excel; the gentlemen, forgetting all business, even the price of gold, for that one genial hour, and giving themselves up to such happiness as only the society of refined women can give, when surrounded with everything that is bright and cheerful.

The poor woman sitting on Theodore's hall-chair saw all this with dull, weary eyes. The time had been when she too held an honored place in scenes like that, when the proudest of those lovely women would have been gratified had she formed one of their brilliant groups. Indeed, she saw two or three faces well known to her, and shrank away from their recognition with a sort of shame. But she need not have feared notice. Women of her seeming class were constantly moving up and down the passages of that vast hotel, performing such missions as the poor are forever rendering to the rich, and her presence there, protected as she was by Theodore, passed unheeded. So she sat still, afraid to trust her limbs again, yet anxious to take her misery out of that brilliant crowd.

As the lady sat thus, weak, faint, and disheartened, a young man came out of the dining-room, laughing and conversing gayly with two or three gentlemen, with whom he seemed on especial terms of intimacy. He was a handsome and rather dashing fellow; and, but for a certain air of dis-

sipation, which suggested careless habits and late hours, might have been considered the most distinguished person in all that crowd of loungers. This young man left the gentlemen, whose hospitality he had evidently been receiving, joined a splendidly-dressed woman, who seemed to be expecting his approach, and passed the poor woman so close that his garments brushed hers. She was looking down, and must have discovered his presence by some intuition more subtle than sight, for she started up and cried out "Charles," in a voice that would have touched a heart of stone.

The young man turned suddenly, and the blood rushed red and hot into his face. Then he gave a haughty lift of the head, and passed on as if that pathetic cry had neither reached his ear nor his heart.

The woman knew that he had seen her, and stifled the second cry which sprang to her lips; but the effort was too much. She made a feeble attempt to move on, threw out her hands dizzily, like a blind woman who felt herself in peril, and would have fallen prone on the carpet had not Theodore caught her as she was sinking.

A small parlor, close at hand, was fortunately empty. Theodore supported the poor lady into this room, and placed her on a sofa, where she fainted dead away.

CHAPTER XIV.

THREE LADIES.

AS Theodore left the room, and, with delicate tact, closed the door after him, three ladies had paused outside, in such conversation as good and gracious women love to interchange when they meet. Theodore knew them to be kindly and gentle, so he approached the group, and, in a few hasty

words, related what had happened. A look of sympathetic pity passed over each sweet face; for the beauty which springs from a quick intellect and delicate sensibilities was theirs in eloquent perfection. With one impulse they entered the pretty blue parlor, which looked so cool and pleasant with its azure furniture, and carpets of delicate azure and dove-color, where they found the poor lady lying pale, lifeless, and with a look of pain on her thin features.

Down upon her knees fell the larger of these three women, raising that weary head on her arm, and calling softly for water, wine, anything that would drive the deathly pallor from those pinched lips.

Theodore brought everything she wanted promptly; and the other two ladies rubbed those cold hands, and forced wine between the parted teeth, looking at each other in vague terror, for it seemed as if the breath never would come through them again. They were great friends, these three women, and took common cause in any case of distress that came before them; and the sorrow of the poor woman was so apparent in her face, that all the charity in their fine characters was completely aroused.

"Get a spoon and pour the wine through her lips, Lizzy," said the Roman-like matron, who held the sufferer in her arms.

Lizzy, for these young women called each other lovingly by their given names, as intimate friends will, turned her blue eyes brightly on her friend, and smiled as only the gentle and good can smile.

"She swallows from the glass; there is no need. See, see how eagerly she drinks!"

True enough, the poor lady — for, spite of her worn garments, she was a lady — opened her eyes feebly, and a faint light shone in them. The wine had brought some redness to her lips, and she looked eagerly at the glass, asking for more with her eyes.

"Will it hurt her, Nannie?" said the blue-eyed lady they called Lizzy, withholding the glass with evident reluctance.

"We may do harm."

Then the third lady, who had stood near the sofa, watching the efforts of her friends, came forward and took the glass from that little, hesitating hand.

"Give her all she can drink, Lizzy," she said, with that quick animation which bespeaks a positive character.

"But, Laura, dear, it might hurt her, she seems so weak."

"Exactly the reason that wine will do her good," answered Laura, filling the glass with her own hands, and holding it to the sufferer's lips, while her face shone with smiles, and her dark eyes brightened. "Come, madam, drink off a full glass; then tell us how we can help you."

The woman held out her tremulous hand for the wine, and drank it off slowly, with an appearance of keen relish.

"Thank you," she said, in a low voice; "it makes me feel strong. Pray, do not let me trouble you."

"Trouble!" said the dark-eyed Laura, filling the glass again. "I only wish it were something that would really do you good. Now your hands are getting warm. Are you subject to these fainting fits?"

"Sometimes. No, never, I should say. But I will try to walk now. Thank you. I am so much better!"

She stood up, strengthened by the wine, but still trembling, and somewhat confused in her mind. All at once a thought seemed to strike her, and she looked on the sweet, earnest face of the lady they called Lizzy, with such questioning wistfulness that the gentle-hearted lady felt a mist of tears clouding her eyes.

"Is there anything else we can do for you?" she questioned.

"If you would but whisper to him that I am here, and leave me alone with him only a few moments," she answered.

"I want to speak with him so much!"

"Who is it you wish to see?" questioned Laura, promptly. "I will do it for you."

"A young gentleman — Mr. Charles Gray. I saw him in the passage, walking with a lady — at least I think so."

"Yes, yes, of course you did; though who the new flame is I cannot imagine. He used to come often enough when his dashing young sister-in-law was here. He was dining with a party of gentlemen. Well, is it him you wish to see?"

"Yes. I did not know that he was here. If you would but speak to him."

"I will, of course I will. But who shall I say —"

"His — his m — Say that a lady — that is, a person —"

The poor woman stopped short, and looked wistfully around on the kind faces surrounding her.

"If you would let me see him in here alone," she faltered. "It is so long — so long."

The lady whom the others had addressed as Nannie broke in here.

"You shall see him where and how you like," she said. "I know young Mr. Gray, and will tell him about it."

She went out of the room, moving like some young Roman matron intent on good deeds and full of noble aspirations. This woman was never so graceful as when she had a kind act to perform. Directly she came back again, looking pained and perplexed.

"I told him," she said, "that is, as well as I was able; but he pleaded great haste to be gone, and said I might tell you that he would be sure to see you later in the evening at your own house."

"Did he? Did he promise that?"

"Yes, quite earnestly; but he spoke hurriedly, and did really seem in haste. The young lady tried to keep him; but he would not stay."

"Oh, it is all right! I am so much obliged!" answered the

woman, with more animation than she had yet exhibited. "It was very foolish in me to faint here; but I could not help it."

The lady was stronger now. Something like hope was kindling in her dark eyes, and with a sweet look of gratitude she turned to go.

"Good night, ladies; I shall never forget how kind you have been," she said, reaching forth her hand as equal greets equal, evidently forgetting how poverty-stricken she was.

They took her hand, and said she was very good, indeed, to think so much of any little attention they had given her; all regretted their inability to do more.

She did not accept this delicate hint; but went quietly away, leaving them in a little commotion of surprise. They did so long to lighten the burden this poor woman was suffering under; but she was no common person, and they did not know how to approach the grief she seemed so desirous of hiding from every one.

"She is a lady, every inch a lady," cried Laura, with her usual graceful decision. "How sweetly she thanked us!"

"Her poor little hands, how thin they were! Oh! how I wish we could do her some good," said Lizzy. "It seems a shame to let her go off alone, just after that fainting fit, too. What if she should be taken with another in the street?"

Suddenly struck with this idea, the three ladies went hastily into the passage, and on to the broad staircase; but the woman who had interested them so much was gone; and so was Theodore, for another person sat in his place—the good fellow had evidently followed her into the street. After awhile he came swiftly up the stairs again and relieved his substitute, smiling to himself, and muttering some pleasant words under his breath. The ladies went toward him.

"Did you see her home, Theodore?"

"Yes; or very near home."

"Who is she? Where does she live? Tell us; perhaps we can do her some good."

"Don't attempt it, ladies. I did my best to say something of the kind; but the words stuck in my throat when she turned her eyes on me. Let her alone—let her alone."

"Perhaps it is best; but it is all very sad, she seems such a lady," said Lizzy, who found it hard to give up a generous project.

"She is a lady," muttered Theodore, "if ever I saw one in my life; but that makes it so hard to reach her."

"Where does that poor woman live, Theodore?" said a young lady, joining the group.

"She did not seem to want me to know."

"But you found out? Of course, you did."

"Theodore never finds out anything a lady wishes to keep private," answered the man, rubbing his hands nervously, "especially ladies who wear faded dresses and last year's bonnets."

Here some one placed a card in his hand, which he glanced at, and the next instant was mounting the broad staircase, intent on his duties; but shaking his head all the way, and muttering to himself, "What a pity! what a pity! I remember the poor lady, if no one else does."

While he was talking to himself, three ladies passed up the staircase, smiling upon him as they went; for their pure Christian hearts knew no distinction of rank, and in this kind, hard-working man, they acknowledged that brotherhood of sympathy which will always link the good in human nature sweetly together.

CHAPTER XV.

GENTEEL POVERTY.

THE poor lady who had left nothing but compassion and a generous wish to aid her behind, entered an iron gate, leading to a small house, built in the rear of a noble block of buildings, whose gardens composed an open space, which was carefully planted and possessed almost the beauty of a park. The house was small, but pretty as latticed windows and a network of light balconies could make it. The shrubbery around the house was well kept, and everything was neat and orderly. Yet there was something about the place which chilled one with a sense of desolation; and when the woman entered it, she sighed heavily, and a look of settled gloom came over her face. She went into what had once been a tastefully furnished sitting-room, but it was almost empty now; two chairs and a little round table, with some few articles of china, unmatched, but each exquisite in itself, were all the articles of use or comfort that the room contained.

It was almost dark now; but the old lady lighted no candle. She opened the shutters wide, and used the last purple glow of sunset in putting away her bonnet and shawl in a closet which seemed empty and dark with shadows. Then she dusted the chairs, and gathering some honeysuckle-sprigs from a vine that coiled its rich masses of leaves and blossoms around the window, arranged them in one of the china cups, and left them to fill the room with their delicate odor.

When this was done, she seated herself by the window, and allowed the calm twilight to gather around her, sighing gently to herself as its shadows crept darker and darker throughout the room. The woman had evidently learned a

great lesson of patience; for she sat motionless till the moon arose and cast its soft light on the bare floor, like bars of silver shining at her feet and mocking her necessities.

Thus she sat hours and hours, watching for that young man to fulfil his promise, till the city was fast settling into that faint, solemn hum of slumberous life which is more impressive than absolute stillness.

At last this poor, patient watcher grew restless and weary of the heavy life that lay, like a weight, in her bosom. The moonbeams revealed her face, pale and wan, like that of a ghost, marked with the suffering of a painful transfiguration. She got up with difficulty, and attempted to walk the room, but sat down again, panting for breath, and cramped in all her limbs.

"Will he come? Ah me! how long it is! How hard to wait, wait, and hear nothing but that dull, far-off sound, and the soft rustle of the leaves, that whisper, whisper, whisper, and yet say nothing to comfort me. If he knew how many days it is since I have tasted a wholesome meal, he would not keep me waiting so. God help me! how I have suffered! and he, looking so well, dining sumptuously. There, there! how selfish hunger makes one! Of course some one invited him, and that was why he went; it was natural he should want to forget all his troubles—I wish I could—poor boy! I am glad he can enjoy himself there, though it does seem a little hard when he will not come near me for days together!"

She sat down again by the window, still listening for the steps, which had grown less and less frequent, as poverty made that little home a dreary place to visit.

The house in which there was so much misery was a lovely object to look upon as the moonlight fell around it. Two or three full lots had been cut short and crowded into a small space in order to give it room. East and west, right and left, a stretch of open ground, broken up into lit-

the gardens, lay around it. Every window of the house looked out on flower-borders rich with rare bulbs, and verdant grass-plots, soft as velvet, pleasant to look upon, night or day. Just now young roses were just budding on the fences, and grape-arbors were putting forth their blossoms; trailing draperies of honeysuckles swept over balconies and windows, loading the air with fragrance.

Whatever of poverty was known in that house, its surroundings were cheerful enough. The little space of ground belonging to it was even luxuriant in its growth of thrifty shrubbery; while the house itself stood, in the moonlight, a neat little *bijou*, such as a poet or artist might have chosen for the solitude which people of that class love so well.

I may as well inform the reader who this woman is, while the person she is waiting so anxiously for still delays his appearance, as he may, for aught we know, till the morning breaks.

The time had been when that old lady was full owner of every dwelling and every foot of land to be seen from her windows. When her husband was living, she might have gone into the street and walked a block each way without coming to the extent of his landed possessions; but, since his death, this property had been divided between two sons, one of whom died early, leaving his share to his young wife. The other portion had gone—well, you shall guess how and where—when Charles Gray presents himself before his mother, who is patiently waiting for him by that open window, so faint with hunger that she can scarcely keep the moan for bread back from her lips.

But how came the widow of a rich man in this desperate strait? I will tell you, though it is an old story, and has been told, one way or another, since mothers have been weak and children grasping, as profligacy generally is. Old Mr. Gray had divided his property by will, giving the widow

uncontrolled possession of her share, and she, in an evil hour, accepted this in place of the dower-right, which would have taken its ultimate disposal out of her hands. So, with a warm heart and most generous nature, she was free to live luxuriously, or ruin herself, as she pleased. This was a great misfortune to a woman who had been kept in profound ignorance of all business affairs, and who shrank from them with nervous dread whenever they were pressed upon her. She loved her children with all her powers of loving, trusted them, indulged them, and took the usual fate of such tender weaknesses as the judgment condemns while the heart applauds. Charles Gray, after the death of his father, had taken the reins into his own reckless hands, and entered life as a fast young man of the world. He had travelled in Europe—that is, had spent a year in Paris, making excursions here and there, perfected himself in the French language, and dipped deep into French social life where it was easiest to enter, leaving trails of gold everywhere, gaining thereby a reputation which had better have been left behind with the money lavished to attain it.

On his return home, this young man was thrown, with reckless habits and unsound principles, into such upheavings of fashionable life as come and go in this country with the caprices of that fickle thing called public opinion.

For half a dozen seasons Charles Gray was the great catch of Newport and Saratoga; drove four-in-hand through the thronged avenues of the Park; was pronounced splendid, over and over again, by a thousand rosy lips—petted, flattered, sought after, and utterly ruined, fortune, character, and almost in his soul, while he was dropping off into that pitiful thing, a *passé beau*, doomed at last to live by his wits.

But all this did not happen until he had, under pretence of taking all care and trouble out of his mother's life, obtained a power of attorney, which enabled him to plunge her into hopeless poverty with himself. For a long time

the young man kept up appearances by supplying all her wants out of the property he was squandering; but at last, house after house dropped out of her possession, money and lands disappeared, and all of her great wealth, that little house, back in the gardens of what had once been her own property, was all she had left.

Of this house, old Mrs. Gray only held a life-lease, and that was in the hands of trustees, beyond her own control, or, at the time of our story, this generous woman, weak only in her great love, would have been without a shelter. This fragment of her wealth had sprung out of her own generous character. A helpless relative, who loved solitude and yet clung to the old family affection, had made this retreat her home. In order to remove all ideas of dependence from her mind, the house had been built by Mr. Gray close to his own dwelling, and deeded to the woman who was to inhabit it. She outlived him by two years, and then disposed of her petty wealth, as I have said, unconsciously, perhaps, securing her benefactress a home which could not be altogether wrested from her. This was the woman who sat watching by the window that night waiting for her son, for he was now driven to shelter himself under her roof, and that was a little gleam of happiness in the desert to which he had lured her.

CHAPTER XVI.

COMING HOME AT NIGHT.

THE clocks that seem to carry on the pulses of time, and beat audibly in the houses of God, when the night is still, struck three in the morning; still old Mrs. Gray sat by the window, with the moonbeams lying full on her white,

woe-begone features. She did not sleep, but her eyes were closed, and the pitying angel, looking down from heaven, might have seen two great tears rolling down her cheeks and losing themselves in the wrinkles there.

At last she started forward and leaned out of the window. The clang of an iron gate, which shut in the passage from the street, heralded his approach. Then the lingering footsteps of a man, coming home against his will, made the weary heart in her bosom stir with expectation.

"Charles," she said, leaning out of the window, and speaking softly, as a loving woman will, "Charles, is it you?"

She was sure of it from the first, but longed to hear his voice after that lonely time of watching, and so asked the question.

"Who else should it be?" answered a quick, impatient voice; "and why are you sitting up to ask?"

"I—I could not go to bed, Charles, especially to-night," she answered, with tremulous tenderness.

"And why not to-night?"

"I—I wanted you to come home so much!"

"And so sat up to torment me by catching cold; at an open window, too. I thought you had more sense."

"I did not feel it cold, Charles."

"But you knew it was dark? Why put out the gas in the hall? It is as black as midnight here."

Young Gray—for so people still called him—pushed open the door as he spoke, and came through the hall. His foot struck against something, and he cursed the object, calling out angrily again to know why the gas had been turned off.

"I did not do it," answered the old lady, deprecatingly.

"Did not do it? Then who did? There are not so many servants in the house, I should think."

"No," was the mournful answer. "Mary went three days ago."

"I dare say the ungrateful thing went off dunning for her wages."

"I think she would have staid almost without wages, if— if I had been able to give her anything to eat," said Mrs. Gray, timidly; for when her son broke into a fit of temper, the heart in her bosom always shrank and quivered like a wounded bird, and she was afraid to tell him of the destitution he had brought on her.

"Why did n't you give her something to eat, then? or was she too lazy for the cooking?"

He spoke this the more rudely because conscience struck him a fierce blow, and he avenged it with increased wrath.

"I had nothing for her—nothing for myself, Charles. Since she went away I have been very, very hungry, almost starved."

"Hungry! My mother, Stephen Gray's wife, hungry! No, no, mother! that is cutting too deep into the romance of poverty."

His voice sank and trembled; the timid words of his mother had evidently startled him.

"Yes, Charles, I have been very hungry, and so sad! Thank God! I never refused food to the meanest beggar—did I, Charles? It isn't that God is punishing me, for I was always good to the poor; you can remember it, dear. Sometimes too good, your father said; but I do not believe that he thinks so now, when it is such a comfort to me."

"I would knock the man down who—"

Here his voice broke, and he came up to the window, looking down at his mother's wan face, which was lifted to his with an expression of piteous love, which the moonlight made almost holy.

"Mother, is this thing true? Have you suffered for food?"

"Yes, dear. I am very, very hungry even now, after drinking so much wine—that it was which drove me up to the hotel. It was the first time, Charles, and I know it was

wrong; but hunger does cut one's pride down so! Don't be angry. I thought you had gone quite away; and, being so faint, was about to ask Ruby for a little money, just to keep me from star—from suffering so much."

"Ruby Gray—cur—"

"No, no, Charles! you must not do that; her husband was my son, and your brother. I think, too, she would not have denied me."

"And so, in this hope, you went up to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where a dozen people might have known you in those old things, and disgraced me before all those proud women."

"No, no; there was not a soul who guessed who I was, unless—"

"Well, madam, unless what?"

"Unless it might be the man Theodore, and he never gave a sign of it, and never will, I'm sure. I would have perished here alone rather than have gone there, had I guessed how it might hurt you."

"Well, well, it's done, and can't be helped. But what possessed you to call out my name before them all?"

"I was taken by surprise; besides, I was getting feeble and childish from going so long without food."

"Oh, do drop that! I'll soon get something for you, if there is a restaurant open in the city."

"Will you, Charles? will you? That is kind. Oh, how good you can be!"

The poor woman clasped her hands in eager hope; her eyes shone in the moonlight like those of a famished animal.

"Oh, Charles, be quick! I would not have asked you for it; but since you are so kind, do be quick!"

There was some human kindness in the young man's heart, and he went out in search of food, cursing his own selfishness with a bitterness which was not altogether repentance.

CHAPTER XVII.

BILLY CLARK ATTEMPTS TO MAKE MRS. TEST HIS ALLY

BILLY CLARK went home, after his night of watching, torn by conflicting emotions — not very deep, perhaps, but enough to throw his feeble nature into a tumult. That handsome young fellow with the broken leg was evidently better. He had slept some in the latter part of the night, and in that sleep a soft moisture crept over his lips and forehead, while the hot fire died out from his cheeks, leaving only traces of exhausting pain there. His crazy mutterings had all ceased, and the eyelids that had been strained back so wearily, were closed with the fixed tranquillity of sleep cut in marble.

Billy had watched that noble face at first with thankfulness; for the delirium which had kept the patient so restless, had shaken his nerves terribly, and he was glad of a respite. So, for a time, he forgot Zua Wheaton's intense anxiety about the man. His imagination, too, was enlisted with Ruby Gray, who had made him her confidant, and trusted him as no woman had ever trusted him before. Her beautiful blonde face, with those delicate gleams of color, which Rubens alone ever fully represented in art, and which are so exquisite in nature, came and went before his eyes with a wonderful power of fascination.

Of course, the man on the bed was welcome to her, Billy muttered, and ought to marry her the very moment he was able to walk about. So beloved, and so sure of being carried out of Zua Wheaton's path, his recovery was the thing of all others the most to be desired.

Billy wished, with all the force of his little heart, that the doctor would stay there altogether, and so expedite the knitting of those fractured bones, that a boat might carry

the sick man in all safety across the bay into that gothic mansion where the young widow was praying and sighing for his presence.

Yes, Billy made up his mind, there in the still night, that his best course was to get the sick man on his feet as soon as possible, and out of the reach of those dark, velvety eyes which his little soul worshipped with all its tiny power of devotion. So he sat by the bed, still as a mouse, watching the snowy waves of linen rise and fall across that broad chest with the even pulsation of waves sweeping up to a full tide, and wished that a word from his lips could make the man sound again and send him forever from under that roof.

When old Mrs. Test came down in the morning, Billy resigned the patient into her hands, with many charges regarding the care she was to take of him, and an anxious inquiry if she did not think that good nursing might get him out of the house — say, in a week at the farthest.

Mrs. Test did not know. She rather thought a compound fracture like that would require a month at least; but he should have careful nursing — she and Zua would take turns.

Billy Clark caught his breath with a faint gasp — that was just what he dreaded: Miss Zua by that sick-bed, looking on the noble face in the calm beauty of slumber, as he had been gazing on it for hours; the thought was gall and wormwood.

"No, Mrs. Test," he said, breathlessly, "it's a man's work, this is. Strength and resolution is wanted here — masculine power, you know, like this."

Here Billy shoved the sleeve back from his arm, and revealed a puny little wrist that made a straight line to the elbow, where it bulged a little at the joints, and grew thin again, showing its anatomy with wonderful distinctness. It was a meagre limb enough; but Billy clinched his hand and made the veins swell with a pretentious display of

power that sent a smile to the withered lips of the old woman.

"That is the sort of arm to hold him back when he's crazy, and help him when he feels like trying to walk. Talk about a young lady like Miss Wheaton taking care of *him*—why, marm, 't would be like sending a humming-bird to tend a fish-hawk; besides, he gets dreadful uneasy, and flings the clothes about like anything, pitches both arms over his head, and clinches both hands in his hair awful. Miss Zua, don't think of it, marm—if you're a lady, as I think you are, dear Mrs. Test, don't encourage anything of the kind. This is a man's work, I tell you; and I'm the person to understand it."

"I'm sure you are good as gold, Billy—the doctor said so himself. That is, as regards watching; but then the strongest man must have some sleep, you know."

"Oh! I'm beyond that, marm—sleep is nothing to me. Napoleon the Great, you know, was above that sort of thing. Not that I am Napoleon; but then there are occasions when one feels—yes, I may say, when one feels like him. I'm up to the occasion, marm, and you'll find me so. There isn't the least need of any one coming near this chap but you and me. Don't let *her* come, on no account; it may be catching—should n't wonder if it was. You've no idea how my legs ache this morning. Don't let her run any risks, my dear Mrs. Test. Mr. Wheaton would never forgive you if you did. Just say to her how you have found me this morning, all cramped up; and keep her away from here. You and I, Mrs. Test—you and I. This is our work; you in the daytime, I at night—that's the ticket."

Billy drew himself up quite jauntily, and did his best to shake the leaden weight from his drooping eyelids; but they were very feeble little affairs, and the sparse white lashes came quivering down to his cheek after each effort, in spite of himself.

"We will do the best we can," said Mrs. Test, who was herself a little scandalized at the idea of Zua's presence in the sick-room on any terms.

"And you will keep her out?" said Billy, seizing Mrs. Test's hand, and squeezing it till she winced. Then he dropped the hand, blushed, and said, "Forgive me; I—I did n't mean it. We men do give such rough grasps of the hand—it's the masculine nature, Mrs. Test, and means nothing but what is respectful. Good morning, Mrs. Test, good morning; I'll just take a little walk, and swallow a mouthful of breakfast, then you will find me vigorous as ever—firm at my post."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RUSTIC TOILET.

AWAY went Billy after this, satisfied that he had blocked Zua Wheaton out of the sick-room with the consummate skill of a born diplomat. This idea kept him awake till he crossed the garden and got into the wheat-field; but it failed him there. Half asleep, and wholly worn out, the poor fellow went stumbling along the foot-path toward his home, which looked asleep itself so early in the morning; for no blue smoke curled up from the chimney, and the long grass all around the doorstep was trembling under the weight of dew, which no footstep had as yet brushed away.

Billy crept round to the back door, and was stealing, on tiptoe, up to his bed, when a door opened and Amanda looked out—her hair one forest of curl-papers, and her naked feet gleaming whitely on the threshold.

"Is he better, William, dear—is the gentleman any better?" she whispered.

"He's sound asleep, and I wish I was too," answered the brother, drowsily.

"But what does the doctor say? Oh, brother! is he so very handsome? Does he look like a hero just come out of a book?"

"He—he's nothing particular, Amanda."

"Nothing particular? Oh, brother William! I know better than that."

"Do let me go in, Amanda; I'm just ready to sink."

"One word, William, dear."

"Not another word, Amanda; I could n't stand it."

With this, Billy entered his room, closed the door, and, falling forward on the bed, dropped into that deep slumber which the great overtax on his weak nature rendered imperative.

Amanda, who had been watching for him since daylight, went back to the room in which her mother was sleeping, with her grim old head buried deep in the pillow, and, seating herself by the open window, looked out upon the wheat-field. How lovely and bright it was that spring morning, as it lay fresh and green under the rising sun, with thousands on thousands of dewdrops sparkling over it! In her strange, romantic way, Amanda had a keen love of nature, and enjoyed all the changes of that morning with the quick perception of an artist, while she was fancying herself a heroine, to whom the sickness of the young man down yonder had opened a living novel, which she was just commencing to live out.

You could hardly have blamed the poor girl for her romance, absurd as it was, had you looked out on the beautiful morning as she did.

There shone the bay, framed in with a great curve of living green, all tremulous with such wonderful beauty as the fresh dawn can alone give to foliage. Within this girdle of trees the waters heaved and rippled beneath the warm

flushes of the dawn, between which lakes of deep blue floated dreamily. The bay reflected these colors, and its waves seemed to toss through them ten thousand diamonds, that flashed and shimmered, as it were, over a ground-swell of weltering rosiness; for that morning it seemed as if the orchards had flung all the young blossoms into the waters, which were softly sweeping them out to sea in one broad, fragrant under-tow. Then the orchards themselves were, in fact, perfect seas of living bloom, scattering fragrance everywhere; and the whole earth was so delicious with the bright growth of a luxuriant spring, that it was more than happiness to breathe the very air.

The young girl who was looking out of the window, with her hair pushed back in tumultuous confusion, and her red lips apart, holding a faded calico dress together at the bosom with one not over-clean hand, felt all this beauty with a relish that few would have guessed at. If her dreams were wild and ridiculously fantastic, they were vivid as innate poetry could make them; and the girl felt almost like clasping her hands and attempting to fly out with the birds, which were singing with unusual gleefulness, and making the apple-blossoms on an old tree close by shake with the sweet jubilation.

"Mandy Clark, what on arth are you a-doing at that winder, looking as if you wanted to jump out?"

Amanda turned suddenly, and saw her mother standing before the broken looking-glass, hatchelling out her coarse, gray hair with a horn-comb, from which half the teeth were broken.

"I—I was only looking at the birds, mother."

"The birds! just as if you had n't seen 'em, year in and year out, all your life."

"Yes, mother; but one does n't notice. They seem brighter and more capable this spring. Just here, where an end of the clap-board is torn up, two little wrens are

building a nest—I could put my hands into it from the window.”

“Do it, then, and scare the creturs off, or I shall have you watching them all day long.”

“Scare them away—but I won’t! The little things are company, and I love them. It’s beautiful to see them chatter together. Oh! if one could only know what they are saying! Scare them away! Why, mother, you lose so much, in not loving the birds and the flowers, as I do. Look at the old apple-tree—how it bends and quivers, and shakes off the dew! while the robins fly in and out, with bits of straw in their bills—and you will lose it all.”

“The apple-tree! Who said I did not like it? Who said that I could not understand that all that red-and-white in the leaves would end in great, sound winter-apples? That is just what flowers are good for. When they are eatable, I understand them as well as anybody.”

“Ah! but you don’t understand what I mean; William does—but you never will.”

“But I can understand that it is time to get breakfast, and no wood cut. Go and call Bill.”

“No, mother; he has been watching with the sick man all night, and is tired out—poor fellow!”

Amanda was taking her turn at the horn-comb now; and a mass of brown hair fell down her back, from which she was wrenching out the tangles, without regard to the pain it cost her.

“You’ll break that comb,” said the old woman, tersely; “but that’s about all you are good for. What with this nonsense about birds, and Bill’s silly love-affairs, there’s no wood cut nor meals cooked, without I do it.”

The old woman gave her hair a savage twist, as she spoke—for she had not completed her rough toilet, when Amanda helped herself to the comb—and coiled it up, like a mottled snake, on the back of her head, as she went down stairs.

Directly, as the young girl looked out of the window, she saw her mother under the apple-tree, swinging a heavy axe over her head, holding a crooked stick of wood to the earth with one foot, as she cut it in short pieces, ready for the stove. I do not think Amanda was much shocked by the sight. She was accustomed to see her mother take the rude work of the household, and looked with admiration on the vigorous swing of the axe and the firm poise of that tall figure.

“She likes it, let her say what she will,” thought the girl, still busy with her hair. “I only wish William had half her grit—we should n’t live in this house, or go out to work for anybody.”

Amanda reached out her hand, gathered a sprig of blossoms from a gnarled old branch that swept across the window, and fastened it in a coronal on her head. The hands with which she arranged the flowers had not yet been washed, and the calico dress had lost half its buttons in front; but she bent her head on one side, and enjoyed the brightness of her garland none the less for that.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PINK CALICO DRESS.

AMANDA went in this incongruous array, smiling softly as she remembered her face in the glass, and thinking that, after all, the lady who called there the night before was not much handsomer or more pleasant to look upon. She found a tin wash-bowl standing at the back door of the kitchen, with a wooden noggin of soft-soap close by, which she used abundantly, and came in fresh and glowing like a wild rose, so far as her face and hands went.

The old woman looked up from her smouldering fire, and, letting the smoke half-blind her, made a curt observation, and fell to her work again.

"Well, now, you have strained up and done it," she said, with a grim smile on her lip. "Such extra washing might be expected of Bill, for the cretur is in love; but I would n't have expected it of you, Mandy."

"Mother," said Amanda, intent on her own ideas, "is my pink calico dress done up?"

"How should I know? Have you done it up?"

"Now, what's the use of putting on airs, mother? You know well enough I never did it up in my life."

"Then who did?"

"Why you, of course; no one can do up a dress and keep it from fading so well. I tried to soggle it out once—don't you remember?—and you got so mad because I forgot the starch and let it all dry in streaks, that I was scared out of trying again, and never mean to."

Mrs. Clark thrust a stick of wood into the stove with emphasis, and, tightening her apron between her two hands, commenced fanning the fire.

"Say, mother, is the pink dress done up? I don't know what I shall do if it is n't."

"Why, what's the row about it? Who is coming, or where are you wanting to go to, that nothing but that dress will answer?"

"I—I am only going down to the house; Miss Zua may want me, you know."

"Want you? What for? You'd be of no more use in a sick-room than a chipper-bird."

"Oh, but I will! You don't know how handy I am sometimes."

Again the grim smile stirred Mrs. Clark's lips. She was a shrewd woman, and understood the indolent selfishness of her daughter thoroughly; but, with the usual energy of a

smart woman, preferred to do the work herself rather than urge her child out of her supine habits, or teach her better things. Thus it often happens that the most active and capable women have useless children.

"Had n't you better begin now, and at home?" she said, eying the flowers in that half-brushed hair with infinite scorn. "Suppose you set the table for once."

"It's of no use trying to do things here," answered Amanda, flippantly. "What's the good of setting a table when there's no table-cloth, nor a teacup and saucer that belong to each other."

"These are just as good to drink out of, for all that. What's the difference, I want to know?" exclaimed the old woman, tartly. "But any excuse is better than none when you don't want to do a thing. Just let the table alone; I'll set it myself."

So Amanda let the table alone very willingly, as was usual with her; and, going out into the long grass on the edge of the locust-grove, came back with her hands full of daisies and buttercups, and her dress drabbled to the knees, sweeping a wet path on the kitchen floor as she passed over it.

"There it is again," snarled the old woman, wringing out her dish-cloth, and wiping the table with it. "Buttercups, daisies, and sich trash stuck in every spare tumbler and cracked cup in the house, and the dust an inch thick all around 'em."

"No it is n't. See there!" cried Amanda, from the inner room.

She held up her apron, which had just been swept over the mantel-piece, in proof that some of the dust, at least, had been removed to her own person.

"Just like her—just like her," muttered the old woman, going on with her preparations for breakfast. "What's the use of trying to make anything of her? Lost time—

all lost time. Her head's full of flowers, inside and out; flowers and weeds — flowers and weeds!"

"Now, mother, about the dress?" said Amanda, unconscious of these mutterings.

"What do you want it for?"

Amanda colored, stammered a little, and was suddenly struck with a new thought.

"I promised the lady to go over to the Point and get some ribbons and things. Don't you remember?"

"Ribbons and things! You'd better mend the dress you have on."

"So I will, mother, one of these days; but it's the pink one I want now."

"I suppose you can eat your breakfast with this on. Come along, it's ready."

"First let me carry something up to William."

"Set to, I say, or everything will be cold. I have no doubt that Bill is sound asleep — so let him be."

"Poor fellow, how tired he looked! I should n't wonder if he rowed that lady clear to the Point. It's like him, you know."

"It's like him to be put upon by any woman who wears curls and has a red cheek."

"Oh, mother! how can you say so of William? He is so refined, so delicate. Only look at his complexion and his hands; any lady might fall in love with William. She did, I'm sure. How sweetly she asked him to walk with her; and no thoroughbred gentleman's son was ever more polite than he was, holding his cap in his hand till she got out-of-doors, and putting it on again like a prince. I was watching them from the window till they got clear out of sight."

"Will you stop talking trash and come to breakfast, Amanda Clark?" cried the old woman, with asperity. "The next thing you'll be telling me what a lady I have got for a daughter."

"And so I may be, some time. Why not?" replied Amanda, with tears in her eyes. "Worse-looking girls than I am have married rich men, and spent money like dew."

"Worse-looking! Who are they? Point 'em out, Mandy Clark."

"I — I can't exactly, because you don't read books, and would n't understand, if I did."

"So it's in books you find poor girls marrying so much money. Well, I should n't wonder if you married some rich fellow in a book; but the money and the husband — they are made of something besides paper."

"But such things do happen in real life, mother. I asked Miss Zua if they did not, and she said, 'No doubt, sometimes.'"

"Miss Zua! She'd better keep such thoughts to herself."

"That was what made me think that there was a fair chance for William. I know she was thinking of him."

"Mandy, go on with your breakfast, and don't make a fool of yourself."

Amanda pushed her chair back and arose from the table, flushed and angry.

"Are you really my mother; or was I —"

"Was you what?"

"Changed in the cradle!"

"Changed in the cradle! Well, I reckon not; for all the cradle you ever had was a sap-trough with rockers put on it."

"Oh, mother!"

"It's a fact. When you outgrew the trough, we sent it back to the maple-woods. It was none the worse after we knocked off the rockers."

Amanda threw up her head, and the motion loosened the apple-blossoms from her hair; they had begun to wilt in the steam of hot tea and the intense heat from the stove. She took them up from the floor and held them piteously in her hand.

"Poor flowers!" she exclaimed. "It's enough to make you curl up and die to hear how mother can talk. She don't care a cent for anything but potato-blows and corn-tassels."

"Of course not; they are a sign of something good to eat."

CHAPTER XX.

WILLOW BRANCHES.

WHILE Amanda was lamenting over her apple-blossoms, her brother came into the room, the most forlorn-looking little dandy you ever saw. He had a pair of old slippers, a little too large, and covered with worn-out embroidery, on his feet; a dressing-gown, over which a gorgeous pattern in worsted struggled through the half-faded tints, swept almost to the floor; and on his small head was a smoking-cap of tarnished velvet, heavy with an embroidery of colored beads.

"Mercy on us, Bill! where did you get them things?" exclaimed the old lady, dropping the dish-towel from her hands in sudden astonishment.

"I bought them, mother—splendid, ain't they? A young fellow from York, that boarded in the village, got tired of 'em, and sold out. Capital for a morning smoke," he said, "especially the cap."

"But you don't smoke, Bill."

"I know; it makes me sick as death! But the cap looks as if I did—and that's almost as taking with the ladies. How do *you* like 'em, Mandy?"

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Amanda, examining him from head to foot. "Remember what I told you, mother. Now, what do you think? Is n't William a gentleman from head to foot?"

"You really think so, Mandy?" asked William, turning his head over one shoulder, and trying to survey himself at all points. "Think she could stand against this?"

"I know I could n't, not half an hour; not ten minutes, brother."

Billy's eyes brightened; he sat down by the table and folded the gorgeous dressing-gown over his knees.

"Now, mother," he said, with a simper, "I'm ready for a little breakfast."

The old woman pursed up her firm mouth, and poured some tea into a cup; then she pushed the brown sugar toward him, and added some milk from an old-fashioned butter-boat, which was the best milk-cup she had.

"Now a little toast, mother," said Billy, with proud complacency. "This bacon is a little too—too—what I may say, coarse for my appetite."

Mrs. Clark took a loaf of bread, planted it against her chest, and, seizing a butcher-knife, cut off a clear slice, into which she thrust a fork, and, dropping on her knees before the stove, prepared to supply the toast so languidly requested. She turned once or twice to look on her son in his gorgeous attire, and then fell to her work again, apparently reconciled, if not a little proud of him.

"Thank you, my dear madam!" exclaimed Billy, when the toast was placed before him; "you are very kind."

His look and manners were quite regal. He treated his mother as if she had been queen-dowager, and he a reigning prince. As for Amanda, she sat down opposite him at the table, and lost herself in admiration. Billy ate his toast with considerable relish, now and then casting a sidelong look on the bacon.

"Will you have a piece?" said Amanda, answering the look. "It's splendidly done; mother does cook beautifully."

"No, dear, thank you," answered Billy, taking a white

handkerchief from a side pocket of his dressing-gown, and daintily wiping his lips. "My appetite, this morning, is quite satisfied; but I'm obliged all the same. So you think this rather a success? I doubt if the young fellow I bought it of felt more at home in it. The worst of it is, dear sister, I'm afraid it would n't be just the thing for out-door wear."

"Well, I do n't know," answered the girl doubtfully. "In books, they wear such things about the house; I never read of them being used for street dresses."

"Then, how *am* I to let her see me in them? It was all on her account I spent the money."

"William," answered Amanda, solemnly, "you must leave something to me."

"But could you?"

"I'll get her to come here some morning."

"But she never does come here."

"That is nothing. She will."

"Oh, Amanda! if you could bring it about. I think one hour with me in this, and with you to help along, would settle that sick fellow's chances forever."

"Has he—has he taken a fancy to her so soon?" cried Amanda, panic-stricken, for all her pretty air-castles began to totter. "Has n't she got enough, with money, and such fine clothes, horses to ride, and *so* handsome? Won't she leave a chance for anybody else?"

"I only wish you could cut in, Amanda; for it don't seem to me as if he cared much for the other one."

"What, the lady that was here?"

"Yes."

"And is she in love with him, too?"

Billy all at once remembered the confidence that had been placed in him the night before on the beach, and drew himself up, folding his dressing-gown close, as if he feared some secret might escape from its folds."

"Don't ask me, sister—don't ask me; the secret was confided to my honor."

"Oh! then I won't, dear. Only, if she is, I can't help but hate her."

Billy arose from the table, brushed the crumbs from his dressing-gown, and stretched himself with an affected yawn.

"Hate her! Oh, that would be cruel! She is a splendid woman—my angel—my benefactor."

"Thy benefactress; that is the way ladies are spoken of in books, brother William."

"Never you mind which it is, Amanda. She's a splendid creature; and I hope he'll love her to distraction."

"Here's your pink dress, if you must have it," said the old woman, who had been opening bureau-drawers in the next room.

"Oh, mother! how bright and nice it looks! Thank you a thousand times. The little ruffle around the neck sets in and out like the leaves of a dahlia. Now, William, I'm ready; that is, I shall be in a minute, to go down to the house with you. Mother's cross as fire, sometimes; but she's good as gold, for all that. Wait a minute, and you'll see how scrumptious I shall look."

Up stairs ran the happy girl, singing as she went. Her voice was pure and flexible as a bird's, deep and sweet as the low murmur of waters; the mother and son were used to it, and did not realize what a glory and power it might become. Directly, the singing was hushed, and a voice came from the stairs:

"Ho, William! William, dear, step this way." William went to the stairs, and found his sister, with an old shawl huddled around her shoulders.

"William, can't you steal out and bring me a few branches from the weeping-willow—good, slim ones—and strip the leaves off? But don't let ma' know; she hates hoops like poison. Do, now; that's a good fellow."

"I understand. All right. I'll do it for you," whispered Billy; and, a moment after, he stole out of the front door,

with the dingy, but gorgeous dressing-gown floating around him, and wet his slippers through and through on his way to the locust-grove, where a fine willow flung its profuse branches downward, like a fountain of leaves against the dark back-ground of the locust-trees. Directly, there was a wild commotion among the tender, green foliage, and Billy came away, trailing a dozen long, flexible branches in his hand, which he denuded of their foliage as he went along.

Amanda ran across the little sitting-room to meet him, gathered up the willows, and with a breathless "Oh! thank you, brother! I'm sure you are welcome to the strawberries!" ran up stairs, hustling the willows out of sight, while her mother was busy at the back door.

This reminded Billy of his precious deposit under the tuft of clover. Out he went again into the long grass, and brought the little rush-basket from its hiding-place, with the forced fruit, blooming and red, heaped in it.

"Oh! if I could take it down to her just this way," he said, glancing at his gay attire, "I'm sure it would do the business; that sick feller would be nowhere. But the chap I bought 'em of told me they were only for house-wear. It would n't do — I'm afraid it would n't do!"

"What won't do, William dear?" inquired Amanda, coming in upon him with a suddenness that made him start guiltily enough.

"It would n't be the thing to go down in these, with the basket in my hand, so. Now would it?"

Amanda looked at him reflectively. The pose he had taken struck her as wonderful. She really thought William almost perfect.

"Why, it is like a picture!" she exclaimed; and so it was, where the artist has a weakness for gorgeous draperies, and in his love for them forgets the humanity they cover. "It's like a picture! If she could but see you now."

"But she can't," said William, mournfully. "It is n't

to be. Other fellows have their chances; mine never turn up."

"What if you make believe that your other clothes would n't do to put on — wet through, or something?" suggested Amanda.

Billy sparkled into cheerfulness at once.

"That'll do. What a smart girl you are, Amanda; no steel-trap ever beat you."

"It'll be a little of a smasher — but who cares?" answered Amanda, delighted with his happiness.

"No, no; I did wet myself, through and through, last night, getting out that ridiculous little boat."

"What, for the lady?"

"Yes, of course. The clothes dried on me; but that's no consideration. Dear me! how bright you look; and the hoops."

"Hush, hush! do be quiet. Where's my sun-bonnet? Oh, my! if mother has n't got it in the wash. Do my shoes show much, William? Can't see whether I've got stockings on or not, can they? To-morrow I'll let down the gathers of my dress and make it trail, like all possessed! Did n't her's sweep? There goes another hook and eye; but, thank goodness, I've got a spare pin. Come now, don't let mother see us."

Away the two went, softly and breathless, out of the front door, and down the foot-path toward Mr. Wheaton's house — William carrying the rush-basket very carefully, and Amanda shading her happy face with an old parasol, along whose bones the silk was splitting fearfully.

CHAPTER XXI.

BILLY CLARK VENTURES ON TWO OR THREE FIBS.

ZUA WHEATON stood under the cherry-trees, shading her eyes with one hand as she looked occasionally up the lane.

"He's worse, I'm afraid," said Amanda; "she's looking for the doctor."

"What business is it of hers?" muttered Billy, growing red in the face.

Zua saw Billy and his sister coming, and moved toward them, smiling cheerfully.

"He is better, Billy Clark—much better; at least I think so; but old Mrs. Test is so perverse. She says that quietness is, sometimes, delusive, and there is no knowing how it will be till the doctor comes. I wish he would come; but it's of no use watching—no one ever yet moved the faster for that. What a grand, good nurse you must be, Billy Clark! He may not be strong enough to thank you—but I will."

She held out her pretty white hand with sweet condescension, as if she had been an empress, and he her page. Billy longed to kiss the hand, as a page might have done, perhaps; still he had not the courage, but stood looking at it wishfully, almost with tears in his eyes.

"I have brought a few—that is, a little basket; yes, I may say, a little basket of strawberries, Miss Zua. I suppose—that is, I hope that they are the first."

Zua seized upon the basket with a little cry of delight, and held it up in the sunshine.

"Oh, it is beautiful! So red, so ripe, so every-way precious! Billy Clark, I do think you are the best little fellow that ever breathed. Isn't he, Amanda?"

"William is a good son and excellent brother," answered Amanda, firmly; remembering the same combination of words in some novel she had been reading.

"Indeed he is; and you, Amanda, how more than pretty you are. Upon my word, you look fresh and sweet as a damask rose in that dress. I never saw you so—so," she had almost said "clean," but ended in, "nicely dressed before."

"It is the willows!" whispered Amanda to her brother. "I told you!"

Zua turned her eyes upon Billy. She had been so taken up with the strawberries that his fantastic costume escaped her. Billy, feeling himself under observation, softly glided into an attitude, and hooked one finger into the pocket of his vest, blushing like a girl all the time.

"Why, Billy, how resplendent you are this morning!" she exclaimed, with a world of fun dancing in her eyes and dimpling her mouth.

"Oh, nothing in particular, Miss Zua. This is my house-dress—not exactly the thing for out-doors; but I got into the water last night, and so had to wear 'em."

"But what took you to the water, Billy? I thought you set up all night with Mr. Moreton."

"Yes, yes. Well, so I did; but going home—no, coming down, it was so dark. The fact is, he said so many things in the night, all mixed up together, and among the rest was clams."

"Clams!"

"Yes, clams. So, thinking that a few—say for breakfast—might pacify him, I went down at once."

"What, in the dark?"

"The dark! Well, yes. One doesn't want much daylight to feel for clams; but it does wet a feller's clothes awful."

Poor Billy was crimson while uttering his clumsy little

fibs, and Zua saw it with some surprise; for she had never seen him seem quite so foolish before. She laughed a little—who could help it?—and then fell to questioning Billy of his experience the night before; for she was famishing for information of every feverish word that dropped from the sick man's lips in her absence. Consumed with a feverish longing, as jealous women are, for that which is sure to give them pain, she began, with a little awkward artfulness, to ask if the patient had slept well, if he talked much, and kept up that foolish idea about angels being about his bed.

"No," Billy answered, savagely. "He did n't say nothing of the sort—not a thing; but he kept on about rubies! rubies! rubies! as if the word meant something red and sweet as cherries."

Zua's face clouded, and she began to stamp her little foot down into the grass, as if she could hurt it, and meant to do her worst.

"How people do talk in fevers! It's enough to make one laugh, going from rubies to clams—how absurd!"

"Don't!" cried Amanda, all at once; "you—you hurt the poor thing! How can you?"

It was a golden dandelion which Zua had crushed down with her heel, glad to see the poor thing coil under her feet like some pretty reptile striving to writhe out of its misery. Zua removed her foot, and revealed the poor flower crushed and broken under it.

Amanda was anxious and pale, as if she had seen a child wounded. She had so few companions in her out-of-the-way life, that it seemed as if the flowers belonged to a bright sisterhood, of which she was the servant and protector.

"You have killed it!" she said, mournfully. "Come away, and let it die."

Zua laughed and moved toward the house. She felt, in her prosperous life and rich beauty, as if she were born to trample down higher things than a few wild-flowers, and

deemed herself privileged to do it. Directly her mind went back to the old subject.

"So he kept on talking wildly all night?" she said, addressing Billy.

"Oh, that he did!" answered the artful fellow. "You should have heard him. 'Billy,' says he—"

"Why, how on earth did he know your name?"

"How! I—I told him, of course. How was he to ask for things without that? 'Billy,' says he, 'don't let any women into this room; I don't like it.'"

"What?"

"Yes, he did. 'Especially young ones,' says he. 'I don't so much mind that good old dove; but girls—oh, Billy Clark, Billy Clark!' says he, 'keep them away, if you don't want to kill me.'"

"Did he say that, Billy?" asked Zua, with shame in her eyes, and a hot red on her cheek like that which the sun burns into a mellow peach.

"Yes, he did—and more too; only I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings by telling the particulars."

"But he was out of his head!"

"Not when he got on that subject."

"It may be; but I don't know of any girls that want to go into his room."

"Of course not—absolutely immodest; that was what he muttered to himself."

"What?"

"Nothing, Miss. I wasn't meaning anything. Talking to myself—do sometimes; it's a habit I've got."

Zua's eyes flashed like water under sunshine. Heated and angry, she was out of all patience with herself for the sympathy she had wasted on the sick man, who could speak of her kindness in that fashion even in his ravings.

Billy saw the expression of her face, and trembled even to the feet encased in the dingy embroidery of those slip-

pers. He felt like a school-boy who had audaciously lifted the floodgates over a waterfall.

"I—I may be just a little out of the way; besides, he was crazy—now I think of it. He must have been crazy," he said, rubbing his hands together with deprecating anxiety.

But Zua walked proudly on, silent and heedless. Had she, indeed, been so forward and unmaidenly in entering that sick-room? Were mere conventionalisms so binding upon human sympathies? Would she not have done the same, had Billy Clark, there, broken his leg?

This question rather startled Zua. Could any misfortune possible to Billy Clark have kept her wakeful an entire night? Would she have been given up to that intense longing to mitigate his pain with her own hand, if he had been the sufferer?

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BASKET OF STRAWBERRIES.

THE color on Zua's cheeks grew hotter and redder as she reflected on what Clark had told her. They passed into the garden in silence, the proud girl looking deeply offended.

Billy became uneasy about her silence. He was disappointed, too; for after the first amazed glance, she had not once turned her eyes on his finery.

"Would you just accept them strawberries, and think no more about it?" he said. "They got ripe a-purpose for you."

The angry flush turned to a smile on Zua's face. She was an ardent young creature, and flung off unpleasant feelings as roses cast the rain that beats into their bosoms over night.

"Oh, they will be so nice for him!" she thought, but not aloud; for some remnants of disturbed pride stirred her heart, and she was shy of exposing its changefulness, even to Billy Clark, who seemed suddenly to have acquired the power of annoying her.

"Oh, I am so much obliged!"

These were the words which sprang above her thoughts, and set Billy's heart off in a quick palpitation. Amanda had left them, and was wandering about in the garden, looking into the crimson bells of the tulips, and caressing their broad, green leaves with her hands, lovingly, and with the tenderness of a mother fondling the plump foot of her infant.

"I—I'm glad you like 'em," said Billy, all in a glow of delight.

"Like them! why there never was anything so delicious."

Billy had almost turned his back on the radiant creature, and fell to kissing his own hand with silent rapture. She had touched it in taking the basket.

"Billy—"

He started, guiltily, dropped his hand, which crept up the dressing-gown sleeve and hid itself, then stammered out:

"Did you speak, Miss Zua?"

"Look! you are far-sighted. Isn't that the doctor?"

"Sure enough, it is!"

"I—I must go in and tell Mrs. Test. Thank you a thousand times for the strawberries."

She was gone. He caught the flutter of her white dress, as she floated down the front veranda, and turned away, wondering if there ever was another creature so lovely.

"Billy," said Amanda, coming up to him, "might I just go into the house; and if Mrs. Test should want me to help her, would you care if I stayed a little while?"

Billy grew animated at once.

"Just the thing, Mandy, dear; just go in and offer to nurse him."

"But I might do harm, not knowing much about sickness. If Mrs. Test will only tell me how!"

"Oh, she'll do that! You in the daytime, and I at night; there won't be much chance for visits, then—don't you see?"

"Do I look nice, William? Is my hair just the thing?"

"Nice! Why you look like a pink."

"Billy!"

"Well, what is it, Amanda?"

"You are just the kindest and best brother that ever lived!"

"No, I ain't. Don't praise me when I don't deserve it."

"You don't think it forward, nor nothing?" questioned Amanda, who felt her breath coming quicker at the thought of presenting herself before the wounded man.

"Forward? No."

"You said something to her about its being immodest."

"For a young girl!"

"But she is just a little older than I am."

"Amanda Clark, I do think you are the most hateful, tantalizing cretur! Can't you see the difference between folks and folks?"

"Well, no, I can't exactly, William; but you're just as good as gold to let me go. If mother nags about it, you'll stand by me, William?" she continued, struck with a sudden panic.

"Won't I?" answered Billy, standing up manfully in his gorgeous attire, as if to typify the position he was ready to take.

"And you'll go in with me, just to tell Mrs. Test about it?"

"Of course, I will. Come along."

So they went into the house together; and Billy informed old Mrs. Test that his sister was a nurse worth her weight

in gold, and ready to make herself handy in the sick-room or kitchen, just as she could be most useful.

The good old lady was rejoiced to secure the extra help so much needed in the household, and gave Amanda a basket of old linen at once, from which she was directed to tear bandages and have everything ready for the doctor, who was even then coming through the garden gate.

Amanda sat down in the broad hall, and fell to work with more zeal than knowledge; but she managed to get the linen into strips, and handed it over with pride, when Mrs. Test hurried from the sick-room after it.

Meantime, Billy went into the garden, and made himself useful about the strawberry-beds with a little hoe, which he used dexterously among the plants.

"I've got that all fixed," he muttered to himself. "What a goose I was, not to think of Amanda before. Why, between us, we shall have the fellow to ourselves, night and day. If he gets a chance to talk with her, I lose my guess; that's all."

Billy was interrupted in these thoughts by the appearance of the doctor, who wound his way through the rose-bushes, with Zua Wheaton walking close by his side. She was talking earnestly; and he answered her, now and then, smiling, as elderly men will when in the society of a beautiful girl. Billy was not near enough to gather a word of the conversation; but he saw by the two faces that it was pleasant and hopeful.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THAT MINIATURE CASE ON THE WINDOW-SILL.

THIS is what passed between Zua and the doctor:

"Now, doctor, tell me—is he better or worse? Is this quiet a delusion, or a sign of comfort to us?"

Zua said this on the veranda, and held the doctor's arm with her hands, looking up in his face, and asking the question with her eyes rather than her lips.

"He is better; decidedly better, my dear child."

"Ah, I am so glad!"

"The fever is gone; the nervous excitement is quieting down; we have nothing but the broken limb to contend with now."

"And that you can soon cure."

"Well, such hurts as his must have time. We can serve nature well, but she is not to be hurried."

"Is he quite comfortable, doctor?"

"I saw nothing to the contrary. The first dressing was got over without much pain."

"I'm glad of that. And is he quite himself?"

"What, you are thinking that last night he was one beside himself," answered the doctor, laughing heartily at his own joke; "but he is all right now. Go in and see, my dear; go in and see! I think the young fellow seemed to be expecting you, for his face fell every time the door opened, letting in only Mrs. Test."

"But it is hardly right. I—I am afraid he—that is, papa—might think it improper."

"Nonsense, my child! I thought you were above such absurd scruples. The young fellow is your guest, helpless and sick; what he wants most is cheerful society, pleasant surroundings. I prescribe at least three visits a day."

"Oh, doctor!"

"Dainty little things to eat, and beautiful objects for the eye—that accounts for my prescription—so three visits a day. Music, when he can bear it; reading, if he asks for that; a breath of roses through the window in the morning, and of salt-sea air at high tide."

"Are you in earnest, doctor—in real, honest earnest? Are—are you teasing?"

"In earnest, upon my honor—never more so. I wish this young man to have every care. He is anxious and fretted about the trouble he is giving, and that must be done away with, unless the burden is too great for you."

"Oh! no, no! What heathens you must think us, to say that."

"Of course, I am sure that he is welcome as the day; but with a stranger it is different; and the least appearance of coldness—"

"Yes, yes, I see. Everything shall be done as you wish. I only hesitated about personal attendance, because—"

"Because you are beautiful, and he is young; as if that makes any difference when a kind act is to be performed."

"You are a dear old flatterer, doctor, and I would do anything to oblige you!"

"Then cast all this nonsense out of your head, and fancy yourself the poor young fellow's sister."

"I'll try," answered Zua, lowering her eyes demurely.

"Amuse him out of his pain and the lonely feeling which every one must have in a strange house. He is a fellow of superior education and abilities; one can see that with a single glance."

"That I am sure he is," answered Zua, eagerly.

"And may be married, for aught I know."

Zua started, and looked up a little wildly. Somehow, the thought had never struck her before.

"Have you any idea? Do you know?"

The doctor smiled a little mischievously.

"I have n't an idea; and I don't know. But you must be a good girl, obey my directions, and on our next visit I will find out."

"But — but what made you think —"

"Just this, and nothing more: from his vest pocket dropped a tiny photograph in a crimson-velvet case. It flew open, and I saw a pretty face—that is all. So don't fall in love with him till we know who he is."

All the red died suddenly out of Zua Wheaton's face. It was not yet twenty-four hours since she had first seen this young Moreton. Was the warning already too late? I cannot answer this; but she turned away from the doctor without speaking again, and went into the house. As she passed the open window, near which the sick man lay, she caught a gleam of crimson on the sill; looked again, and saw a little, round case, which might have held a diamond brooch or a portrait. She sat down in one of the hickory chairs, softly reached out her hand, and drew the case toward her, holding her breath as if the thing had been a theft.

It was a female head, radiant with beauty; soft curls of feathery gold seemed to float over the white forehead; a glimmer of blue drapery defined the bust. Everything about it was lovely. Zua closed the spring with a snap that made her start, and laid the case softly back, sighing heavily as she did so. Billy Clark would have known that face; to Zua it was strange, but, oh! how beautiful. A few minutes after Zua's white dress floated past the window, and the sick man saw it. Then old Mrs. Test went to the hall-door and found her there, looking white and troubled.

"Come in," said the old lady; "he is doing so well."

Zua followed the old lady into the sick-room, and found the guest, with his face turned toward the door, watching for her approach. His vest lay on the counterpane, and he was searching the pockets with an unsteady hand.

"It must have been lost," he said, with a look of trouble on his face, laying his vest down. "I am very sorry."

"Is this it?" said Zua, taking the crimson case from the window.

"Yes, yes; thank you. It is the picture of a friend, and I wish to return it. The loss would have been awkward."

Zua's face lost half its shadows.

"Do you know," said Moreton, "I am just a little hungry? But the doctor says I must be careful; very light food, and a little fruit—but that is not to be had."

"Oh! yes it is," cried Zua, starting up all in a flush of eagerness.

The next moment she came in with that little rush-basket of strawberries in her hand.

A few minutes after this, Billy Clark came softly up the veranda with a handful of flowers which he had just gathered. He cast a glance into the window, and saw Zua Wheaton sitting close by the sick man's bed, with the basket of strawberries in her lap, dropping the rich fruit, one by one, into his eagerly opened mouth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RED SIGNAL.

RUBY GRAY was late to breakfast, somewhat to the annoyance of her hostess, who found the elegant irregularity of her guest a serious impediment to her household routine. But the handsome widow cared nothing for that; a supreme indifference to the comfort or convenience of others was one of her characteristics. I think she would not have left the droop of her smallest curl unsatisfactory

to save the best friend she had on earth from grief. But she was very sweet and caressing in her selfishness, and protested so prettily, that half the time her egotism was forgotten in her beauty, and in that elaborate make-believe which is sometimes almost as effective as generosity itself.

She came down the morning after her visit across the bay, looking a little worn and depressed. The faint blue shadows had grown purplish under her eyes, and there was a restless expression of the mouth, which now and then broke into a forced smile, that denoted more pain than she would have liked to expose. Still she had been very careful about her toilet; the daintiest and most shadow-like little French cap fluttered above her fair curls; her dress of rich pique was liberally brightened with pale-blue ribbons; and a dainty slipper gave shapely beauty to the foot which had been so thoroughly wetted the night before.

No matter how selfish a guest may be, a well-bred lady never forgets her duty as a hostess. Though the family breakfast had been over a full hour, an exquisite little repast stood ready for Ruby Gray in a bright, airy sitting-room which opened upon the flower-garden, and overlooked the bay now quivering all over with dimples and rifts of silvery sunshine. Close by the open window stood a little table white as the crust on pure snow, glittering with frosted silver, and white with china that seemed moulded in fairy-land. A little mulatto girl, with a good deal of scarlet in her dress, stood in attendance, ready to bring in the delicate white rolls and fragrant coffee whenever the lady appeared.

Ruby took her seat languidly, and covered her eyes with one hand, as if the flowers and bright water distressed her. The girl drew near, and asked if she should bring in the breakfast then.

"A cup of coffee, hot and strong — nothing more. I cannot eat a mouthful."

The girl turned away, but Ruby checked her.

"Has any one been here this morning — that is, for me?"

"No, Miss."

"Look out and see if you can find a boat on the water."

Flora went through the window, and, mounting a garden-chair, looked over the bay, shading her eyes with one hand, making a pretty bronze statue of herself where she stood.

"Yes, Miss, I see a boat coming."

"Which way — which way?"

"Around the Point, marm."

"That is from the landing. Look the other way. Is nothing coming from the shore?"

"Not as I see, marm."

"Look again."

"I does, marm; but there ain't nothing but two fellers a-picking up clams just below Mr. Wheaton's house, and another feller sitting in one end of a scow fishing. Oh! golly gracious!"

"What is it — what is it?" cried Ruby, turning pale, and stepping hastily through the window.

"Nothing; only there's a great red blanket or shawl, or something, a-streaming out of the garret-window."

The quick scarlet flashed into Ruby's face. She remembered that, among other things, Billy Clark had suggested this method of telling her what she most wished to know. She clasped her hands in a sort of ecstasy, and went back to the room whispering, as if it were a delicious secret:

"He is better — he is better!"

Flora sprang down from the garden-chair, and came through the window full of girlish excitement.

"The boat is a-coming this way, marm. The island hides it just now; but, as sure as you live, it's a-coming."

"Very well; let it come," said Ruby, indifferently; "the boat is nothing to us."

"Oh, yes, marm! it may bring lots of company from York; who knows? I saw smoke from the steamboat, round by the landing, ever so long ago."

"I hope not; oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Ruby, who had but one human being in her mind that morning, and would gladly have shut out the whole world.

"Shall I run and get the coffee, now, marm?"

"Yes, and the rest. I—I begin to feel a little hungry; so, bring in whatever they have."

"Now, that's something like," cried Flora, darting off with fresh animation, but coming back instantly.

"Oh! I forgot. The madam has driven over to the store, and told me to ask you to excuse her. Mr. Van Lorn has gone over the bay to buy some cattle—cows, I mean—and I'm to take care of things, and get everything that you want; so, if coffee, and rolls, and eggs, and broiled ham, and butter, and flannel-cakes ain't enough, jest mention the other thing, and it'll be on hand."

"No, no! that is enough," answered Ruby, smiling, and very thankful that fate had left her alone that one morning.

Away went Flora, smiling till her white teeth shone again; and directly the repast she had promised stood on the little round table, over which flecks of sunshine came dancing through the honeysuckle-vines.

Ruby Gray could be indolent and sensuous enough when no strong passion disturbed her. She was now comparatively at rest. Moreton was better—that red signal assured her of that; and with the free breath she was drawing, came her usual relish for food. She sipped her coffee, over which the sweet country cream was mantling; took the snowy heart-out from her French rolls; and broke her eggs with soft blows from a golden spoon, enjoying the whole with something like her old contentment.

Flora stood by, smiling with that mellow good-humor which comes so naturally to the African; now offering superfluous attentions, and again darting out of doors, to see if the red signal was still afloat, and if the little craft from the Point was bearing that way.

"As true as I live, marm, it's landed, and a gentleman is coming up the hill. I seed him turn into the foot-path, cutting up from the beach, with my own eyes."

Ruby Gray made an impatient movement.

"I hope not," she said, with a sigh; "heaven knows I want rest more than anything. If any visitor comes, say that the family are out, Flora. It can be no one that I know coming from that direction."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE UNWELCOME VISITOR.

AS Ruby Gray spoke, a shadow darkened the sunshine, coming in through the screen of honeysuckles, and a voice called out:

"Don't be so sure of that, fair lady. Some of your worshippers may have nerve enough to follow you even here."

"Why, Charles—why, Mr. Gray, I hardly expected to see you here," said Ruby, completely taken by surprise.

"No; I dare answer for that," laughed the young man, passing through the window, and laying his hat and a jaunty little cane on a side-table. "But one cannot well live out of the sunshine altogether, so I came in search of mine. Oh, Ruby! it was very cruel of you to run away from us all in this sly fashion; the hotel has not been itself since you left it."

Ruby was a good deal confused, and half angry. The easy familiarity of this man's demeanor annoyed her; yet, for some reason, she seemed to conceal this.

"You are all kind to miss me so much," she said, smiling.

"Oh! that is a thing we cannot help. I, for one, could

endure it no longer. As for your favorite admirer, Moreton, he has disappeared altogether."

Young Gray cast a slow, sidelong glance at Ruby as he spoke, but she neither shrank nor changed color.

"Have you had breakfast?" she said, looking him innocently in the face. "Mrs. Van Lorn is in the village, and Mr. Van Lorn away somewhere; but I can extend that much hospitality to a relative, I suppose."

Young Gray answered by drawing a chair close to the table. He slowly pulled off his gloves, and gave them to Flora, saying, in his easy way:

"Drop them in the hat, child; then bring me some warm coffee. I hope you have not quite finished, Ruby; one relishes a breakfast so much better in good company. They offered me something on the boat, but I could not endure the close cabin."

"I had finished my breakfast when you came in, thank you," answered Ruby.

"Oh! that is unfortunate; but if you cannot share my meal, smile upon it, and I am twice fed."

Gray took a cup of coffee from Flora as he spoke, and helped himself to a roll. Ruby was so much annoyed by his assumption, that she gave no orders about a fresh supply of food, and that upon the table was almost cold.

"You should have splendid fish in this neighborhood," he said, eying the dishes askance.

"I really don't—that is, I suppose so," answered Ruby, coldly. But Flora soon made up for this lukewarm hospitality by crying out:

"Oh! yes, sir; sich blue-fish as you never see; besides—"

"Does there happen to be one in the kitchen, my good child?"

"Yes, sir; just come in, with the salt water a-dropping down 'em, and their fins a-quivering."

"Have one nicely broiled, if you please; tell the cook to do it slowly. I have the day before me, and can wait."

Flora went out delighted with her message.

"You make yourself at home, I must confess," said Ruby, allowing the soft smile that played about her mouth to harden almost into a sneer.

"It is my way, sweet sister."

"Yes, I recognize that."

"And disapprove it?"

"What difference would it make if I did?"

The young man turned in his chair, and surveyed her curiously with a half smile on his handsome face.

"Why, Ruby, what has come over you? One would think I was not more than half welcome."

"I did not expect you, Charles; this is not my house, and I have no right to entertain guests here."

Again he looked her sharply and angrily in the face.

"Am I in the way, Ruby?"

"In the way? No."

It was not in the young widow's character to provoke contest, nor make enemies; she glided through life always avoiding the rough places. Charles Gray was the last person in the world that she wished to provoke, for there had been a time, after her husband's death, when crape folds and double veils had rendered gay, social life indecorous, that she had discoursed more sentiment with this young man, in a doleful and shadowy way, than an honorable woman could well answer for. In fact, he was the last man on earth that she would have cared to see on that pleasant spring morning. True, all this had happened before her acquaintance with Moreton; but she had said words and written letters to this handsome young Gray, which in another woman would have amounted to an absolute engagement. Not that she ever thought of such a thing in reality; but Ruby Gray was a woman who could not exist

without the excitement of a passion, simulated or real. True, the flirtation Ruby had commenced under her crape was of a novel kind, and so possessed peculiar attractions; but the depth and blackness of her mourning gradually subsided, and her grief was carried off decorously in silks and grenadines, brightened with such quantities of bugles that she rattled out her sorrow like a hail-storm with every movement. Then admirers crowded into place, and she grew weary of a sentiment which had softened her mourning by degrees, just as she came out of her black, shade by shade, at last changing it altogether.

I think young Gray understood all this, but he gave no sign of annoyance. From the first he had resolved to marry his brother's widow; first, because she was rich, and held all that was left of the Gray property in her own right; and secondly, because she was a beautiful, dashing woman, likely to keep her place in society, and eventually to rule it, if that ambition should chance to seize upon her. The truth was, Charley Gray had made up his mind not to be thwarted. If the lady had not been in earnest, he had, and was so yet. She was too rich a prize for a ruined man to relinquish readily.

Thus Ruby answered gently when she saw that Gray was becoming angry, and, putting on her sweetest smile, held out her hand.

"The time will never come when you will be in the way, Charles. I only feared that Mrs. Van Lorn might think me a little presuming; but I know she will make you welcome."

"We will not ask too much of her, Ruby. I suppose there is some hotel or tavern in the village where a fellow can get accommodations; unless, indeed, it is full of your admirers already."

Ruby laughed.

"A hotel! Oh, yes! two of them, I think; but I fancy you would soon get tired of their quiet."

"Not if they are within an hour's ride of my lady-bird. But they told me at the Fifth Avenue that Moreton had come into this neighborhood; in fact, that he was on a visit to Van Lorn."

A flood of scarlet rushed into Ruby Gray's face; but she drove it back with a great effort, for she felt the man's eyes upon her, and tried to answer calmly:

"You were misinformed then. Mr. Moreton is not here."

"I am glad of that; for I detest the fellow, and shall forever, if it were only for his impudence in persecuting you as he has done."

"Persecuting me! Indeed, Charles, he has done no such thing."

"Then you encourage him?"

Ruby laughed one of her rich, low laughs, that were more effective than her beauty.

"Encourage Mr. Moreton! Yes, as I do all agreeable men."

"And you would, perhaps, marry him?"

"Ladies do not usually marry men till they are asked; and Mr. Moreton is not given to committing himself lightly, I should think."

Ruby spoke with some warmth, and Gray saw the bright scarlet burning hotter and hotter in her cheek. The sight made him angry, for he was fiercely jealous of Preston Moreton, and had been from the beginning.

"You have not told me of your mother," said Ruby, controlling herself with an effort she was fully capable of making when her interests were at stake.

"She is well, and happy as a queen," answered Gray, without a pause. "Thank heaven, the misfortunes of our house have not reached her!"

"I thought her looking pale and worn, when I saw her just before leaving the hotel. Something there was about her that made me sad. I feared, indeed, that trouble had reached her."

"What trouble can reach her while I live?" said Gray, with seeming pride.

Ruby drew a deep breath—his words swept away the shade of anxiety that had settled on her mind. She knew that old Mrs. Gray lived in a very retired and plain fashion, but of her destitution she had no idea; for the long-suffering woman never complained, and Gray always spoke of her as a being whom care could never reach.

"Your mother is a good woman," said Ruby, sighing; for she knew how to appreciate goodness, and sometimes felt how worldly and selfish her own nature was.

"I hope no one wishes to dispute it," answered Gray, and an angry flush swept over his face. "My mother is a peculiar woman, and has her foibles; she evidently is not over-liberal with her income, and likes hoarding better than I could wish. Since my father died, she has fallen a little into the vice of avarice; but what she saves will come to me in the end, you know."

The young fellow said this unblushingly, and with the air of a man who wishes to pass over a fault that wounded his pride with apparent unconcern. This was a new idea to Ruby. She remembered Mrs. Gray's faded shawl and last year's bonnet with less sympathy; with her wealth so liberally spent, she could afford to look down with something like contempt on the penurious habits of a woman whose noble life had at times been a reproach to hers. She was thinking all this over when Flora came in, bearing a small silver dish in her hands.

"Ah! here comes the blue-fish, fragrant and tempting as the apples in Paradise. Come, sister Ruby, take a morsel with me."

"No, thank you."

"But I feel like a wretch, sitting here eating alone—with such an appetite, too."

"I shall enjoy it best while watching you eat."

She leaned back in her easy-chair, and began to play with the ribbons on her dress, thinking all the time how she could best evade the visit with which he threatened her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABOUT THE STRAWBERRIES AGAIN.

CHARLES GRAY eat his breakfast with zest. The blue-fish was delicious, and the bright sea-air had given him the appetite of a shark, he declared. Flora stood by, ready to spring away for anything he might chance to want; and for a time Ruby was left to her own thoughts. While she was rolling and unrolling the streamers of ribbon around her white fingers, a figure lifted itself above the level of the garden-terrace, and soon took the form of Billy Clark, who saw her sitting near the window, made a signal, and fell back among the bushes.

Ruby arose and glided through the window, gathering sprigs of honeysuckle and early roses as she went. Gray looked up, saw her occupation, and fell to his breakfast again, muttering under his breath, "What is the woman at now?"

"Billy, Billy Clark!" called Ruby.

"Here I am, marm; but if you'd just as lief call me Mr. Clark, I should be much obliged," faltered Billy, crushing his cap nervously between his thin, little hands. "I hung out the red horse-blanket, but that could n't begin to tell how much better he is—more's the pity."

"More's the pity? Why, Mr. Clark, do you regret that he is out of danger?"

"Well, no, not exactly—that is, in one sense; but to see him gobbling down them strawberries, and her a-chucking

them into his mouth, was enough to put rank poison and murder into a fellow's mind — I leave it to you now."

"What do you mean about strawberries?"

"What do I mean? Why, marm, we had a hot-bed full of 'em, all covered over with glass, when they swelled out and grew round, and ripe, and beautiful, like red rosebuds turned to fruit, bending down the stems and sending their sweet, ripe breath out whenever I lifted the glass. They were all for her — every one of 'em. When the first white blow came out, I made up my mind to that, and nursed them and tended them as if they had been live things. Well, one day our Mandy picked them all, braided a pretty little basket, and laid them plump and blooming into it, with apple-blows all around. She had been tending them for me; for Mandy loves me, if nobody else does. But I hadn't once thought of her. My mind was on another — you know who; for you and I understand each other."

Billy put one hand on his heart, and looked at Ruby with piteous appeal.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Clark, there is no doubt of that; but the strawberries? I hope no person stole them."

"Stole them? worse than that. I took them away from my sister, who longed to see my lips stained with them. I knew it, I felt it; but what was such feelings compared to them that I felt for her? She had them, basket and all. Right before my sister's face, basket and all, I gave them to her. Oh! ma'am, I had been breathing kisses over them all the way down, for we went across lots. She took them; she parted the apple-blossoms with her pretty fingers, and took one between her lips like a bird. Then she covered them up again and went down to the house, thanking me with her lips and her eyes, and the very motion of her hands, till I was so happy it quite made me faint — indeed it did."

"I can understand that," answered Ruby. Billy shook his head and went on:

"How she will enjoy them, I said. How they will melt between them red lips, leaving their scent behind, which will be sweeter to me than kisses are to most fellows. There's plenty of 'em — handfuls on handfuls, the first she has seen this year. How I should love to see her eating every one of them, ten at a time, say, crushed between her teeth and brightening her lips. 'She's at it now,' says I, and thinking of the poor fellow that gave them to her. 'Oh!' says I to myself, if I could but take one look at her, bending over the basket with them fingers all stained, and her lips red with the juice!"

"I was in the garden, hoeing some cabbage-plants, but these thoughts took the grit out of my hands. I flung down the hoe and crept up on the stoop, thinking that she would be in the hall; but there she was in that man's room, sitting close by his bed, and be darned to him, with that basket in her lap, a-cramming the strawberries down his mouth, and he looking up at her so — so — It was too bad; I'll leave it to you, ma'am, if it was n't too bad!"

Billy gave way here, and crushing the cap between his hands, pressed it to his face, shaking all over with a sense of his ill-usage.

Ruby Gray was scarcely less excited; her color came and went, like flashes of sunset over snow. Her lips were pressed fiercely together — she clenched her hand more than once as if about to strike some one.

"Don't, don't unman yourself in this way, Mr. Clark," she said, at length, trembling with impotent wrath; for her whole being was in sympathy with the poor fellow. "It was mean; it was unwomanly to treat your gift in that way. I feel how cruel it was."

"Don't, don't," said Billy from behind his cap, "she is n't that; there is n't a mean streak in her body and soul; she made a mistake; he wanted 'em, and she could n't help it. Oh! ma'am, you don't know how generous she is. That

great, big shote of a fellow, asked for 'em — I know he did. It was n't her fault. She's generous as the sun, and delicate as a daffodil. She'd give the glove off her hand. What did the great, greedy fellow come there for, with his broken leg and white hands? I wish he was away."

"So do I, with all my heart. But, Mr. Clark, what are they doing now?"

"Eating strawberries together, I hain't no doubt. There was enough of 'em; and I don't suppose he'd gobble 'em all up himself, though it seemed like it," answered Billy, viciously.

"But your sister — where is she?"

"Oh! down at the house, ready to nurse him, if they'll let her."

"That is some comfort. She seems a sharp, sensible girl."

"Amanda is more than that; she's a genius, she is — writes poetry; and, oh, my! is n't she a reader!"

"Indeed!" said Ruby Gray; and, spite of herself, a smile quivered around her lips. "But that will make her all the better nurse. I hope she will stay there still, most of all, I trust in you."

"You can — you may," protested Billy.

"How did you come, Mr. Clark?"

"In the boat."

"That is bad; I was in hopes you came on horseback."

"Why, what difference does it make?"

"I want you to go over to the village for me."

"Well, I can do that; but what for?"

"There is my porte-monnaie. How many rooms have they fit for travellers, in the hotels over yonder?"

"Three or four apiece; that is, them that ain't used by the boarders, I reckon."

"Well, I wish you to go over and engage all these rooms, and pay for them a week in advance, for a party of gentlemen who are coming down to fish in the bay. Do not leave

a single room or empty bed — you understand? Pay for everything; and tell the landlords that the rooms must be kept ready, for the party may arrive any minute. If he lets one be used, even for a single night, he will forfeit the money — you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Buy up every empty room in the two houses, and pay for 'em; that's easy, but rather expensive, is n't it?"

"Never mind that, you will find money enough in the purse; but on no account mention my name, or say that you have been here. You are employed by a party of gentlemen, remember, who may be down at any time, and must have the rooms ready."

"I'll do it; it'll make 'em stare, I'll bet; but I'll do it, just as you want me to."

"That is a good fellow; and now, good morning."

"Good morning. I'll just row across and get a horse from the stables."

CHAPTER XXVII.

RUBY GRAY HIRES A HOTEL.

BILLY CLARK disappeared down the foot-path, intent on his novel errand; and Ruby Gray loitered back into the house with a mass of loose flowers in her hands. She found Charles Gray leaning back in the easy-chair she had left, with the perfumed breeze from the window lifting the bright hair from his forehead, enjoying to the full one of the loveliest prospects that he had ever seen.

"Upon my word, Ruby, you have a lovely spot here, or rather your friends have. It almost makes one feel like a

boy again. Dear me, what a waft of perfume comes in with you. Was that the gardener I saw you coquetting with?"

"Coquetting!"

"Yes; that was what I said. Upon my soul, Ruby of Rubies, I think you would coquet with a chimney-sweep, if nothing better offered. It was born in you."

"You are complimentary, Mr. Gray."

"Am I? So much the better. Pretty women love to be complimented—it is their due; and when it is not an effort, I am always ready for duty in that particular. But speaking about flirting, you must be sadly out of practice here. If Moreton had come down, indeed; but you say he did not."

"I have not seen him," answered Ruby, who was busy putting her flowers in a vase.

"The fellow is rich as a miser, they tell me."

"Do they? I did not know it."

"And proud as Lucifer!"

"I think he is a proud man!"

"Ruby Gray, do you love that fellow?"

Ruby turned suddenly, her face scarlet, her blue eyes flashing like stars.

"How dare you ask me such questions, sir?"

"How dare I? Because I love you myself, and have from the day you were a free woman; because love like mine gives a man rights."

"I deny it. You have no rights over me."

"There is a package of letters in my desk, and a memory of words in my heart, which contradicts that. Ruby Gray, you can trifle with other men—but not with me. By ten thousand looks, smiles, and caressing words, you are my promised wife, and I solemnly intend to marry you."

Ruby was dumb with wrath. Her face turned white as the crests of foam that were melting back into sea-water on the beach. She could have dashed her white hand into the

insolent man's face; but was compelled to curb her passion and temporize, for in substance Gray had told the truth. The man had thousands of those vague, half-spoken promises, which she was in the habit of lavishing on admirers without a thought of redeeming them. More than that, she had committed herself to this man in writing, and that is the most galling shackle a reckless woman can forge for herself.

"You are silent, you do not recognize the bond," he continued, lazily reaching forth his hand for a spray of verbena she was just arranging in the vase. Crushing the fragrant leaves between his fingers, he dropped into exquisite enjoyment of their perfume. "What has come over you, dear one?"

"Stop!" burst forth the angry woman, whose temper broke bounds at last. "Stop! I will not permit this; you shall not make use of a few idle words and meaningless looks to chain me to a single obligation."

Young Gray rolled the verbena leaves gently in his palm, and exhaled a long and delicious breath; then he said, very quietly:

"Ruby, you *have* seen Preston Moreton."

"It is false! But if I had, what then?"

"Only this—you cannot marry him, or any other man."

"How will you prevent it?"

"I will show him your letters written on black-edged paper, while you wore a widow's cap on your head."

"You would not be so base?"

"Don't trust me, dear."

Ruby Gray was burning with wounded pride and indignation. If ever one human being hated another, she hated the man who sat so complacently gazing out of the window within a yard of her; but she knew that he was capable of doing all that he threatened, and constrained herself with an effort that made her faint.

"Indeed, I will trust you in everything—why not? Who is there that should hold my welfare so near at heart? I have not forgotten, and shall not forget, that you were my husband's brother."

"That is taking a sensible view of the matter, Ruby. I always have given you credit for being a woman of sterling judgment—up to a good many things that ordinary females never learn. Give me your hand, darling, and let us make up."

She gave him her hand, which was deadly cold; for concentrated rage had sent all the blood to her heart, where it was burning like fire.

"Poor bird! how it struggles," he said, patting the hand. "Now tell me when this wedding shall take place. I am getting very impatient."

"So am I of the bold game you are playing."

She spoke coldly now, and with cutting scorn, that made itself felt even on his case-hardened nature.

"You think I do not love you," he said; "that it is the share of my father's wealth that I covet."

"No, I do not think that. Was not your portion equal to that of my husband? Is not your mother rich? Still I am sure that you feel no real love for me."

Gray drew a deep breath. He had been in terror lest the ruined state of his fortunes had reached her; but these last words relieved him.

"With equal fortune, then, and more in expectation, what but the truest and deepest love that man ever felt for woman, could so long have chained me at your feet?"

"I do not know what it is; but this I do know, persecution like this does not spring from love."

"Persecution! This is a bitter word, sweet one; but you are out of temper this morning, so I will find my boat and betake me to the village. There must be some way of amusing one's self, I fancy. Boating, fishing—they don't let

you shoot birds, I suppose, while they are making their nests; but it will go hard if I cannot stand the place as long as you stay here."

Ruby smiled a little maliciously; but she protested against his leaving her so soon; became suddenly interested in making him acquainted with the Van Lorns; and managed to keep him a full hour, thus giving Billy Clark time to reach the village, and engage every vacant room for the imaginary party of which he was the moneyed agent.

At last she looked at her watch, and discovered that further delay would keep him beyond the next train to New York; complained that the sun was giving her a headache; and took leave of him in the garden, putting a rosebud, red as coral and green as emerald, into his button-hole before he went.

Gray was right. Ruby would have flirted with her worst enemy, if nothing more attractive had been in the way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE POND IN THE MEADOW.

GRAY was a good walker, and, for a change, he rather liked the country. So he engaged the boatman who had brought him over from the Point to continue his course up the bay, and land him near the Wheaton farm-house, for the curving rise of land in that direction broke upon him as something so near to Paradise that he longed to explore it.

A small wharf had been built for vessels a little to the right of Wheaton's farm, and to this the boat took her course. The scene was, indeed, beautiful as he approached

the shore; drifts on drifts of red apple-blossoms swelled over the orchard; the garden was purple and golden with tulips and daffodils; the lilacs and snowballs tossed their great blossoms in the air; and a laburnum-tree on the terrace dropped golden racemes from all its slender branches, as if a shower of gold-dust had curdled into blossom there.

The old house, with its profuse draperies of honeysuckles, cinnamon roses, and Virginia creepers, was a picture in itself, which Gray would have liked to examine closer; but a foot-path led from the wharf up through the wheat-field by one end of Mrs. Clark's house, and, cutting through the locust-grove, led to the turnpike some rods beyond.

This path the boatmen pointed out; so, leaving the farmhouse to the right, the young man made the best of his way through wheat-field and meadow toward the village. Sometimes he would pause and look about him, drawing long, pleasant breaths as he gazed; sometimes he would stoop to rescue a dandelion or buttercup from under his feet, and curl the delicate stems around his finger as he went along. For moments together he would cast off all selfish thoughts, and feel like an innocent boy going home from school. Once he absolutely climbed a fence for the pure pleasure of sitting on the top rail, and looking down on the billowy verdure of the orchard. I do not think you could have induced him to shoot a robin, during that one pure hour of his life, for any consideration whatever. Gray was sitting on the fence, swinging his feet lazily against the rails, as school-boys will, when something in the meadow next the wheat-field caught his attention.

About the centre of this sloping meadow was a little pond, around which the emerald grass fell luxuriantly, sweeping the water like a fringe. In the centre, tall rushes, sweet-flag, and tufted cattails started through the water like a fairy island, and a few lily-pods floated dreamily, here and there, on the blue of the pond.

This pond was one of the loveliest objects imaginable, sunk as it was in the bosom of a meadow all snowy and golden with daisies, lilies, and buttercups—for the sunshine lay full upon it, and the waters sparkled like rifts of diamonds in the surrounding greenness.

It was not this sylvan beauty that Charles Gray looked upon, but a young girl, fresh as an April morning, who was gathering rushes on the brink. She stood with a quantity of long, green rushes in her hand, watching a couple of cat-birds, who had built a nest somewhere among the flags, and were greatly troubled by her presence. The girl was bare-headed, and the sunshine wove itself in and out of her rich hair, lighting it up with wonderful beauty, as she stood leaning forward, with unconscious grace, to get a clearer view of the birds.

"By Jove! she's a beauty!" exclaimed Gray, springing from the fence knee-deep into the grass, and forgetting all the pure thoughts which had come back to him with the bright air of the morning. "I haven't seen anything so fresh these ten years! Wonder if she'll stand a nearer view!"

The sound which he made in the grass was so slight, and the birds were so clamorously noisy in their terror, that Amanda Clark was quite unconscious of any approach till the young man stood beside her and spoke. Then she dropped the dress, which had been gathered up from her feet with one hand, uttered a little cry of surprise, and turned upon him almost as much frightened as the birds were by her own presence.

"I think we are terrifying the poor things out of their wits," he said, gently. "Why can't they understand that we mean them no harm?"

"I—I suppose—that is, I came upon them unexpected. So few people ever think of the pond, and that makes them wilder than common," she said, flushing rosily under his

eyes. "I'm sure I would not hurt one of them for the whole world."

She broke off suddenly, and shrank back scarlet with shame. Gray was looking down at her feet. She forgot that the long grass concealed all imperfections in her coarse shoes, and was half smothered with a sense of shame. He must have seen them broken at the sides, and laced up with pieces of twine; besides, she had no stockings on. His next words gave her an infinite sense of relief.

"You are dropping your rushes; let me gather them up for you."

She looked down and saw that he spoke the truth—the heavy grass befriended her. The skirt of her pink calico dress fell upon it, hiding her shoes altogether—and very pretty was that rose-colored dress surrounded by so much green; an artist could have chosen no better color for her.

"May I ask what you are gathering these for?" asked Gray, really curious.

"Oh! I can make lovely baskets for flowers and fruit. If I had anything to sit on, you should see."

"I passed a rock out yonder. It is half buried in the grass, but you can see a gleam of gray above the greenness. Suppose we go there?"

Amanda made an effort to gather up her dress; remembered her shoes with a fresh pang of shame, and dropped it guiltily.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRAIDING RUSHES AND LOSING HEARTS.

GRAY, with half the rushes in his hand, turned toward the rock, and she followed, allowing her dress to trail on the grass. The rock was not large enough for them both

to sit upon; so the young man threw himself at Amanda's feet, and gave her the rushes to begin with. She went to work dexterous and with natural grace, dropped inch by inch of green braid into her lap; then rolling and curving it into a shallow basket-shape, fastened it together with the thorns of a wild rose-bush that grew by the rock she sat on.

All this time Gray had been lying at her feet, supporting himself on one elbow, and gazing in her fresh, young face, as only such men can gaze, with a certain snake-like fascination that has poison in it. He would not have dared assume this attitude with a city-bred girl, or with one of his own class, wherever educated. But Amanda, in her romance and her inexperience, thought nothing wrong of it; though wild, pleasant lights came into her eyes whenever they were bent to his, and the color on her cheeks grew warmer and redder every moment.

"There!" she exclaimed, holding up her basket with pretty triumph, "it is finished. Oh! how I wish the strawberries had not been picked; I would fill it for you. But William would have them for Miss Zua; and, after all, she gave them to the sick man. I saw her feeding him."

"And who is Miss Zua, pretty one?"

"Miss Zua! Oh! our young lady down at the house there. She is Mr. Wheaton's only daughter, and so pretty."

"What, does this neighborhood produce nothing but beauties?" asked Gray, fixing his bold, bright eyes on Amanda's face with undisguised admiration.

Amanda laughed and shook her head, quite conscious of all he meant to imply, but embarrassed and pleased as a girl of her habits might well be. The poor girl had been long expecting, in a dreamy way, some splendid man with bright eyes and a diamond ring on his finger, to come and throw himself at her feet, just as this superb fellow was lying; and she could not keep the glory of it from breaking out in her eyes and smiling on her lips.

"Oh! Miss Zua is a real beauty — great, black eyes, hair with a gloss on it, and such a color!"

"But I do not like large, black eyes, nor the hair that matches them. Now I'll wager a pair of gloves that you are the prettiest of the two."

Amanda opened her eyes in genuine astonishment. She had thought herself rather good-looking, when her hair was combed and the pink dress on; but anything like that fairly took away her breath.

"Oh! you have no idea how handsome Miss Zua is! I am no more to be compared with her, than" — "chalk's like cheese," she was about to add, but checked herself, remembering the high romance of the occasion, and exchanged the chalk and cheese for "than this is like a chip-basket."

"Still I have my own way of thinking," said the young man, smiling. "Don't tell me that Miss Zua can show a hand like that."

"Is it anything particular?" said Amanda, looking down at her hand, quite unaware of the way in which it had got into the clasp of that larger and whiter palm, and becoming conscious that it was shapely for the first time.

"Particular? Why, girl, it is a model for a sculptor."

"Is it?" murmured the girl, wondering vaguely what a model was. "I dare say. But, dear me! there comes brother William back from town; I wonder if he made out to get all them rooms. Queer, was n't it?"

"What was queer?"

"Why, that the lady over at Mr. Van Lorn's should have wanted him to do such a thing?"

"The lady at Mr. Van Lorn's! What has she to do with rooms?"

"That was the very question I asked brother William, when he came to me running up from the boat and asked, as a particular favor, that I should tell Mr. Wheaton that mother wanted him to go over to town for something very

important. I would n't do it till he told me what it was all about. I knew there was something curious going on when he slid into the boat, and kept so close to the shore going over. My belief is that the lady, handsome as she is, has taken a fancy to our William — and no wonder, for he is a born gentleman, if I do say it. What did she come over here for in the night, with her dress all drabbled with dew, and ask him to walk down to the shore with her, if there was n't something in it? What did he sly off and cut over to Van Lorn's this morning for? I don't understand anything, if she has n't seen William somewhere, perhaps sailing by moonlight on the waters of the bay, or wandering along the road — but it's no use. I can tell her that William is a true knight, and would n't give up the shadow of Miss Zua for fifty like her, though she has treated him so mean about the sick man."

"What sick man are you speaking of, pretty one?"

"Oh! that gentleman from New York, who broke his leg falling out of a buggy. He was going over to Van Lorn's."

"Indeed; and what was his name; perhaps I know him?"

"Preston Moreton, Fifth Avenue Hotel. I saw it on a piece of square paper that he gave to William."

Gray drew a sharp breath, and a gleam of sneering triumph shot into his eyes. Amanda saw it.

"You know him, and don't like him," she said quickly. "No, nor do I. He's a snake in the grass for brother William, or I am mistaken; a snake that's charming Miss Zua away from one that loves her better than his life."

"Still he goes over to Van Lorn's after the other lady?"

"But he don't love her; that's all on the other side, if anything. Then, again, there is no love in hiring all the rooms over at the hotel for people that are never coming, and paying for 'em in advance ever so much money. I know, for he had the lady's little pocket-book crammed full of greenbacks."

"But, perhaps, the lady really has friends coming."

"Billy thinks not. He only saw her a few moments in Van Lorn's garden, and she was quite flurried and beside herself with anxiety, he said; looked beautiful, too, with a little cap hovering over her head like a butterfly, and blue ribbons streaming from her dress, all in a flutter like herself."

CHAPTER XXX.

CHARLES GRAY OUTWITS THE WIDOW.

YOUNG Gray listened to Amanda's gossip with a malicious smile on his lip. He could hardly refrain from giving some demonstration of the little pleasure her talk was giving him. So Preston Moreton had come down to cross his path, and broken his leg in the process. Gray was glad of it. He only hoped it was a compound fracture, and that the bones would be long in knitting. This accounted for the widow's flurry when he came—for her restless manner and almost rude reception of his visit.

"The vixen!" he thought; "so she hopes to block me out with her money. It would serve her right, were I to secure an invitation from this Van Lorn, and watch her little game from under the same roof. I would, too, only that a little freedom seems just now desirable. One does not meet a girl like this every day."

While Gray fell into these thoughts, Amanda, struck by a sudden idea, stole softly from the rock, and was on her knees, on the brink of the pond, searching for something in the grass. She was very busy for some minutes, which Gray observed, and was rather glad of, for he wanted a little time to mature his plans; so he lay still, with his eyes half closed, thinking deeply. After awhile Amanda came slowly back,

arranging a star of daisies in the centre of her basket, which she surrounded with a crowd of sweet-scented violets, edged with a garland of buttercups.

"My basket need not be empty when I give it," she said, with a pleasant blush. "The flowers are pretty, if they are wild."

Gray reached out his hand and took the basket, thanking her with his eyes.

"The creature has taste; no artist could have arranged them better," he thought, as the fragrance of the violets floated around him, and she stood looking on pleased as a child.

"I did not know that meadow-violets were so sweet," he said.

"Oh! Miss Zua and I planted them years ago, when we were play-children," answered Amanda. "But I must go now; mother has hung out the cloth for dinner, and William is going home."

Gray looked toward the little wooden house, from whose chimney a wreath of blue smoke was curling upward, through the rosy drifts of apple-blossoms that tangled themselves over the brown roof, and saw a white towel hanging from an upper window.

"Is that your home?" he asked, remarking silently how humble it was.

"Yes, that is my home," answered Amanda, thinking of some book that she had read. "Humble, but—but—"

"Honest!" suggested Gray, smiling.

"Yes, honest—for we are that," was the rather proud answer.

"And who lives there with you?"

"My mother!"

"Is she a widow?"

"Yes."

"Not very rich, I should think."

"No; poor enough. She takes in washing!"

"And you?"

Amanda burst into tears: these questions were torturing her. "I—I ought to help her, and do not," she answered, crimson with excitement.

"Of course not, it would be unnatural; beauty and toil go rudely together. Good morning. Thank you for the basket. To-morrow I will call and ask your mother to do some washing for me."

Then he went toward the locust-grove, into the highway, and had a rather long walk into the village. After taking a brief survey of the two hotels, he selected the most promising. He went in and asked the landlord if a young person had not just been there, and engaged rooms for a party of gentlemen coming down from the city.

"Yes," the landlord said; "and paid for them too. Was he one of the party?"

"Yes; his friends might not present themselves for some days. Meantime one of the rooms might be prepared for a parlor, one for his sleeping-chamber, and another for a dressing-room; that would about cover the whole, he fancied."

"Yes; they had but three rooms vacant. Would the gentleman walk up?"

Charles Gray walked up stairs with great composure, and took possession of the rooms which his sister-in-law had paid for. Just at that time it was a great convenience, for his funds were at a very low ebb.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PATIENT SUFFERING.

OLD Mrs. Gray had fallen once more into complete destitution. For a little time her son had cared for her; but the duty soon became irksome, and her sad, weary face

a reproach which he had no courage to endure. So he pacified what little conscience was left to him with a determination to give his mother all her old luxuries whenever he should marry the widow; and convinced himself that the best way to accomplish this, was to follow up Ruby Gray and secure her wealth at once.

So he sent a note to the patient old lady, promising to return with capital news in a few days; and betook himself, as we have seen, to Long Island, quite satisfied that his mother would take care of herself somehow until his return.

But poor Mrs. Gray had exhausted all her resources and all her strength; she, once so proud and powerful both from her wealth and personal character, was now more helpless than a child. She was too old for work, too delicate for begging; and so she sat down in her weary want, and prayed God to let her die.

I will not describe to you how much this poor lady suffered; how, day by day, hour by hour, pure animal craving gnawed away her strength and overwhelmed her pride. The deep mother's love strove to throw off the conviction of her son's unworthiness, which coiled closer and closer around her heart, as the serpent girds and crushes all life out of its victim. He would come back in time—surely he had not left her to perish! She had nothing to busy herself about; no food to cook, nothing but pure water to drink. Fire was unneeded, fortunately, in that bland June weather; and all she could do was to sit by the window and see the flowers bloom around her all the weary day, and feel the cold moonlight stealing over her like a shroud when she crept into bed.

Sometimes these flowers awoke her imagination, and mocked at her hunger. When she looked at the grapevines, reddening over with the first leaf-buds, longing thoughts of the purple clusters that would, by-and-by, hang among them, made her eyes bright and sharp with yearning greed.

But even then the natural refinement of this woman made her ashamed of the animal want which was torturing her, and she thanked God in her heart that no one was by to witness her sufferings.

A few weeks before this, Mrs. Gray had dismissed her last servant—a faithful and attached girl, who had pleaded hard to be “kept on” without wages, and went away heart-broken and wounded when her generous request was denied. But the poor lady had no choice; for she knew that the girl must not only stay without wages, but without food. She could find the strength to suffer herself, but not to endure the humiliation of a witness; for her son’s sake, the extremity of her distress must be concealed. So, with seeming hard-heartedness, she refused the explanation which would have wounded her, but saved a faithful servant from a feeling that she had been treated with ingratitude and something like injustice.

The girl went away, and, through the influence of a friend already in service at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, got a situation there. She soon learned to forgive her old mistress; and as her resentment wore off, began to comprehend that no unkindness could have been meant by her discharge; and a vague sense of the truth came to her heart, wounding it with self-reproach.

The duties of a hotel-servant do not admit of much visiting; but one day the mind of this girl became so disturbed with thoughts of her old home, that she was absolutely haunted by them. That evening she obtained an hour to herself, and went, with breathless anxiety, which she could not have accounted for, toward the little dwelling in which she had seen more happiness than usually falls to the lot of a girl whose home is changed so often by the will of others.

Theodore had come with the girl, and waited in the street for her. Helen found the iron-gate partially open, and went

into the back enclosure, where the soft air was stirring among the flowers, and sweet odors floated dreamily on every breath, such as only come from the flowers when night-dew is upon them. Everything was dark about the house. A window was open, and through it fell the light of a new moon; but all within was still as the grave. Helen rang the bell, but no one answered. Then she waited awhile and tried the door. The night-latch was up, and she went into the hall, frightened by the darkness and the solitude.

“She used to sit a great deal without light,” thought the girl; “it may be that she is at home, still as it is.”

With a quick, cautious step, Helen mounted the stairs; the door of Mrs. Gray’s room was open; gleams of moonlight came faintly through, and with them a low sobbing breath, which brought Helen’s heart to her mouth. She entered the chamber, and there, upon a low, white bed, which looked cold and dreary as a tomb, lay the form of her mistress; masses of gray hair rested dimly upon the pillow; and the pale moonbeams fell in chilly whiteness upon that pinched face, making the locked features deathly. While Helen looked, the drawn mouth began to move, and the two hands were thrown out eagerly.

“Give me more; what is one spoonful? Why do you keep the tureen back? it is brimming full—pieces of meat floating in it, too. Why does the soup turn to water when you put it in my mouth? Water, water! Oh! I am so tired of water! Do not carry it away. One spoonful—only a spoonful—I won’t ask for more!”

Then the woman fell to moaning and sobbing in her sleep. Her hand dropped heavily down, and her face was wet with tears, shed in that sleeping agony of hunger.

Now Helen understood it all. No fire—no light—no food; nothing but an empty house, moonlight, and flowers, around a famishing woman. Tears, sharp and painful, came into that good girl’s eyes. She longed to fall upon

her knees, and ask pardon of that gentle lady for ever leaving her; but even then she remembered the sensitive pride of her mistress, and dared not arouse her.

A generous heart was at work in that honest bosom — and that is enough to brighten the most ordinary mind. The girl thought of Theodore, and resolved to consult him. Down the stairs she glided, and out upon the pavement, where she joined Theodore, pale and breathless.

"I have seen her — she is at home. She is sick. Oh, Theodore! she is suffering so!"

This was said with a burst of tears that startled the kind fellow she addressed.

"Is she so very sick?" he inquired.

"Oh, Theodore! she is all alone in the dark, and crying in her sleep."

"Crying in her sleep?"

"O God! forgive that young man. He is killing her!"

"Killing his own mother!" exclaimed Theodore, shocked to the soul; for he, too, had a mother living, whose memory was ever with him. "That is a crime, Helen, which we ought not to ask even the good God to forgive."

"I know it — I know it; and she kept it all to herself — kept it from me; and now she lies there, white as a ghost, moaning for something to eat, with no one to hear her."

"Moaning for something to eat, Helen?"

"Yes, Theodore, it is just that; and I could think hard of her! That handsome wretch — oh! I could tear him to pieces! His own, own mother!"

"If she is suffering like that," said Theodore, speaking in a quick, nervous way, "you and I must do something more than talk."

"I know it. But what?"

"Get her something to eat."

"I dare not offer it. She is such a lady."

"But we must do it carefully."

"How, Theodore — how?"

"She would not like us to know how bad it is with her; we must do something."

"Yes, Theodore, we must do something. What if I go to the proprietor, get some wine and things, and put them by her bed while she is asleep?"

"That would do for once; but we could not manage it often."

"That is true. What can be done?"

"I'll tell you what," cried Theodore, all at once. "There are ladies in our hotel, kind as angels — I know which they are. They saw her once. We will go to them."

"That is it, Theodore; I know who you mean. Come, walk faster. We must do something at once."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THAT ONE MEAL.

THEODORE quickened his walk, and the two friends reached the hotel almost on a run. Up stairs they went, knocked at a parlor-door, and came in upon three ladies, who were reading and working together around a table in the centre of the room. Theodore and his companion were too much in earnest for any regard to ceremony. In short, broken sentences, which often interrupted each other, they both spoke at once, and told, with the eloquence of true feeling, what they had seen.

Directly the ladies were all in a state of generous excitement; they remembered the lady, and each gentle heart warmed toward her. While Theodore and Helen stood by, they held a little council, and then, in a flutter of kindness,

announced their decision. Helen was to resign her place, and go back to the old home as if young Gray had sent her. She was to provide comforts for the lady as if from him; and the expense should be divided among those three, so long as the lady might require it. It was not likely that young Gray would trouble himself to ask questions, or that he would ever explain the facts to his mother; thus they might minister to her wounded heart while rescuing her from physical distress.

In half an hour after he entered the room, Theodore and Helen were in the street; the man with a roll of money in his hand and a basket on his arm; the girl with a bottle of wine and a paper of crackers under her shawl. A short time after, they stole into the little basement kitchen, which had not been used for weeks, kindled a fire, put a tea-kettle over it to boil, and prepared a dainty little supper, which might have tempted even a pampered appetite.

"Have we got everything — sugar, milk, butter, and —"

"Everything," cried Helen, cutting the kind fellow short. "Don't I know exactly what she wants? Have n't I lived with her, rich and poor, for five years? I tell you, the sight of Helen will do her almost as much good as all the rest, nice as it is."

"Well, come along, then," answered Theodore, taking up the tray between his hands. "I will carry this as far as the door; you take the lamp."

Helen took the lamp, and the two went softly up stairs, smiling as they went. Helen left the light outside of the door, and, taking the tray, placed it on a little table near the bed. Then she stopped to listen.

Mrs. Gray was muttering in her sleep:

"How full the market is! whole sides of beef, chickens, piles on piles of vegetables, butter, eggs; but not for me — not for me. They cannot understand how I want them. Ah, me! Ah, me!"

Helen trembled violently; there was desolation in that voice, a mournfulness that sent the tears in a tumult to her eyes. She took the slender hand which lay all withered and thin on the counterpane. With the delicate instinct of a kind heart, she pressed her lips upon the hand, murmuring:

"Oh, dear lady! Helen is with you."

Then those locked features moved with a sudden spasm of consciousness, and the wretched lady started up in her bed with a sharp, hysterical laugh.

"First it was a dinner — soup, fish, everything; then a market full, full; now it is my old Helen. When will I stop dreaming?" she said, shading her wild eyes with one hand and looking at the girl. "You look real as life; and so did they."

"But I am real as life, Mrs. Gray," said Helen, gently, for she had received her instructions. "Shall I bring the lamp in? Your supper will be cold."

"My supper! My supper! Did you say supper, Helen?"

"It is all ready. There, let me fling a shawl over your shoulders — that will do nicely. Now shall I pour you out a nice hot cup of tea?"

"Tea? No, no! give me that?"

The poor lady threw herself half out of bed, and snatched at some cold chicken and a piece of biscuit, which she devoured ravenously, laughing over it with greedy delight. In a few moments it was gone, and she looked hungrily for more.

"Here is another piece; but you must be careful and not eat too much; when people have been sick it is dangerous," said Helen.

"Sick! Have I been sick, then?"

"Yes, you have been sick."

"But I am hungry; give me more."

"In the morning — yes. Now take a cup of tea."

"A cup of tea—what, warm? Where did you get the fire?"

"The fire! Oh! where I get everything else from, Mr. Gray."

"From my son?"

Those large, wild eyes were in an instant flooded with tears. Without heeding the tea or the food she had so craved a moment before, she threw up her hands, buried her quivering face in them, and, shaking from head to foot in an ecstasy of thanksgiving, cried out:

"My son! my son! Thank God! thank God!"

Then the rain of her tears came pouring through those poor, withered fingers, and she settled down in bed, sobbing weakly, likely a worn-out child.

"Take some of the tea, or a little wine," said Helen, filling the cup with her trembling hands.

"Not now—not now. I'm not hungry; my heart is too full—too full."

Helen set down the cup, and began to smooth the gray hair from that delicate forehead.

"How light your hand is, Helen! Like the old times, isn't it?"

"I thought you would be glad to have me back," was the kind reply.

"Glad! Ah! so glad! The loneliness was terrible."

"Poor lady!"

"But who sent you, Helen?"

Her eyes were wistfully expectant, her voice full of tender anxiety.

"He, of course. Who else?"

"He did—he did; and I was almost thinking hard of him. You would not believe anything so bad of me, Helen, but I was."

"I never did think anything bad of you."

"I know it; you were always a faithful, good girl, Helen—and *he* liked you."

"That was kind of him," answered the girl, with a degree of bitterness which fortunately escaped the lady.

"Oh! he is naturally kind—I always knew that; but people will mistake his manner. I, his own mother, did it sometimes—but how unjust it was! He does not forget his mother; I would not have any one think he did, for the world."

"No one shall think so, if I can help it, dear lady."

Mrs. Gray started up eagerly.

"Helen, you shall have my shawl. Dear, dear, I can't give you that, it—it is gone—That is, I thought a great deal of that shawl; but you shall have something."

"I only want to see you strong and well, dear lady!"

"Oh! it will come. I was hungry—that is, my heart was hungry for news of my son. You have brought it, and now I think my appetite is getting strong again. Give me a little more, Helen; not tea—something to eat."

"He would not like it if I gave you too much at once."

"He—who?"

"Mr. Gray."

"My son, my dear, good son! Of course, if he wishes it, I will not ask. But you had better take the things down stairs, they tempt one so."

Helen took the tray into the hall, where she found Theodore, with his eyes full of tears. He had been listening to the poor lady's words, and they made a child of him.

Before Helen had reached the top of the stairs, Mrs. Gray called her back.

"Just save one bit of bread, I—I should like it. Not being well all day yesterday, and the day before, you see I could eat nothing, and so the reaction makes one craving."

Helen brought a piece of biscuit from the tray and gave it into the eager hand. The poor lady turned her face to the wall, and in a moment the bread was gone.

"Do you feel like sleeping again?" asked Helen.

"No; my heart is too full of thankfulness!"

Mrs. Gray turned slowly and fixed her unnaturally large eyes on the servant. The food had made her eager and restless; her hands were growing warm; her lips had a tinge of color stealing into them.

"Sit down on the bed, Helen," whispered the old lady. "It seems so long since I have talked to any one about him. Now tell me. Is he well? Does he look happy?"

"Yes, dear lady, he is well, and he always looks happy."

"Then—I don't want to be unreasonable, Helen—but why did he not come and see his mother? It is—I don't know how many weeks; but they seem like years since I have seen him."

"I think he is very busy; that is, not very well."

"Is my boy sick, then? Oh, Helen! how could you deceive me by saying that he was well and happy?"

"I—I don't know. It was n't in my heart to hurt your feelings, I suppose."

"But is he sick?"

"Not now; that is, not much. He will be quite well, I dare say, when he comes back from the country."

"The country! Has my son gone into the country?"

"Only a little way; the air, you know."

"Oh, yes! I understand. He was afraid of frightening me by his pale looks, and so would not come. I have grown so nervous, Helen, that his very step makes me tremble all over. He sees it, and wishes to spare me, the dear, good boy."

Helen did not answer; if she had, the truth might have broken out, for her cheeks were hot, and her honest eyes full of shame for the man who felt none for himself. She busied herself in arranging the pillows and spreading up the bed-clothes.

"Helen, my good girl."

"Well, what can I do?"

"Give me just one bit of biscuit more, Helen—I have such an appetite; sick people often have, you know."

Helen could not resist those appealing eyes. She went down stairs for the biscuit without a word. When she came back, Mrs. Gray was lying with both hands folded on her bosom, and a soft piteous smile creeping up to her lips. She was thanking God for the goodness of her son, who lay that moment upon a settee in that country hotel, smoking luxuriously, and smiling over the triumph of the manoeuvre which had so cleverly outwitted his artful sister-in-law. On a table, close at his elbow, stood a little rush-basket, full of daisies, buttercups, and blue violets, which had just begun to droop for want of water. Once or twice he glanced at this basket; and then his lips parted wide, and the smile upon them passed off in a cloud of smoke, which floated in and out of his hair in fantastic wreaths, clouding his handsome head. Thus the son was lying while his mother suffered and prayed.

CHAPTER XXXIIL

MRS. RUBY GRAY SWEEPS DOWN UPON THE FARM-HOUSE.

A PONY-CARRIAGE came sweeping down the lane leading from the highway to Mr. Wheaton's house. Two splendid little cream-colored horses tossed their white manes to the wind, and seemed ready to fly if urged forward by a touch of that small hand on the reins, or a vibration of that richly-mounted whip in the air. Ruby Gray sat in the pretty carriage, graceful, piquant, and lovely as Venus in her shell. Her dress was perfect. From the delicately-fitting boot to the gauntlet-gloves and coquettish little hat, with its streamers of rich lace and tufts of feathers, chang-

ing from purple to green in the sun, there was not a false tint.

On she came, sweeping down the slope of the hill like some fairy vision. A little South-American Indian boy sat in the seat behind her, dressed like a footman of the old country, and looking so gravely conscious of his high position and gorgeous livery that his presence there was an exquisite burlesque, whether the lady intended it or not.

"Here, take the lines, Theo," cried Ruby Gray, springing out of her crimson nest, and flinging the reins to the boy; "and mind, no nonsense with the horses; they will stand quietly enough if you let them alone."

"I always do let them alone," answered the boy, in Spanish, the language she had used in addressing him. "Why should the señora doubt it?"

Nothing could be more innocent than the boy's face. He seemed grieved to death that she could suspect him of mischief, and turned away his head with a touching gesture of grief.

"Well, well, mind they don't become restive, just as you begin to get tired of waiting, that's all," answered the widow, laughing till her white teeth shone again.

"Theo never is tired," answered the boy, still more profoundly grieved. "It is the horses that want to go, they have so much life."

But Ruby Gray did not wait to hear these plaintive words; she was at the front door, with the ponderous, old-fashioned knocker in her hand.

A servant opened the door.

"Is Miss Wheaton in?"

"Yes, Miss Wheaton was in; but engaged just now. Would the lady step into the parlor?"

Ruby opened the parlor door for herself and went in, holding her breath, for she was somewhat agitated, and her color came and went naturally — an unusual thing with her.

The room in which she found herself was one of those unique apartments that have grown so rare under the innovations of modern improvements. A wainscoting, some three feet deep, ran around it; the windows, three in number, two looking out upon the front-door yard and the lane beyond, one commanding a view of the thickly-planted flower-garden, were of moderate size, and filled with small panes of glass — old-fashioned, but harmonious with the whole room. The fire-place, in which was an open Franklin stove, occupied one entire corner of the room; the mantel-piece was of dark wood, and the space above it, to the ceiling, was also of dark, empanelled wood, one panel of which formed the door of a little cupboard, in which some choice specimens of old china were kept.

The furniture of this room was rich and old-fashioned. Chairs that might have come over in the *Mayflower*, the mahogany was so black, stood against the wall, their fluted backs and purple-velvet cushions rich in themselves and rare from antiquity. Upon a table, in one corner, stood a huge punch-bowl, of such rare china as can only be found in old curiosity shops, large enough to serve a regiment, and resplendent in rich coloring. Some good pictures hung between the broad wainscot and the ceiling; two antique vases stood on the mantel-piece, filled with fresh flowers.

There was a modern easy-chair and sofa in the room. Ruby chose the sofa, for it was close by the door of that sick-room, and she heard a murmur of voices within that made her heart beat with unusual violence. But listen as she might, no words reached her. A vague, low confusion of sounds rose to her ear now and then — but nothing more. Still she felt certain that there was a female voice. It was that of a young person full of sweetness and persuasion.

The color grew hot and red in Ruby Gray's cheeks; for once, she felt the keen agony which she had inflicted on so many others. All her being was stirred with jealousy.

What right had Zua Wheaton in the room with that man? Sick or well, it was improper, unfeminine, shameful."

Ruby quite ignored the memory of her own visit there in the night, and never once condemned herself because it was Moreton alone who had brought her under that roof. She was too full of condemnation of Zua for any thoughts of that kind.

While she sat waiting, disturbed, and almost with tears in her eyes, a man's voice in the hall aroused her. A moment after, the door opened, and Mr. Wheaton came in. Instantly the old nature of that woman broke out through the jealous anguish that possessed her. With the man she loved lying within twenty feet of her, this woman unconsciously aroused herself for a new conquest. Indeed, so completely was the coquette ingrained in her nature, that I really think she would have laid herself out to fascinate Billy Clark, if "metal more attractive" could not have been found in her neighborhood.

But Mr. Wheaton was no mean object even for her prowess. True, there was a little silver in his hair, and some faint lines on his white forehead; but, above and beyond that, he was a man of noble presence, tall, well-proportioned, high-bred. His eyes, of a dark-bluish gray, had lost nothing of their expression; his mouth, and all the lower portion of his face, might have been cut from marble by some great sculptor, so perfect was the form and expression. The whole presence of the man took Ruby Gray by surprise, and all her old nature came out in wonderful force.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONLY PRACTISING.

MRS. GRAY, I believe," said Wheaton, coming forward. I came in to apologize for my daughter. She is just now engaged with a sick guest, but will have the pleasure of seeing you the moment she can be spared."

"Oh! I am prepared to wait. Some one told me that an accident had happened to — to a gentleman who was on his way to Mr. Van Lorn's; an acquaintance of mine, too. I hope it is nothing very serious."

"A broken limb, I believe."

"What, so bad as that? I am grieved to hear it!"

"Yes, it must be painful to his friends."

"Yes, very. I know him intimately, and was *so* shocked. It is a terrible thing to see a strong man suffer—I do not think it is in me to endure the sight. Your daughter must be very courageous—very superior."

Mr. Wheaton smiled. He was proud of his child, and took no pains to conceal it.

"Yes, my Zua has courage enough for any duty. It was she who first discovered the wounded gentleman."

"How fortunate! how noble!"

"I doubt if she thinks it anything more than a fortunate accident. For my part, I cannot imagine any woman doing less in an emergency like that."

"Oh! but I am afraid many of us might have fallen short. For my part, I can endure anything better than a sight of pain. In my own person, I am sure of fortitude; but in another—"

Here Ruby gave a pretty little shudder, and settled back among the sofa cushions, as if desolated by the very idea of human suffering.

If Mr. Wheaton understood this graceful bit of acting, he was only amused by it; for he smiled pleasantly, and fell into sudden admiration of the beautiful picture she made with her clasped hands and drooping eyelids, which just revealed a sapphire brightness underneath. Ruby being satisfied with her pose, and conscious of the admiration, sat motionless awhile, then slowly lifted her eyes to Mr. Wheaton, and claimed his sympathy by a look that brought a glow of brightness all over her face.

"Do I keep you — am I in the way of pleasanter engagements?" she said, plaintively.

"Pleasanter? impossible!" he answered, with a spontaneous burst of admiration.

"I fear my visit is ill-timed; but I have heard so much of your daughter, and feel so certainly that we should love each other."

"I am sure of it," answered Wheaton.

Ruby arose from the sofa, and prepared for a new position. She went to the window and leaned against the frame, looking out upon the orchard.

"What a paradise you have here!" she said again, clasping her hands. "Oh, how beautiful! I can now understand how men, capable of ruling others, content themselves with nature only."

Next to his daughter, Mr. Wheaton was proud of the old family farm. He went to the window and looked out, not upon the orchard — that was a familiar object — but upon the little nest of a carriage, and the cream-colored ponies, that made a pretty picture in the lane; then his eyes fell upon the Indian boy, and he laughed.

"You have a strange servant there," he said.

Ruby laughed, too; the great charm of her coquetry lay in its eternal changefulness.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "A wonderfully attached creature, that I love like a pet animal — not that he is one in fact.

There never was anything so sharp and clever; I really think he adores me."

"Is there anything very singular in that?" said Mr. Wheaton, looking down upon the glowing face and upturned eyes, now so close to him that he could not, if he wished, avoid them.

Ruby had a way of gliding softly up to a man when she conversed with him, as if moved by some impulse of sympathy, until her face came directly under his; then she would lift those wonderful blue eyes and creep, as it were, into his protection with an appearance of child-like unconsciousness, which was sure to attract almost any man until he saw it practised on some one else, when the effect was entirely different. Just then, Mr. Wheaton, cold, stately, and wise as he was, felt the thrall of her artful loveliness in its full power.

"It seems," said Ruby, "as if I had been here all my life — as if I never wanted to go away again."

Mr. Wheaton was tall, Ruby scarcely more than medium size; of course, his fine eyes drooped downward, and rested full upon the sweet face. He did not speak for a moment, and then only said:

"You are very lovely; too lovely for any thought of wasting life in a country farm-house."

"Is this wasting life, or is it making the best of it?" answered the widow, sweeping her hand so as to take in the room, and thus changing the position of her head.

"If I were a young man, or had a son, perhaps —"

"Don't talk of young men," cried the widow, with a pretty pout of the mouth; "I cannot bear them."

Mr. Wheaton's eyes flashed. Somehow, in her eager protest against youth, Ruby had laid one hand on his arm — she was so child-like, you know. In a moment, it was in his own firm clasp.

That instant, the door opened, and Zua came in — but

she saw nothing. Mrs. Gray was settling her hat with the hand which was yet warm from that sudden clasp; Mr. Wheaton was looking out of the window, with a hot flush on his forehead.

"Oh, Miss Wheaton! I am so delighted to see you at last," cried the lady. "Mrs. Van Lorn was coming with me; but there was some trouble with the servants, so she bade me use her name for an introduction, and charge you to like me very much, audacious as I am to come alone."

"Mrs. Van Lorn is very kind," said Zua, smiling. "There was no need of a personal introduction; her friends are always ours."

Zua was perfectly polite; but Ruby's child-like manner did not quite take her by storm, as it had her father.

"I—I came for another reason. You have a friend of mine—an acquaintance, rather—under your roof, and I wish to thank you. I mean Mr. Moreton. I hope he is recovering."

"He is much better, thank you; but a case like his must have time, the doctor says."

"Oh, of course! But he has no fever? nothing dangerous has set in, I hope."

"Nothing. He is quite calm, and as well as the pain of a broken limb permits."

"I wonder," said Ruby, putting a finger to her lips—

Zua stood quietly waiting to hear what her visitor was meditating over.

"I wonder if it would be a terrible thing if I asked to see him? He is an old friend, you know."

"If he would like—if he wishes," answered Zua, forcing back the blood that she felt rushing to her face.

"My dear Miss Wheaton, it seems so inhospitable for an old friend—for in trouble even an acquaintance should have a friend—to be standing on ceremony about visiting a sick-room."

"I—I do not know. Mr. Moreton is easily excited; we are ordered to keep him quiet."

"But I am like a mouse; he never will mind me."

"I will ask him."

"Oh! I would not ask you to enter his room. Of course, a young lady who never knew him would shrink from that," said Ruby, so sweetly that no one but a sensitive rival would have guessed at the venom in her words. "I see a nice old lady in the hall: perhaps she will take my message—being a widow makes some difference, you know."

"I will take the message myself," said Zua, with dignity. "It will be no strange thing for me to visit the gentleman's room."

"Indeed! I beg ten thousand pardons. Etiquette is not so rigid in the country, then, and I may hope to escape criticism. How very good you are!"

While Ruby was speaking, she took a survey of Zua from head to foot, and her spirit rose to meet the contest which threatened them; for that rich complexion, that raven hair, and the exquisitely-formed features—inherited as Ruby saw then from the father—were of such rare beauty, that she felt the contrast like a challenge. The dress, too, was perfect in its simplicity—pure white, with a crimson rose or two in the hair and on the bosom.

"I will return in a moment," said Zua, annoyed by that searching look; and she left the room.

"How very beautiful your daughter is!" cried Ruby, with enthusiasm, taking her old place by the window; "but no wonder."

She whispered the last words, as if to herself; but they rose with subtle flattery to the proud man's ear.

"It flatters me that you think so."

"Flatters! oh, sir! who would dare to flatter you?"

Wheaton laughed.

"I think you might find courage enough, Mrs. Gray; only it is not worth your while."

"Me? Oh, dear! I never could flatter any one. The feeling springs to my lips, and out it comes. There never was so foolish a creature in that respect."

"Foolish! that is no word for such lips."

"Who is it that flatters now?"

"Mr. Moreton will be happy to see you, Mrs. Gray."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Ruby, looking at Mr. Wheaton. "I hope it will be in my power to console him a little. May I beg of you, Miss Wheaton, to show me his room?"

Zua had not moved from the threshold; she stepped back, and allowing her guest to pass into the hall, opened the door to Mr. Moreton's room. Ruby passed through, touching the door with her hand, as if she would have shut Zua out, but dared not. There was no cause for fear; the young girl asked to be excused, and walked into the garden with a quick, proud step, as if some one had wounded her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

RUBY GRAY IS FOR ONCE SINCERE.

RUBY GRAY changed utterly as she entered that room; the roses faded on her cheeks, the self-confident manner vanished into natural timidity. There was no power of fascination left to her then; for she was in fact natural and child-like, as real love makes any woman.

"Oh! Moreton, I am so sorry — so very, very glad to be sure that it is no worse."

She went up to the bed on which the young man lay, and placed both her hands in that he held out to her. He felt the little hands tremble through their gloves, and was touched by her emotion.

"You are kind to come when a fellow needs his friends

most," he said, dropping her hands from his clasp with a sigh. "Sit down and tell me what has happened since they chained me down here. Nothing that is unpleasant, I hope."

"I cannot tell; I hardly know. From the hour I heard of this I have thought of nothing else. It seemed like an evil omen that you should be hurt on the way to me."

"An evil omen! Oh! I hope not," said Moreton, glancing through the open window, where he saw Zua walking in and out among the flowers.

Ruby followed his glance, and grew pale as snow. He could turn his eyes toward another woman when she was by — the thought made her tremble.

"You — you are pale; you are changed," she said, with a quiver of pain in her voice.

"Pale, of course I am; and changed, too, as much as horrible pain can change a man. Do you wonder at that, sweet Ruby?"

She smiled, and made an effort to deceive herself. Now that she was thoroughly in earnest, there was no use for her art but to blind her own intelligence. She would not believe that he had ceased to love her.

"But with your friends, with me, for instance, is there no change; are you exactly the same?"

"Exactly the same! As if anything on earth that breathed the air ever was exactly the same two days together."

"But I speak of feelings."

"And they change most of all; here is a proof. For the first time on earth, Ruby Gray, you seem to be in earnest, natural as the flowers out yonder. This would surprise me if I expected stability in anything; but when a coquette becomes sincere, even for an hour, I think it is not impossible that the leopard may change his spots."

"A coquette, Preston! Why will you call me by such hard names? Why will you think such things of me?"

Tears trembled in the woman's voice, her beautiful lips quivered. Yet ten minutes before you have seen her by the window, looking into Mr. Wheaton's eyes, as if there did not exist another man on earth. Still she was honest in saying, "Why will you think such things of me?" She had only meant to fascinate this man for a moment—in fact, had not thought of it. Habit had become second nature to her—that was all.

Moreton rose upon his elbow and looked at her keenly. A cloud came over his face, and he settled back on the pillows holding his breath. At last he spoke.

"If it displeases you, of course I will not do it."

"It pains, it troubles me, Preston. With you I would have no faults."

The cloud settled heavily over his face now; so heavily that it seemed like a spasm.

"Are you hurt? Oh! how could I let you move?" cried Ruby, bending over him in real sympathy. "Oh! how pale you are, my poor, poor Preston!"

Quick as thought, this woman, given up for once to her impulses, bent down and pressed her beautiful lips to his forehead. She felt him shrink suddenly, and thought some motion of hers had angered his wound.

"Forgive me! I did not mean to hurt you," she pleaded with tears in her eyes. "Everything I do seems to give pain; and I so want to comfort you!"

Preston looked by her through the window, with keen anxiety in his eyes. He saw the white dress of Zua Wheaton fluttering upon the terrace, but her back was toward them.

"You are kind, indeed, Mrs. Gray; you always were kind to me; but I am not so very ill! Only chained down here, you know, with a pang darting through me now and then like a spear. This is a sort of thing that time alone can cure."

"But you are lonely; you must be sad."

"Lonely, am I? No, I rather think not. They let me read now; then there is a queer little fellow that comes to me sometimes from the garden, the most absurdly amusing creature you ever saw; and his sister, a strange, bright girl; beautiful, too, in a certain way; full of originality, and kind-hearted as a creature can be. She always wears flowers in her hair; and with *such* shoes—but there is nothing to laugh at in the girl. I wish you could see her and take to her, Mrs. Gray."

"Mrs. Gray—this is the second time you have called me that. When you prayed to call me Ruby, did I refuse?"

Moreton laughed; but a flush of color came into his face. He made no direct answer to her reproach, but went on about the girl, who had evidently excited his interest in no small degree.

"She is affectionate as a child, brimful of romance, and ignorant of the world and its way beyond all belief. She has a sweet voice, too, perfectly uncultivated, but with a world of power in it. I wish you could see her."

"I will, if it pleases you. Indeed, I am ready to accept or reject anything you desire."

"That is promising too much; but it will be a kind thing if you interest yourself about this poor girl. Her mother is a washerwoman, somewhere in the neighborhood, and her name is Clark."

"Clark—why that is the girl—I—I have seen her, Preston."

"Seen her! When?"

"The—the night you were brought here—I will not conceal it. I will conceal nothing now. The news reached me, and I went wild. All day I had been watching for you with such sweet hopes, such anxious longing for your presence, that at last suspense made me faint. I was like a child waiting for its mother; like a flower asking the night

for its dew. When it was dark, and you did not come, I sat down and cried; you will not believe it, Preston—but I did. Then it was that I heard of your fall, and where you lay suffering. My little boat was at the foot of the hill; I got into it and came over. First I went to the washer-woman's house, where I saw the girl you speak of; then I persuaded the woman's son to bring me here. I saw you; I was in the room with you, my darling; I—"

"Halloo, old boy! well enough to see company, I find. Will you let a fellow in?"

The voice came from a window close by. Ruby turned her tearful face, and saw young Gray leaning into the room, with a half-smoked segar in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNDER THE OLD APPLE-TREE.

MANDY CLARK!"

This name rang out in a shrill, loud voice, and reached the girl where she sat under an old apple-tree, at the end of the house, with her feet buried deep in the flowering clover, and her head leaning against the shaggy trunk of the tree. Boughs, heavy with green apples, scarcely larger than hickory-nuts, curved over her; and glimpses of the green shore and far-off sea came with new beauty through the leaves when the wind swayed them. A tin pan, nearly full of green currants, was half sliding from her lap—for the girl had fallen into one of those bright day-dreams, with which genius is forever filling the commonplace hours of life.

This voice cut through the girl's dreams like a spear,

shivering them into ten thousand broken flashes. She started up, drew the pan into her lap, and began to rub the currants between her soft palms, rattling them into a yellow earthen bowl that she placed within the pan, and flinging the tangled stems into the grass when the fruit was all severed from them.

"Mandy Clark, where on arth are you? The pie-crust is all rolled out, and you hain't brought me a single currant yet. Billy's got home with the molasses-jug more 'n an hour ago. Mandy Clark, I say!"

Amanda looked down into the yellow earthen bowl in great perplexity. About half a pint of currants met her eye; and there was the pan, almost full to the edge, bristling with stems. How long had she been there? During how much time had she been dreaming under the apple-tree? What could she say in excuse of her tardiness?

"Yes, mother, yes, I'm almost through; just wait a minute."

But Mrs. Clark was not disposed to wait. The fire was crackling in her brick oven; half a dozen brown earthen platters were already clothed with under-crust, ready for the fruit which lay untouched in that tin pan. The cork was out of that molasses-bottle, and its sweet contents were creaming over its neck. Everything seemed in a hurry to be used.

"Wait!" cried Mrs. Clark, slapping her hands vigorously together, dusting the flour away, as if she fancied herself boxing Amanda's ears, and enjoyed it. There's no such thing as waiting when the oven-wood is burned down to cinders, and the molasses yeasting over like all possessed! Just hand over them green currants and a-done with it."

Away the woman strode over the patch of clover which stretched between her and the apple-tree, treading down the sweet blossoms like a grenadier, and swinging her arms like

a windmill. Amanda began to tremble as those firmly-planted steps drew near.

"Oh, mother!" she said, "I—I could n't help it; the stems are so tough; the day so—so awfully beautiful. I don't think I went to sleep, mother; but, somehow, I could n't get the dreams out of my head."

Here Mrs. Clark snatched up the bowl, and looked scornfully down on the handful of currants in the bottom.

"And this is what you've been about, you—you abomination; you lazy—"

"No, mother, don't call me that; I'm not an abomination, if I am lazy. Yes, I own that it is n't in me to work."

"Then it should n't be in you to eat, my madam. Here I've been rolling and kneading, and raking up the coals, till I haven't hardly a dry thread on me, while you've been dawdling here in the shade, counting the green apples, I dare say."

"No, mother, I have n't thought of them!"

"Or, for all I know, spending your time with that York chap, with his white hands and mustachers—the scamp!"

"Indeed, indeed, mother, I have n't seen him; I was only thinking. The day was so still, you know; and there was such a humming of bees in the clover-tops, that I sort of floated off with them, and forgot the currants."

"Hand 'em over here," cried the old woman, seizing upon the pan, and giving her daughter a vicious push, by way of emphasis. "I'll pick 'em over myself. It always comes to that when work is to be done. You was bad enough before, gracious knows; but since that York chap has been a-hanging about it's scandalous!"

"Mother, it was not his fault that I did not rub out the currants," pleaded Amanda; but the old lady took her up.

"His fault, indeed! What else was you a-thinking about but him, with his hair smelling like a violet-bed, and his kid gloves? Oh! how I despise sich things."

"Don't mother—please don't," cried the girl, wounded by this attack on her idol. "He is n't the only gentleman that wears gloves, and smells as if he slept among the flowers."

"Is n't he? Now do tell!" retorted the mother, tossing her gray head with a slow motion full of scorn. "What do you know about gentlemen, Mandy Clark?"

"I—I saw Mr. Moreton with gloves on; that is, he had gloves on when he got upset; I'm sure of that; for only yesterday, I saw them in Miss Zua's upper bureau-drawer."

"Yes, I dare say you did. There's another fool!"

"Oh, mother, mother! you're talking about Miss Zua," cried Amanda, shocked and angry.

"Well, what if I am? Haven't I got eyes? But what's the use talking? Hand over them currants, and get out of my sight, if you want me to keep my hands off you."

The old woman snatched the pan of currants from Amanda's lap, threw herself on the ground, crushing the clover down into hopeless nothingness, and began to grind the clusters between her hard hands with bitter energy.

"Yes, look on, and stare as if you never saw work afore," she cried, while the green berries rattled into her lap in a perfect shower. "Oven getting cold; pie-crust hardening; sweetening all running to waste—but what do you care? Been a-looking out for him; I know it. Don't dare to say it is n't so. Oh! you're taking hold at last, are you? High time—high time!"

With these bitter words, the old woman fell to work with such zeal that the yellow earthen bowl soon brimmed over with picked fruit.

"Here," she said, lifting the bowl between her two hands, "take it in, fill the pies, and bring it out again, while I pick over the rest. Why don't you go along?"

Amanda hesitated, and stood irresolute, with the bowl between her hands. The sound of a footstep in the locust-

grove seized upon her breath, and held it. The old woman looked sharply up, and saw that the color was coming and going in that young face. She had not heard the sound; nothing but the keen sense of love could have gathered it in from that distance; but there was something in the girl's face that made her angry.

"Go in," she repeated, shifting her seat, and crushing fresh tufts of clover to death; "go in and do as I told you. What possesses the girl?"

Amanda gave a furtive glance toward the grove, where she saw a shadow moving through the feathery greenness—a shadow that she recognized with a wild throb of the heart. Quick as lightning she darted toward the house, and hid herself around the corner, afraid of his coming up when her mother was in that sharp humor.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE UNPLEASANT MISTAKE.

SCARCELY was the girl out of sight when young Gray came from the grove, smoking a segar, and swinging a light cane in his hand. He dropped himself over a fence, and began to wade through the clover slowly, as if he enjoyed treading out the perfume, and lingered over the task with lazy satisfaction.

All at once he saw something moving under the old apple-tree, and gave his cane a light toss in the air, catching it as it came down, with a graceful gesture.

"Oh! I thought as much," he said, taking the remnant of a segar from between his lips and flinging it away. "She was sure to be waiting somewhere; a little neglect was just

the thing. Will the creature pout, I wonder, or leap forward to meet me?"

With these thoughts in his head, the young man came forward a little more quickly, smoothing the soft moustache on each side of his lip, as if he wanted to brush away that triumphant smile before he presented himself under the apple-tree.

Mrs. Clark was seated with her back against the rough trunk of the tree, hard at work. She heard the rippling noise of feet moving through the clover; but took no heed, for her head was just then full of her daughter, and the thoughts which presented themselves were anything but pleasant ones. All at once a broad stream of light was let in upon her through the parted boughs. She looked up suddenly: there was the very man she had been pondering over, in connection with her daughter, with an interest that arose almost to bitterness.

Young Gray stood with his arms extended holding the branches back, struck motionless by what he saw. Instead of that bright young girl, flushed with rosy joy by his approach, he saw a gaunt old woman, with her long limbs stretched out upon the grass, the checked sun-bonnet falling away from her thick, grizzly hair, and a tin pan in her lap, from which she lifted her great black eyes in sudden and displeased wonder.

"Ah! Mrs. Clark, good morning," cried the young man, allowing the leafy branches to close behind him, like the drapery of a tent, as he stepped lightly forward. "I felt sure of finding you somewhere about the house, hard at work as ever! What an industrious creature you are!"

"If I want to eat, I must work," answered the woman, settling the sun-bonnet on her head with a jerk. "It isn't everybody that can live on the best and never lift a hand—though some do it. But what did you want of me?"

"Oh! nothing much. Only I'm not quite certain of the

count; but wasn't there a—a col—no, a handkerchief, short last week, Mrs. Clark?"

"Neither one nor t'other," was the terse reply. "You got all you sent, young man, and know it, too."

Mrs. Clark began to grind the bunches of currants between her hands viciously as she spoke, and her lips settled together hard and firm as iron.

Gray did not dispute her, but answered with a forced laugh:

"I dare say it's all right. Only I am such a careless fellow; always counting short or double, when I attempt anything of the kind. Shouldn't have thought of the thing, only the handkerchief was given me by my mother—a fine old lady, Mrs. Clark; I wish you could see her, so gentle, so loving, so industrious. In her mildness she has almost spoiled me."

"Shouldn't wonder," snarled the old woman, shaking up the currants in her pan; "but whether or no, I hain't got yer handkercher."

"Of course not; I must have dropped it out of my pocket. But what are you doing now, Mrs. Clark—anything that I can help you in?"

"I'm picking our green currants. Mandy ought to have had 'em done hours ago. She sat out here long enough, gracious knows; but it's of no use; I've got 'em to do myself, and always shall. She ain't worth her salt."

"What, Miss Amanda?"

"Yes, *Miss Amanda*, seeing as she's got up to that notch. I'm talking about her, and no one else."

"You could n't talk about a lovelier subject, Mrs. Clark."

"How do you know?" questioned the old woman, sharply, her black eyes striking fire.

"Why, of course, I have seen your daughter, Mrs. Clark."

"Where? When?"

"Where? Oh! I beg your pardon; at Mr. Wheaton's,

when I went there to visit my sick friend. What care she took of him!"

Mrs. Clark was busy at her work all the time this conversation was going on. She now took a handful of the loose currants and rained them back and forth from one hand to the other, while she blew the green dust away with powerful and prolonged blasts of her breath. Then she dropped the fruit slowly back into the pan, and deliberately removed it to the grass, preparing herself for battle.

"Mr. Gray," she said, speaking with something like dignity, for she was in earnest—"Mr. Gray, you have n't lost no handkercher, and you did n't come about one; you know that as well as I do; but it's my daughter you are a-coming to see, and I know it."

"Indeed, Mrs. Clark, you—"

"There's no use denying it. You can't cheat me! When you lifted them apple-tree limbs you thought it was her a-setting here, and so it would a-been fifteen minutes ago. I do believe she was waiting for you then. That's what you've brought her to."

"My dear madam, you certainly are mistaken."

"You know better. Set down you, Mr. Gray, on the grass there. I've got something that must be said, and now's the time. Set down, I tell you!"

Gray took out a delicate white handkerchief, spread it on the grass, and sat down, smiling blandly upon the old lady, when these arrangements were made.

"Now, Mrs. Clark, I am all attention."

The old woman was no longer angry, but earnest, and full of motherly feeling; if not gentle and tender as might have befitted a more refined person, she was honest and resolute as the bravest woman that ever lived, in protecting the child of her bosom.

"Mr. Gray, what do you come here for?"

The young scape-grace was about to make some flippant

reply, but those black, earnest eyes rebuked the frothy words, and he said, almost respectfully:

"Because the country is lovely, and I have little else to amuse me."

"To amuse you!" cried the old woman, in a deep voice, hoarse with angry emotion. "That girl is my daughter, sir. I love her—I am proud of her. She is all that I have of woman-kind to show me that life is worth anything to an old woman with gray hairs in her head. It is her you come to see. I know it. What for?"

"I—I like—I admire your daughter. She is fresh, innocent, beautiful."

"Well, sir. Well?"

"She is the lightest, freshest—"

"Stop, sir. I know what my Mandy is, better than you can tell me; and such as she is, I mean to keep her."

"Heaven forbid, madam! That girl is capable of higher things. She must not waste such gifts in a place like this."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MRS. CLARK SAYS ALL THAT IS IN HER HEART.

CHARLES GRAY had expressed himself with sincerity when he said that Amanda Clark possessed gifts that were lost in that humble home. He really believed what he was saying; but old Mrs. Clark fastened her eyes on him as he ceased speaking, till a faint crimson stole over his face, deepening around the eyes duskily as shame marks itself. It seemed to him that the old woman knew of some black thoughts that had sometimes crept, like serpents, through his mind, and was bringing them forth to the light.

"You think this?"

"I do, indeed. Your girl was born for something better than a drudge in the country."

"Drudge! Look at my Amanda's hands, then look at mine. Which is hard? Which is white? Drudge, indeed! I may scold, I may find fault, I may raise Cain, because she does n't take hold of work; but I tell you, young man, I'd rather slave till every joint in my body cracks, than have her do it. Some people take to drink, some to making money; some go to meetings, and pacify themselves that way; but I take to that child—she's wine, money, prayer and praise to me. When I thank God for anything—which is n't often, remember—it's for her. I never see roses in the garden; but when they come out pink and bright as her cheek, then I thank God for them. When I draw up a bucket of water fresh from the well, and hear it dropping back from the moss on the sides, so cool and clear, it is not the water I think of, but her. It's of no use talking, sir; that girl owns my soul. I gave it up to her the last time her father took her in his arms and told me to love her for his sake."

"I do not think you found it difficult to love a girl like that?" said Gray.

"Love her?" answered the woman. "Love her? It is not often that I talk about such things; I am too much ashamed of 'em, just as I am of praying, when I do pray. I can't kiss the girl, and hold her in my arms, and praise her, as some women do—it's not in me. My heart is full of the thing you call tenderness, but I cannot make even her know it. Like water in a pitcher left on the rock-work of a well, which all men have given up drinking from, it goes off in a mist which no one ever sees. Not one drop flows over, and so even she knows nothing about it. But sometimes it swells here till the ache of it holds my breath."

"After all," muttered Gray, "it is easy seeing where the creature got her genius from. So hard, so sharp—a regular scold. Who would have thought it?"

"It is because I love her that I say this to you, young man."

"But why to me, Mrs. Clark?"

"Because I am afraid of you!"

"Afraid of me! There is not a more harmless fellow living."

The old woman arose and leaned against the tree. Her bonnet had fallen to the grass. She wore no hoops, and the folds of her dress settled heavily around her, like the drapery of a statue. The coarse, jet-black hair, clouded whitely with silver, fell down with the bonnet, and with a sweep of her arm she twisted it around her head, like a huge serpent, and fastened it there, thus making a sibyl of herself, which no sculptor ever matched.

"Young man, do you love that girl, my child?"

There was power and pathos in the voice; and from the glance which came out from those eyes like lightning from a thunder-cloud, this shallow man of the world shrank like a coward.

"You turn white—your eye sinks; but answer me in words, for I will have the truth."

"Love her—of course; who could help it?" he said at last, lifting a hand to smooth the silken hair on his lip, but dropping it again in very shame—for those stormy eyes were upon him.

"That is no answer to the question I asked, young man."

"I know. I dare say not; but forgive me if I say you ask very disa—very singular questions."

"I dare say; but I do ask this one, and will have an answer."

"I—I think it was, 'Did I love your daughter?' Well, yes, I do, as well as a poor devil can afford to love anything."

"Then you want to marry her?"

"Upon my word you are up to time, sharp. One does not expect to be booked up like that by his washerwoman."

"I am a washerwoman. It was for her sake; but I am that girl's mother, and her father too—for he is dead, and left her to me. I ask you, as a man speaks to a man."

"Pretty much, I must say," muttered Gray, under his breath.

"As a woman talks to a woman, with tears in her eyes and a pain in her heart, I beg of you tell me the truth. Is marrying in your mind when you come after my daughter?"

"And if I said yes—what then?"

"Then, if I was wise, like a good mother—if I had no pride, and could lift my eyes to God for the truth, I should say to you, 'Take up your hat and cane, turn your face to the city, and go away forever;' but I cannot do it: I cannot do it."

"And if I said no—what then?"

"Then," said the woman, uplifting her hand with a gesture that made him shrink, "I could find no words to curse you with, for you have torn the heart out of a young girl's life."

The young man got up from the grass and strode backward, startled and astonished. This woman, whom he had looked upon merely as a common drudge, only unlike others of her class because she was more masculine and had unusual physical power, seemed to him like a prophetess, who was searching out his thoughts, and might hereafter avenge herself like a heathen.

"Nay, my good woman, you take things too grimly. What if I loved the girl ever so much, which I should not be ashamed to confess anywhere, for she is charming; what if I loved her, but evil fortune had left me poor as a—as you are, for instance; so poor that a marriage for love is absolutely a luxury beyond my reach—what then?"

"What then? He asked me that question years ago, and

my answer was, that I had strength and will to work for us both; but she could not do that, and I am an old woman who takes in washing that she may live easy as he did; but it is a hard life—a bitter, hard life—he died under it.”

“Still, you would press this fate on me and her.”

“No, no! It is too hard. Go away. Leave her to me. She is young. I may be wrong. Perhaps she does not care for you.”

“I am sure she does not.”

“Sure—are you sure?” cried the woman, eagerly. “I hope so. She is a sensible girl, with all her ways of speaking; and you are no more like him—I mean her father—than I am like her. How should she love you?”

“How, indeed!” said Gray, laughing. “You see, my good woman, what a monster you have raised up, and all for nothing. Amanda likes me well enough, because I have read a good deal and can talk poetry to her; but as for love, she never thought of it, be sure of that. If there is anything of the kind, pity me, not her. She meets me exactly as she would seize upon a book of poems—that is all.”

Mrs. Clark looked at him keenly. She was not a woman to be cheated by a few crafty words; but what the heart wishes, the brain easily accepts. She drew a deep breath, and sat down to her work again, drooping her strong head, as if ashamed of the excitement which had just disturbed her.

Gray read all this in her face, and breathed freely for the first time since he came so unexpectedly into her presence. A little anxiety came back upon him when he heard footsteps wading through the grass, and saw the skirt of a woman's dress sweeping that way; but he was on his guard now, and prepared for whatever might happen.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LOVE'S WILD DREAM.

AMANDA had done her work in the kitchen with trembling hands, stooping now and then to look out of the window, from which she caught glimpses of two persons talking earnestly under the apple-tree. What could they be saying? Why did her mother stand so uprightly, and, as it were, crowned with the dignity of an empress, as she talked with the young man? Never in her life had Amanda seen her mother with an air of command like that. She felt afraid to go near her, and hovered around the window, long after her task was done, like a bird which finds some stranger near its nest, and dares not cry aloud, lest its very agony should reveal the sacred hiding-place.

At last, she gathered courage, and, taking up the bowl she had emptied, went out into the waves of clover, trembling as her feet waded through their redness. As she came up, the trunk of the apple-tree stood between her and the two persons talking near it. She paused and held her breath. The voice of her mother, loud, clear, and impressive, struck her motionless. The very language she had been accustomed to was changed; and from that high, maternal instinct came expressions which seemed to have passed out of the woman's life when her husband died, but which the love of his child had brought forth again, fresh and vivid, from their long sleep.

Just as Amanda came up, the old woman lifted herself from the grass a second time, and moved close to young Gray, who was picking the small, green apples from a branch that bent over him, and tossing them into the grass with short, impatient jerks. He stopped as the woman laid her hand on his arm.

"But you love her well enough. Tell me if you love my poor girl?" she said, while a piteous moisture crept into her eyes.

"Love her? Yes, by Jove! I do, better than anything on earth."

A throb of exquisite delight shook the heart in Amanda Clark's bosom. She pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle the happiness that threatened to break from it in cries that he must have heard. She turned and ran away through the meadow into the kitchen, and up to her own room, where she fell upon the bed, quivering from head to foot, and crying such tears as April clouds give to the flowers.

"He loves me — he loves me! She knows it, for his own lips told her so," she cried, in an ecstasy of thanksgiving, lifting her clasped hands upward, as if pleading with the angels to record that one fact, and make all heaven the brighter for it. "He is telling her now; the news has changed her, as it has changed me. Oh! what shall I say? How can I look her in the face? *Am I beautiful?* What does he find in me to love so? I will go to church next Sunday; I will — I will —"

Her voice died away in soft, broken sighs, growing quiet and holy as the spirit of love brooded down upon her. She fell upon her knees unconsciously, and thanked God with a spontaneous outburst of gratitude for the first time in her life. The simplicity of a little child came upon her in that supreme hour; and, robbed of all other language by intense emotion, she whispered over the Lord's Prayer, while tears trembled on her closed lashes, and a quiver of joy disturbed her smiling mouth.

If such moments as these could last, humanity would be glorified into something angelic, and we should never feel the change of this earth for heaven; but joy and pain exhaust themselves like storms, leaving beauty or ruin behind.

Amanda arose from her knees, quiet and lovely, like a

flower just filled with sunshine, while its cup is heavy with dew. She looked out of the window, and saw the tall figure of her lover passing into the locust-grove. He did not turn toward the house, but moved quickly, beating the undergrowth with his cane. This brought a shade of sadness upon her. She so longed to see his face, to feel that he was looking for her.

"No matter, he loves me — he loves me," she whispered, pressing both hands to her bosom; and she followed him with her eyes, as if wondering that the trees did not break into fresh blossoms as he passed under them.

"Mandy Clark, why don't you come along with that bowl?"

It was her mother's voice cutting sharply from under the apple-tree — the old voice, shrill with impatience. Down stairs the girl went, startled out of all her sweet dreams. The earthen bowl stood upon the table, where she had left it, surrounded by a regiment of pies, some lacking the fruit, all deficient in the upper-crust, flanked by the molasses-bottle, about which the flies were buzzing like bees in a buckwheat-field.

Amanda seized the bowl, flung a table-cloth over the pies, and ran out of the house. She found the old woman hard at work redeeming lost time, and intent only on her occupation.

"Well, you've come at last, have you?" she said, gathering up her apron, into which she had rasped the currants for lack of a better receptacle. "Set down that bowl while I empty my apron into it. That'll do. Stand it just there, while I rub out what's left on these stems. What on arth are you a-shaking it so for?"

"It was my hand. I—I didn't mean to!" answered Amanda, breathless with excitement.

The mother made no reply; but gathering up a handful of loose stems, began to rub out the few berries that were left

among them, as if her mind had never wandered from the occupation.

"Mandy!" she said, at last, tossing the crushed stems behind her with an emphatic gesture.

"Yes, mother," answered the girl, glowing with sweet expectations.

"Mandy, that young fellow had just been here."

"Has he, mother?" was the faint rejoinder.

"Yes, Mandy, he's gone for good and all. I told him never to come on my premises again, and he'd better not."

"Oh, mother, mother!" cried out the poor girl.

The old woman turned upon her daughter sharply. There was a smouldering fire in her eyes that might be anger or suppressed trouble. Amanda was so blinded by sudden distress that she could not tell which.

"What are you screeching at me in that way for? One would think I'd been striking you," she said.

"So you have, mother!—so you have! The hardest blow of all. How could you?"

"How could I what?"

"Tell him that?"

"Because I wanted him to understand it. He's been a-hanging around here long enough. Perhaps he and you thought I didn't notice it—I did. Girls brought up in the country don't begin to curl their hair all at once for nothing, nor—"

"Oh, mother, don't!"

Amanda was striving to tuck away the curls under her comb with both hands; but the rich mass would writhe out of her fingers, and drop down on the white neck in rebellious coils, defying all attempts to intrall them.

"Well, it's of no consequence, let 'em curl. He's gone for good; and I never want to set eyes on him again, nor none of his sort."

"Mother—oh, mother! tell me what has happened?"

"What has happened? Nothing that I know of. The chap came here, and I gave him a piece of my mind. I reckon he won't want to hear it twice. Once has al'es been enough for any man when I'm in earnest. Now go in, and let's finish up them pies."

Amanda did not speak, but her mother beat the upturned pan on the ground till it rang again, and marched off toward the house, like a grenadier, conveying it under her arm.

CHAPTER XL.

BACK AGAIN.

AMANDA threw herself upon the ground, and leaning her pale cheek against the rough bark of the tree, moaned like a wounded kid—all the brightness had gone out of her life. The ache at her heart was a cold agony, which she could neither understand nor throw off. What had they done to her? Was this pain, which took the strength from her limbs, mortal? Was the first blow struck upon her heart, death? The moans that died on those pale lips broke into sobs at last, and a wild burst of tears exhausted her to faintness. How long she lay there no one but her mother could have guessed, for the girl forgot everything. At last she was disturbed.

"Birdie!"

She sprang to her feet, put the wet hair from her temples with both hands, and Gray saw that her face was radiant through the tears that stained it.

"Oh, you have come back! You have come back! She was only tormenting me."

"Hush, child! Do not make this outcry! The old autocrat will hear you. There, there; not a word more. I

would kiss off those tears, if I dared. Come down to the shore to-night. There is a moon; but say nothing to any one—above all, to that brother. We want no confidants. The old woman is not going to keep us apart—be sure of that. Only be silent as the grave. She must not know that we ever meet, after this. You will come?"

"Yes, yes!" said Amanda, bewildered, "I will come."

"That is a good girl. At eleven—not earlier; and put something dark around you."

"Mandy! Mandy Clark!"

The girl started, and grew white as death.

"It is her! She wants me. What can I do?" she whispered.

"Go at once; I will stand this side. The trunk is large enough to cover me. Go! go! or she will come in search of you."

"And you? She is in the kitchen. One of its windows looks this way," whispered the girl, in desperate terror.

"Get her up stairs, or stand by that window yourself. Three minutes will cover my retreat."

"I will try. But, oh! keep out of her sight. She hates you so, all at once."

"Trust me for that! But you will come?"

"Yes, yes! Keep close to the tree; her eyes are like a hawk's."

"And yours like an angel's."

"Oh! I am frightened. What have I done to be afraid, like this?"

"Done? Made a fool and a slave of me."

She turned her face upon him, bright and glorious with affection, but spoke no word, before taking flight for the house. He followed her with his eyes, and they, too, were dark with genuine feeling. If love ever could reach that heart, it burned there, almost promising to make a better man of him.

"If she had money—if she only had," he muttered, as

the last flutter of her garments left his sight, "what a glorious creature I could make of her! The widow, that sparkling Zua are tame in contrast with her. I know the girl never loved any one before—never dreamed what love was. She carries me out of myself, by Jove!"

As these thoughts flashed through the young man's brain, he saw Amanda come up to the kitchen window and look out. Twice he turned his head, after his quick passage to the locust-grove, and saw her watching him with fond, eager interest.

"By Jove, this is love!" he exclaimed, wiping the moisture from his forehead, as he stood within the shadow of the woods. "It makes a boy of me, anyhow. If I had but kept all that the old governor left, by Jove! I'd marry her to-morrow, and let her ride over them all."

Meantime, Mrs. Clark was busy with her pies, and became impatient of Amanda's inactivity.

"What on arth are you looking at? One would think you had never seen a clover-patch before," she said, sharply.

Amanda left the window, and let the light in upon her mother, who was folding a sheet of crust on the table, and cutting a fern-leaf pattern in the centre with an artistic sweep of her knife. When this was accomplished, she spread the crust daintily over the fruited platter, and began to pinch an elaborate border around it with her two thumbs.

"Now, do look on, Mandy, and see how it's done," she said, balancing the platter on her left hand, when she began to cut away the drapery of crust, which fell in a ring adown her naked arm; "for you must learn how to work in earnest now, or you won't be worth your salt. Don't stand there, like a stone statue, but go and see about the oven. Should n't wonder if it was cold."

Amanda took the huge fire-shovel and went to the oven, with misgiving at her heart. She remembered now that her mother had called after her, as she came into the house, to

put some wood in, but, bewildered by excitement, she had forgotten it. She set down the shovel in dismay, after one look into the oven. A few dying embers and some dull white ashes were all that remained of the hot fire that blazed in it when her mother came out to the apple-tree.

"What's the matter? Why don't you rake out the coals?" cried the old woman, setting down the last pie, and facing round upon the girl.

"They are burnt out; nothing but ashes," faltered Amanda.

"Goodness me! no more there ain't!" exclaimed the woman, stooping down to look into the black mouth of the oven; "cold as a stone, too, and all my fault. I ought to have told you to put in more wood."

"You did, mother, but I forgot," said Amanda, penitently.

"No such thing! I did n't! Don't tell me; and all the oven-wood is gone — not a splinter."

"I can pick some up in the woods, mother."

"Well, then, be at it quick as a wink. Streak it, now."

Glad to escape from the rebuke she had fully expected, Amanda ran across the clover-patch, half hoping to overtake her lover in the woods. But no, she only found his footsteps here and there in the moss, as she bent down for the sticks and dry branches of which she was in search. Even these set her young heart into a fresh tumult; and when she found one whole footprint pressed into a cushion of moss, wet and green as emerald, she fell upon her knees and kissed the dewy velvet of the moss, as if it had been a living thing, and could feel the fever that made her lips so red.

Young Gray was still lingering in the outskirts of the wood, smoking a segar in the shade, before venturing out into the dust of the highway. He caught a glimpse of Amanda's pink dress, and, thinking that she had come out in search of him, stole softly behind a tree to feed his vanity by her disappointment.

"By Jove! if she does n't worship the very ground I tread on!" he exclaimed. "Catch Ruby Gray doing that! I'll just steal over and surprise her — the darling!"

So he crept softly through the shade, and, coming upon Amanda just as she had gathered an armful of sticks, threw his arm around her. Down went the sticks, with a rush, to the ground; but the cry that sprang to her lips was smothered in a kiss, so warm and sudden, that it frightened her.

"Don't be angry — don't be frightened! But I love you, Amanda Clark! I love you dearly! It's of no use trying not to tell you as an honorable fellow should, for it's a truth that will have its own way. One kiss, my girl. Don't tremble like that. Thank you, darling. I don't ask, because, Amanda, I know that you love me, and I'm sorry for it — upon my soul, I am."

"Sorry — sorry?" questioned Amanda, drawing back, like a princess, while a storm of rose-leaves seemed fluttering over her face.

"Yes, my girl! Sorry, and yet glad; proud, but humbled; happy, and miserable. Oh! Amanda Clark! if there was no one in the world but you and I, what a good man you could make of me."

"Mandy! Mandy Clark!"

"It is mother! She is getting cross. Oh, dear! What if she comes out after me?" cried Amanda, gathering up her oven-wood in affright. "Do go, Mr. Gray."

"But, I shall see you to-night?"

"Yes — yes."

Gray made a straight line for the fence, and leaped into the highway, while Amanda came out into the clover-field, with the bundle of sticks in her arms, walking swiftly, as if she trod on air. She entered the kitchen, threw the wood on the hearth, and, falling into a seat, began to cry, though a strange glory came and went through her tears, such as a rainbow flings into the mist of a summer shower.

"What on arth has come over you, Mandy Clark?" cried the mother, pausing before the oven, with a crooked stick in her hand. "Are you crazy, or what is it?"

"I am tired. I—I—oh, mother! let me go up stairs. Please, let me."

"Well, get along. That's about all work ever comes to with you. Baking or washing, it makes no difference. Do get out of the way; I want to pitch this wood in."

Amanda obeyed and went up stairs, thankful to be alone. Yet, when she was gone, the old woman dropped the wood back upon the hearth, and sat down, resting both elbows on her knees, and pondering some heavy thought in her mind.

"Always so—always so," she muttered, gloomily. "It's human nature, and my poor girl is only human. I cannot help it. Did n't I go through it all—and who could stop me? No father nor mother could do it—no, not if they had locked me up. I had my way, and so did he. There is a grave, without a headstone, for him, and plenty of clothes for me to wash. I ought to have made her work—ought to, but did n't. It seemed hard to make a drudge of *his* child. Now what will become of her? She will never, never take to this life again."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RETURNED MINIATURE.

ONE morning, Ruby Gray received a note and a little package from Preston Moreton. The package contained the miniature which Zua had seen in Moreton's room on the night after he came wounded to the house. The note was a polite excuse for keeping the miniature from its owner so long. It ended with a forced compliment, and regrets

that it had been impossible for him to call on her so frequently as he could have wished.

Mr. Wheaton, who had become a frequent visitor at Van Lorn's, brought this package, and begged Ruby to open it without ceremony. The truth was, this middle-aged man, being no wiser than his compeers, had yielded himself to the fascinations of Mrs. Van Lorn's guest, and haunted her presence as the wisest of old flies will sometimes entangle themselves in a spider's web.

The truth was, Ruby Gray had two reasons for luring this man into her society. After young Moreton began to get well, it was impossible for her to visit Mr. Wheaton's house, unless Zua returned the calls and accepted the intimacy, which that young lady rather avoided from the first, and shrank from more and more every day.

Mr. Wheaton was annoyed by this, and strove to atone for it by extra attention in his own person. At any rate, this was the excuse which he made to himself for those frequent visits to a neighbor who had been sometimes weeks together without seeing him.

To Ruby his visits were always welcome. He was an elegant man of the world, intelligent, fine-looking, and singularly frank in manner and speech. Without being at all conscious of the fact, he was led into such details of household events going on at the farm, that Ruby kept herself well informed of those things which were beyond the grasp of Billy Clark. This young man, urged on by his own jealousy and the keen interest of the lady, haunted Zua's footsteps like a spy, and hoarded every changed look or unguarded word as boys catch wasps to sting themselves with.

When Mr. Wheaton placed Moreton's package in Ruby Gray's hand, she turned white, and began to shiver as if a blast of cold wind had swept over her. Mr. Wheaton saw that her hands were trembling by the shimmer of sunlight on her rings, for she stood in the door, through which a

gush of radiance was streaming from the sky and the water, making each movement palpable. Urged by Mr. Wheaton, she tore open the envelope, unclasped the case, and saw her own picture. The pretty shadow had a smile in the blue eyes, as if it were mocking her. With an angry snap of the spring, she enclosed it in her hand, pressing her lips together till the blood left them.

Then it was Mr. Wheaton's turn to grow pale. He half reached forth his hand to snatch the picture from her; but drew it back again in time to prevent this, saying, in a smothered voice.

"Excuse me—I did not think."

"Walk in," said Ruby, waving her hand toward the little room that she had monopolized from the first day of her now long visit; "the note may require an answer. I will get it off my mind, and then enjoy your visit to the full."

She went into the garden, burning with angry impatience to read the note, half hoping that it might explain what almost seemed to her like an insult. When in a safe place, and well sheltered by some thick shrubbery, she tore it open and read the few lines it contained. How evenly they were written; with what cold precision every letter was rounded! How icily polite he was!

He had done wrong in half forcing the picture from her; to have kept it so many weeks would have been inexcusable, he knew, but for the accident which had made him a prisoner. He would have brought the picture himself, and begged her pardon in person, but the doctor forbade much exertion, and he was almost an invalid yet.

Ruby Gray crushed the note in her hand so fiercely that the diamonds on her fingers cut the paper through and through like tiny arrows. That moment the woman found all the passion of her nature wounded to the core. For the first time in her life she was in love, and, therefore, pure

womanly; for the first time in her life she was defeated, and the gall of that thought poisoned this sweet revelation in its birth. Pale and red she grew, with alternate spasms of heat and cold; her eyes flashed, now with tears, now with fire. She was like an angel and a fury at the same time. Up and down a zigzag path, which cut the hill-side to the shore, she walked and climbed, wearing out her sudden anguish with sharp exercise.

At last something like reason came back, and she began to reflect, as loving women will when they wish to deceive themselves. It was so hard for this beautiful creature to accept a disappointment. What woman had ever attempted to rival her without bitter humiliation? Could it be that this raven-haired girl, with her long, dark eyes shadowed so with curling lashes, had crowded her out of that one heart? No, no! She was jealous, madly jealous to think so!

On what ground, after all, had she made herself so bitterly miserable! Moreton had sent back her picture. Had she not demanded it of him twenty times? Had she not quarrelled with him in her graceful, passionless way from the first, for having half stolen, half wrested it from her? Then, and oh! there was joy in the thought! he must have intended to return it before this girl ever presented herself before him; else why did he have the picture with him?

Either this was the truth, or the very shadow had become so dear to him that he could not live without it. In that case it was love for her, strong, earnest love, that brought him into the country, and that could not have changed so soon. This man was trying her with his coldness; perhaps he did not think her sincere in seeming to love him as she did. Possibly he would ask questions of Mr. Wheaton, and learn how terribly she had been disturbed. No, he must not guess at all of his power over her. She would calm herself, and go into the house with all needful composure, entertain the

elderly gentleman there, and then break her heart over that cold note in solitude, if it must be.

When these thoughts passed through Ruby's mind, she was on the sanded shore of the bay, with the hill uplifting itself above her, and the waters rolling up foam-wreaths to her feet. A little distance off she saw a fishing-boat, with a solitary man in the bow, casting his line. The man saw her, stood up, and unwinding what seemed to be a red cravat from his throat, shook it toward her.

Ruby Gray recognized the fisherman at once. It was Billy Clark. He was hauling in his line and making evident preparation to join her; but she had no time then. She thirsted to see and question the fellow; but it would not do with Mr. Wheaton probably watching for her at the window.

Ruby searched in her pocket for a little tablet, which she usually carried there, thrust aside its cover of enamelled gold, and covered one of the ivory leaves with hasty writing. This she held up for Billy Clark to see, and, climbing to a rock hidden in the hill-side just above her, challenged his attention a second time, while she placed it at the foot of a juniper-tree which overhung the rock, with its green berries just taking a tinge of purple from the sun.

Billy Clark evidently understood the signal, for he tied the silk handkerchief around his throat again, and settled down to his lines as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE EVADED PROPOSAL.

RUBY sprang down from the rock and made her way up the path full of energy, smothering down the jealous pangs that had tortured her so, with a will that she had

never been called upon to exercise before. Resolute to take up her old nature for the next hour at least, she returned to the house. Mr. Wheaton was in the little breakfast-room, walking restlessly about, as if the solitude were exhausting his patience.

"Have I tired you out?" she said, peeping in at the glass door with the grace of a naughty child who knows it will be forgiven. "I have been gone so long; but, indeed, it was not my fault. Just as I was opening that tiresome note the wind took it, and I had such a run down the hill and over the rocks. See how I have torn my dress."

Ruby lifted up the folds of her white dress and shook her head at the rents they exposed; while Mr. Wheaton came forward to meet her with sudden smiles chasing the gloom from his face.

"But you have been on the beach," he said, looking at her slippers, to which the moist sand was clinging. "This dainty cloud of a dress, too, is wet as well as torn."

"Ah? so it is," cried Ruby, looking over her shoulder, and holding up both hands in well-simulated dismay; "drabbled a foot deep, and India muslin too. These rocks and briers are ruination to everything pretty. That treacherous wind swept my poor note from bush to rock down the path, taking me after it, like a goose as I was, till at last it went off in a tantalizing puff of wind along the beach and into the water."

"Then you lost it?"

"I did, indeed; the wind snatched it from me just as I was reading the first line."

"That was a pity. Mr. Moreton took so much time in writing it, and destroyed so many sheets of note-paper before he suited himself, that I fancied it must have been of consequence, especially as something like a picture came with it."

Ruby laughed, and took the picture from her pocket. "Will you look at the face?" she said, roguishly.

"It would not interest me, I fancy," he replied, with an impatient gesture; "men seldom make fine pictures."

"Oh! but you must."

She opened the case and held it up, smiling in his face as the picture did.

"Yourself? Yours, and he could part with it?" exclaimed Wheaton, reaching forth his hand for the picture, while his eyes shone, and his lips curved into a rare smile.

"But it was not his. I had asked him for it fifty times. He took it from my table once, to tease me; but you have brought it back again—I shall always remember that."

"Oh! if it were mine—if it were mine!" he said, gazing down into her face with an expression that made her shrink a little, there was such a power of feeling in it.

"Not yet. No, no! You must not ask for it yet," she said, closing the case, and hiding the miniature in her pocket, while she moved softly away from his side, where she had nestled in the old caressing way.

"But some time? Promise that it shall be some time?" answered the man, following her to the window.

"Oh! who knows anything of the future?" she replied, almost in a whisper.

"But I would know, Ruby."

"Don't ask such unreasonable knowledge—at least not now. That chase after poor Moreton's note has taken away all my breath. Never say pretty things to a lady in wet slippers and a torn dress—they prey upon her spirits so heavily. But what are you looking at?"

"I—I think that is one of my men, Billy Clark, out yonder in a boat. He seems to be pulling this way. Has anything happened, I wonder, that they send him after me?"

"No, I think not," answered Ruby. "He seems to be fishing—that is, moving from one place to another."

She withdrew behind Mr. Wheaton as she spoke, and,

snatching up a skein of highly-colored worsted from a basket full of materials for embroidery, waved it two or three times above her head.

The fisherman evidently understood the signal, for the oars began to drag in his hands, a heavy stone fell from the stern of his boat; and directly a line trembled out on the water, while the figure of a man, half lying down in the boat, was all that could be seen of Billy Clark.

"Ah, yes! he is only fishing," said Wheaton, stepping back into the room, where Ruby had seated herself at an embroidery-frame and was beginning to work.

Wheaton sat down near her, and watched her delicate hand as it flashed in and out of the rose she was forming. He knew that she was doing this to suppress the conversation which was leading him out of his prudence, and felt chilled and oppressed by it.

At last she looked up with a faint smile on her lips, and touched the rose with her finger.

"You see how much patience it requires," she said. "Even this blooms out stitch by stitch; but it becomes a lovely rose at last. Sometimes one is tempted to hasten it, but then everything goes wrong; we get in false tints; miss the count, and fall into mischief generally. Gentlemen do not understand embroidery; but the same principle that makes perfect work here, precedes success, with strong men as well as weak women, everywhere."

Ruby looked up, smiled in the face bending over her, and went on. "Time and patience—time and patience: there is philosophy and power in those little words. See what lovely morning-glories, what fuchsias, passion-flowers, and lilies, I have grouped in here, all with time and patience, Mr. Wheaton. You smile and shake your head, thinking me a poor philosopher, no doubt—and so I am; but such lessons need not be lost on a strong man, who must have learned that all the wisdom of life lies in knowing how to

wait and when to act. Pray, hand me that skein of pink worsted. No, the palest; thank you. Now watch how I shall blend the tints of this leaf. Exquisite, isn't it?"

"You are a strange woman, Ruby Gray," said Wheaton, after a hard silence; "nothing like the person I once thought you."

Innocently, as a wondering child, she looked into the man's face, which had become serious, almost stern.

"A disappointing creature, you mean. Something that one fancies a little at first, but wearies of after awhile. Yes, I suppose it is so."

"Wearies of? Wearies of? Woman, you are enough to drive one mad!"

Ruby's embroidery-frame stood against the wall, near a little silver knob which her work-basket concealed. She reached forth her hand as if for more worsted, and touched this knob. Before Mr. Wheaton had taken a second turn up and down the room, the mulatto girl came in, looking demure as a kitten.

"Missus, the carriage am ready."

Ruby arose, thrust her needle through the rose she had been descanting on, and turned a look of touching regret on the excited man.

"I'm afraid they must not be kept waiting; but you are on horseback—why not be our escort to the village?"

Mr. Wheaton turned upon her almost savagely, but his face softened as it met the sweet expressions of hers. She did not wait for his answer, but crept up to his side and touched his arm with her hand.

"Don't be angry with me. Why should you?" she pleaded.

"I am not angry, Mrs. Gray; only disappointed," he answered, looking down upon her with wounded pride in his eyes.

"Disappointed? Oh! how can you say that? What have I done?"

For his life, Wheaton could not have told what the creature had done to wound him so; but even that pleading look did not appease him.

"Think of it," she said, "and tell me when you come again. I shall be so unhappy till then. Shall it be to-morrow, or next day?"

"To-morrow!" he answered, angry with himself for the tenderness which crept over him; "to-morrow! If I do not come to my senses before then," he muttered, striding through the glass-door.

The little mulatto girl understood her business. She knew by the single pull of that bell that something was to be announced which would drive a visitor from the presence of her mistress; and stood chuckling in the distance while Mr. Wheaton went through the garden and mounted his horse. Then she peeped into the breakfast-room, and said, in a loud whisper:

"He am gone clear off, riding like ole scratch, he am."

"Thank heaven!" cried Ruby Gray; "another hour would have killed me. How fast he rides! Heaven preserve me from another danger like that! How terribly in earnest the man is! There is one thing I have to learn, that of keeping such fiery love at bay. If there is any one thing on earth that humiliates me, it is a downright proposal. The woman must be a bungler who commits herself to that; the great secret of her power is to keep a man forever in doubt. Some women are coarse enough to boast of the offers they have received, while I count only as real conquests those I have prevented."

The woman gave herself up for a few minutes to such thoughts as these; for vanity was almost as strong in her as love itself. Then she took out Moreton's note again, and read it over and over, till her features grew still and white with the jealous dread that settled upon her.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN UNPLEASANT DRIVE.

IT was not all jealousy that disturbed Ruby Gray. That bitter passion may feed on shadows; but then substance of some kind produces shade, and even an imaginative mind must have something to build the keenest of all sufferings upon. There was enough in the return of that picture, with the studiously cold note, to alarm any loving heart. But one solution presented itself, and that her vanity and her love seized upon with avidity. Moreton was angry with her. He had discovered the influences she was weaving about Mr. Wheaton, and resented her seeming unfaithfulness; in this way wounding her, as he thought, by the very hand of his rival.

This thought soothed down the pain that had seized upon Ruby, and she began to dwell upon more pleasant thoughts. Indeed, her nature had no great endurance or depth of feeling; she could love passionately, but not with that pure, solemn self-abnegation which sometimes makes womanhood almost angelic. The idea that she, Ruby Gray, with her beauty and her wealth, could ever fail in winning hearts, was an almost impossible lesson for her to learn. She even believed that young Gray was sincere in his adoration, and would have loved her had she been penniless.

So supreme, indeed, was this woman's vanity, that she never once thought of her wealth as an attraction. A more sensible person might have made it a source of great uneasiness. She lifted herself so much above all other things, that wealth was simply one of her natural belongings, like the sunshine and the flowers, which revealed and enhanced her beauty.

In her tablet, which she had left upon the rock, and which she was sure that Billy Clark would find, Ruby had directed

him to come to the beach, at the foot of the hill, just before the moon rose. She was afraid he might be remarked from the Wheaton farm if his boat came ashore too often, and thus excite suspicion of the use she was making of him.

Ruby had some long, dull hours on hand before she could learn all that was going on at the farm — a knowledge that she thirsted for. She sat down to her embroidery, and went to work among the roses and lilies, out of which she had found means of repression for Mr. Wheaton, and began to work with sudden vigor; but her hand soon faltered; she found herself taking false stitches, working one tint into another, till the pattern under her was fast becoming a confusion of colors. This resource failing her, she took up a French novel, threw herself on a couch, and began to read; but the face, now of Mr. Wheaton, now of Preston Moreton, came between her eyes and the book, continually bewildering and mocking her attempts. At last she started from the couch, and went up stairs to change her dress, ordering the Indian boy, Theo, to have her carriage brought out, and make himself ready for a drive. She would consume the time that oppressed her so heavily in the open air.

Directly the cream-colored horses were tossing their snow-white manes before the front entrance. Theo was in his seat, leaning back with folded arms, giving short, half-insolent directions to the groom, as if he had been lord of the whole establishment, and intended to patronize the lady rather more than usual that day.

After a little, Ruby came out, her heavy blue silk trailing behind her, and her dainty straw hat tufted with wheat-ears and corn-flowers. She stepped into the low carriage, which was scarcely larger than a Russian drosky, took the reins, and dashed off at full speed, using her whip more than usual, and gathering the reins firmly, as if she was preparing for some revolt in her horses.

Away the beautiful creatures went, skimming the ground

like birds, and straining now and then on the bit in the exuberance of their strength. Through the shadowy woods, along the curve of the outer bay, and up through the village she went, disturbing the quiet street with a quick clatter of hoofs, and bringing many a childish face to the windows as she passed; for it seemed as if the lady, her horses, and, above all, the Indian boy, never would cease to be objects of curiosity with the inhabitants.

Ruby drove to the post-office, up the principal street, and turned suddenly into a cross-road, which led through the country out to the Wheaton farm. She had not intended to go there at first, but the desire was strong upon her to meet destiny halfway; and it would be something to see the house which contained her lover from another point of view than that which eternally looked out upon the water. Perhaps, she would go down the lane and boldly make a call. But for Mr. Wheaton she would have done so. How she began to hate that man, now that he stood in her way!

As Ruby's carriage dashed along the highway, passing pretty cottages and farm-houses, all embowered in orchard and shade trees, she came in sight of the locust-grove, and saw a man leap over the fence, and land, with a second light bound, into the road. She drew up her horses so sharply that they backed her carriage against the bank, and gave a sudden wrench to the little vehicle, which was a good excuse for the cry that broke from Ruby. She looked around as if meditating a retreat. But the banks drew closely up to the road in that place, and finding it impossible to turn, she stood at bay, whipping her horses into the road, and so onward till she met the man of all others whom she wished to avoid.

It is possible that young Gray would gladly have escaped the rencounter himself, had that been possible; for he stood at bay for an instant, then swung his light cane with a dash, that seemed like defiance, and came on laughing.

"The wrong way for me," he cried. "Why not turn at once, and give me a lift? It is a deuced long walk to the village."

"But a short drive. I have just left it," said Ruby, playing with her whip.

"And where are you driving to now?"

"Anywhere—one cannot go amiss in this lovely country."

"Take me with you, then," said the young man, stepping into the carriage, and seizing upon the reins with graceful violence. "Does that copper-colored imp understand English?"

Theo looked demure and unconscious as a mute; but Gray comprehended his craft, and stopped the horses.

"Come, come; hustle out!" he said, pointing toward the locust-grove. "Cut across yonder, and you will find lots of old apple-trees full of robins' nests, with the young ones just ready to fly. There will be plenty of time to rob them before we get back. Only, be in sight when you hear us coming. Jump, I say!"

The boy sat immovable as a stone; but into his eyes came a glow of fire, and around them dusky shadows, more threatening than speech.

"Jump," repeated Gray, unwinding his whip-lash, "or by Jove—"

"Do not dare to strike him!" cried Ruby, with sudden fierceness. "He is my servant, not yours!"

"And I love you ten million times better than he does!" muttered the boy, in Spanish.

Gray did not understand the language, but Ruby did, and left it unrebuked. She was so accustomed to adulation that even in this form it was acceptable.

"What is the imp saying? Something insolent, I'll be sworn!" cried the young man; and turning suddenly, with the whip and reins grasped in one hand, he seized Theo by

the collar, and with a twist of his strong arm dropped the boy into the street.

Theo uttered a cry of rage, and attempted to leap into his seat again; but Gray lashed backward with his whip, and cut him across the face, leaving a red welt, which glowed like a line of fire.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE UNKIND BLOW.

THEO did not move or utter a single cry when Gray struck him; but the smouldering fire in his eyes lighted up fiendishly, and specks of white foam flew from his lips. Gray laughed with forced mirth as he looked back and saw this; for Ruby's dead, cold silence made him ashamed of his brutality.

"What do you keep that sullen rascal for? He's a nuisance."

Ruby did not answer; but there was cutting disdain in her silence. In very self-defence the man spoke again.

"He's a savage — a monkey; just the fellow to hamstring your horses if they kick at him."

"My horses, poor brutes, are too well trained for that," answered Ruby, with biting scorn. "It is only men who abuse creatures weaker than themselves."

"Sharp as steel, Ruby; but it don't pay."

"What does pay with you but money?" retorted the widow, unable to restrain her bitter wrath.

"Love, when backed with money!"

This audacious reply made Ruby Gray tremble with wrath. She clenched the little hand in her lap with a fierce impulse to dash it in his face. You would not have believed

that those soft, red lips and violet eyes could curve and gleam so fiercely. The young man was regarding her with sidelong glances, half ashamed of himself.

"You drive me to it, Ruby. I had to send the fellow off in order to speak with you alone. It was to be done, you see; there is no way of shaking the old love off, though you have got a new one. Never doubt that I keep posted, Mrs. Gray."

"You are a — a —"

"Softly, darling! When I am your husband, such words —"

"That you will never be," almost shrieked the woman. "I will beg, die first!"

The young man seemed so struck with her vehemence that he fell into a dull, hard silence, which lasted for some ten minutes, during which Ruby Gray was bitterly repenting of her rashness.

"There is one way of avoiding it, which might suit us both," he said at last, speaking with slow deliberation.

"And that?" said the lady, hesitatingly.

"Give me an interview to-morrow, and I will tell you."

"Where?"

"At Van Lorn's, here, on the road, or anywhere. I am getting tired of this stupid life, and must go to the city."

Ruby thought to herself, "To-morrow I may know all; then I shall be ready to brave or buy him. 'I will see you at almost any hour,' she said aloud.

"Alone! Let us be perfectly alone, Ruby; whether you and I are to be friends or enemies, there must be no witnesses to what I have to say. Sometimes I think that frankness is the only thing that will answer between us. We know each other too well, Ruby. Deception and art may do for other men; but a fellow does n't give up to these weapons more than once in the same hands."

"I will see you alone. It is better for us both. To-

morrow you will get a note, saying where," answered Ruby, ignoring all that was offensive in his speech. "Now, shall we turn? This has not been a pleasant drive, and I am weary of it."

Gray turned the horses without a word, and drove them easily down the road again. They found Theo seated on a bank near the place where he had been left; the red mark was across his face yet, and the hot fire in his eyes. Gray jumped out of the carriage, and gave the reins to its owner.

"Take the fellow up—I shall walk," he said.

"Come, Theo, my poor boy, get in," Ruby called out, looking at the lad in tender pity.

The boy came down from the bank in silence, and took his seat with a look of dull, sullen hatred swelling over his face. He seemed to feel the impotence of his wrath as a man would—for Ruby saw that his slight form shook all over.

"Do not mind, Theo," she said, with sweet caressing pity in her voice, for she was intensely sorry for the boy. "I will be more kind than ever, be sure of that. Come here and sit by my side, Theo. You shall drive."

The lad sprang over to the front seat with the leap of a deer, dropped upon his knees at her feet, and fell to kissing her hands and the folds of her dress with a passion of sobs that frightened her.

"Never mind! Never mind, poor boy! Try to forget it. Here, take the reins, and let him see that you can drive."

Ruby, who was all kindness just then, stooped down, raised the boy from her feet, and put the reins into his hands, folding them between hers, as women will caress objects dependent on them for all they have in life. The two hands in her clasp trembled like frightened birds; and she saw, with surprise, that the boy shook from head to foot, while hot, bright tears flashed down his dusty cheeks.

"Did he hurt you so," she questioned, gently, "or is this anger?"

"Mistress! mistress! I hate that man! but—but—"

The horses, impatient of a sudden strain upon the bit, reared a little, and started, drowning anything more the boy might have said.

When the carriage drew up in front of Mr. Van Lorn's house, Ruby stepped to the ground, and was shaking out the folds of her dress, when the hand she had just ungloved was seized, and a kiss left upon it, from which a glow of crimson spread all over the palm. She turned to see what lips had been so audacious, but saw no one but the groom, who was holding the horses; but that moment a strange little figure darted around an angle of the porch, and was running in and out of the shrubbery which bent over the path leading down to the hill.

"Poor boy! how he feels that blow," thought Ruby, shaking her head. "If I had not hated that wretch before, this would make me loathe him."

She gathered up the long skirt of her dress and went slowly into the house, glad to find that Mr. Van Lorn was absent, and that her hostess still kept her room, suffering from a headache, which had kept her up stairs since the morning.

The mulatto girl met her in the hall, announcing that dinner was served in her own little room. Ruby scarcely noticed the choice repast; but took a mouthful of bread, and drank a glass of wine before throwing herself on the couch for rest which would not come.

Just as the moon shot its first silver lance across the water, Ruby Gray left the couch where she had been lying wide awake, and, throwing a shawl over her head, went down to the beach, where she found Billy Clark sitting in his boat, supporting his head with both hands, evidently in a state of deep dejection. He looked up when Mrs. Gray ap-

proached, and revealed a pale, washed-out face, and eyes red with weeping, which made him look forlorn enough.

"I'm glad you've come, marm. It was gitting lonesome here, thinking over and over what a poor, misfortunate cretur I am. Step into the boat, marm, and I'll pull out to sea a little way, so that what we're a-going to talk about can't be heard by nobody living."

Billy Clark's words were low and complaining; the tears that had made his eyes so red seemed to have got down into his voice, filling it with desolation. Ruby remarked this, and her heart began to beat heavily. What was it that had broken the poor fellow down so thoroughly? Was the blow that had levelled his weak nature with the dust about to fall on her also?

"I am glad you understood my signal and found the tablet."

"Here they are, just as good as ever. What if some one else had found 'em, though; you'd never hev seen 'em again?" said Billy, drawing the tablet from his pocket. "But I had n't the heart to touch 'em, if I'd been ever so dishonest. Gold nor precious gems ain't nothing to me now. There ain't a worm that crawls along them young cabbage leaves that feels like giving up and falling off more'n I do now."

All this, futile as it seemed, made Ruby Gray afraid to ask questions. The heart, which had been so full of force that morning, sank heavier and heavier in her bosom, and her face grew pallid in the moonlight, losing all its rose-tints and all its smiles.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE STINGS OF JEALOUSY.

RUBY took her seat in the boat, so heavy hearted that she could not speak.

A light from Mr. Wheaton's house in the distance startled her out of this marble apathy. She laid her hand on Billy Clark's arm, which was feebly urging the boat forward, and bade him take in the oars and let the boat drift.

"Now tell me what has happened?" she said, with forced resolution. "Whatever it is, I will help you, if I can."

"Oh! don't speak of it; there's no help for either you or me. They have gone and done it! He's spoke out, and she—oh, my! what a lovely cretur she is! False, but lovely. She's engaged to him heart and soul!"

"What do you mean?" cried Ruby, in a voice sharp with pain. "Who is engaged? Be a man, sir, and speak out."

"I can't be a man, marm—it's no use asking me. She's crushed me down, stamped on me. You ask who is engaged? She is; they are—Preston Moreton and Zua Wheaton. Is that plain? Is that crushing enough? Do you want me to come before you with a spear run through my heart before you'll believe me?"

"Billy Clark!"

The woman's voice was low and husky; she shivered till her white teeth struck against each other. Her voice was mournful enough now to satisfy even the low-spirited fellow who had felt wronged by her cheerfulness.

"Billy Clark, tell me everything, word for word!"

"I will. Oh, yes! I will. It's like shooting pisoned arrows through me; but I'll do it. Misery loves company—and I'm the most miserable—But what's the use of telling you that? Won't you feel it along with me?"

Ruby suppressed a moan that rose to her lips. The poor fellow was torturing her. If he would only tell her all, some gleam of hope might, perhaps, be gathered out of facts which his moaning deprived her of.

"Tell me! Tell me! I am so anxious!" she pleaded.

"I will, marm — I will! You know he's got amost well. At first he went on crutches; then he took to a cane, because that gave him an excuse for resting one hand on her shoulder when he walked up and down the terrace."

"Did he do that, Billy?"

"Do that? Why, it's nothing to what comes after. Of course he did, and I a-hoeing the cabbages, and carrot-beds, and rutter-bagers, in full sight. Then they would set out on the verander, night after night, just as if there was n't nobody else in the world, and I a-hanging around amongst the grape-vines and lalock-bushes, trying to catch a word here and there, to convince myself that it did n't mean nothing; for my heart was amost bustin' in my bosom, and our Mandy would n't help me a bit; but said it was mean, as mean could be, to keep a-watching 'em so. 'Love ought to be free as water,' says she, 'and not be driv about and tortured.' Them was Mandy's very words when I asked her to keep watch, if I had to go about to the stables, and sich things."

"No matter about her," said Ruby, faintly. "Come to the worst, Billy, as soon as you can."

"Do you begin to feel faint? I did!" said Billy, with mournful sympathy.

"No, no! I am impatient to know all. Do tell it me."

"Well, I watched these goings on; reading poetry together in the daytime, and talking it over at night, till it made me sick to look at 'em; but all I could do, it was n't in me to keep out of the way. The worst of it was, they did n't seem to mind me; and that hurt my feelings worst of all. There I was a-burstin' my heart, and they never thought

of it. Oh, marm! I hope you never will feel as I did then!"

Ruby Gray pressed one hand to her left side under the shawl, but she could not speak.

"One night," continued Billy, "they came out of the verander down to the terrace, and sot on the turf steps. I knew they was going to have a long talk, for he flung her shawl down on the steps, and made that an excuse for putting a part of his cloak around her shoulders, and holding it there with one arm, the consarned cretur! It was n't cold to speak of; but he had to wrap up because of being sick. I thought at first that she would have got mad at that; for Miss Zua is proud as — as our Flash — begging your pardon for naming a hoss at the same time with her. But she took to it as a chicken creeps under an old hen's wing; not that I consider that feller a hen — far from it. He's more of a hawk, in my way of thinking; but no little white chicken, warm from the egg, with nothing but pale-yaller down on it, was ever more innocent than Miss Zua. Yet there she sot, with his arms over her shoulders, holding the cloak, you know, till I wanted to pitch right in and ketch him by the throat. The tide was a-rising, and I could have laughed as it carried his dead body out to sea. Only I felt afraid that I was n't strong enough to drag him down to the water."

"Was this all you saw?" questioned Ruby, in a voice that seemed strange to him.

"All? I should rather think not. The moon rose round and bright, flinging shadders from every tree along the shore: that island seemed ter have a silver veil over it, just as it does now. In one place the bay shone and heaved, and sent out whispers that made one's heart rise in his bosom — for sometimes they seemed to come straight from another world."

"Well, well! Do go on!" cried out Ruby Gray, in an agony of impatience.

"Well, I will!" answered Billy, nervously. "Only don't put me out so; for I ain't very strong since that night."

"Go on in your own way, then; I will be patient. Go on!"

"Well, there they sot and sot, saying next to nothing, but looking out on the water, and up to the moon; the tall, white lilies growing along the edge of the terrace seemed to be keeping them company. I believe they did speak now and then, but it was low and in murmurs, that the rising tide drowned. I was out in the bushes and could n't get near; for all along the terrace the moonlight made it like daytime. So I crept along the garden, let myself down among the bushes, and got below the terrace. I don't know as you ever noticed 'em, marm, but there is a thick row of currant-bushes sot out just between that grass wall and the garden below it. Well, I got into the shader of these bushes, and crept up to the steps so close that I could hear everything. I trembled so that the bushes shook; but they thought it was the wind, and went on talking, low, saying things that just wilted me down.

"How delicious this silence is!" says he, a-drawing her face down to his bussum, and folding the other arm around her. "With you here, close to my heart, and this moonlight smiling upon us, I could set forever, and forget everything but you, and that you are mine. Oh, Zua! you will never, never know how I love you." He said it in just them words, marm. "Never," says he, "did I know what real love was till now."

"Never?" says she, looking into his face so earnest — "never? Oh, tell me the truth!"

"I do — I do," says he. "No woman has ever touched my heart before; but you, Zua, have broken it up with tenderness."

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE LOVER'S CONFESSION.

A SHARP exclamation broke from Ruby Gray as Billy paused with a little sob. Billy looked around, half frightened by her agitation.

"Go on! Go on, I say! Don't mind me."

The woman was pale as death, and shivered from head to foot.

"You are cold," said Billy, struck with compassion.

"Go on, I say! What more? I am not cold!"

"There was n't much more. He said something about its being only one night since he was sure that she loved him, and asked her to say it over again. I am amost sure she whispered the answer; for he held her close, and kissed her on her mouth, and her eyes, and the braids of her black hair. Is that enough? You have made me tell it all. You knew it would be like raking thorns through my bosom. What do you want to know all this for?"

"That the thorns may be raked through my bosom," said the woman fiercely. "What more?"

"Nothing! Does n't that satisfy you? It amost killed me. They went into the house together; but I lay there on the wet grass, crying, till long after midnight."

"And that was all?"

"The next morning, that is to-day — how long it seems! — I saw her a-writing just at sunrise, for I could n't sleep, and was wandering around. Her hand went over the paper like lightning, and she was smiling like an angel. There she sot, with her lovely hand on one side, reading what she had writ down, when some one seemed to call from below. Up she jumped, and stood a minute with her hand on the paper, turning red and white, listening. Then she called

out, 'Yes, yes,' and went out of the room. She must have left the door open, for the gust of wind sent it through the window. It flew among the bushes for a while, when I caught it."

"You did? Give me that paper?" exclaimed Ruby, seizing his arm with both hands. "I will give you a hundred dollars for it."

"Here it is," said Billy, taking a paper from his bosom; "I don't want it. Goodness knows it's been lying like a snake agin my heart: but as for the hundred dollars — ten thousand would n't buy anything she has touched. Take it, if you want the heart to grow sick in your bussum."

Ruby snatched at the paper, and tried to read it by the moonlight, breathing hard and quick, while the white thing she held rustled like dead leaves in her hands.

"It is not light enough! I cannot make it out! Row me home, Billy Clark, or I shall suffocate," she gasped.

"Yes, I'll do it," said Billy, shaking his head and lifting the oars. "I know what it is. I know what it is — pison and night-shade. But she will have it."

The poor fellow bent to his oars in silence after this, and in ten minutes Ruby was climbing up the hill-path like a panther, quick and noiseless, but eager for the pain which she knew was in store for her.

The little room was reached, but she did not pause there. Up to her bed-chamber she went, bolted the door, and falling on her knees by a lamp that burned on the table, opened that crumpled paper, and read:

As Night bends o'er the roses,
When his brow is wet with rain;
And his breath is rich with fragrance
From mountain-pass and plain;
He came and stood beside me,
With a look of tender pride,
And whispered that he loved me
More than all the world beside.

He whispered that he loved me,
But I said not yes, nor no;
For my heart was in a tumult,
And my cheeks were in a glow.
I felt my eyelids drooping
Till the lashes swept my cheek,
And my soul grew rich with feelings
That my lips can never speak.

Then I felt him bending o'er me,
And my lips were lightly pressed,
As red rose-leaves fall together
When they fold themselves to rest
Then he left me very softly,
As a shadow disappears,
To the tumult of my blushes —
To the heaven of my tears.

He paused, and looked behind him —
Had he heard my broken sighs?
Did he mark me blush and tremble
'Neath the glory of his eyes?

No! In that sweet shame he left me,
And I heard his footsteps fall,
Like the treading down of music
Through the vestibule and hall.
Then my heart rose full and richly,
Like a goblet brimming o'er
With the fabulous old nectar
That Venus drank of yore.

Thus I went into my chamber;
It was full of starry gloom;
And the scent of many roses
Went floating through the room —
The scent of mossy roses —
He had given me at morn,
As stars come trooping skyward
Just before the moon is born.

Then I laid me down to slumber,
In the stillness of the night,
With the curtains brooding over,
So mysterious and white;

And there, in blissful weariness,
My trembling lips would part,
While my hands were softly folded
O'er the beating of my heart.

I watched the star of evening
Hang its golden lamp on high,
And saw the filmy white clouds
Come sweeping o'er the sky;
Shot through with silvery lances
From the crescent of the moon,
Which plunged on, like a shallop,
Through the purple depths of June.

Yes, I lay and watched the moonbeams,
As they struck the window-pane,
And filled that dusky chamber
With a storm of silver rain.
And when I saw them stealing —
Stealing softly on the floor,
I whispered that he loved me,
And would love me evermore.

So I told it to the roses —
The roses he had given;
And kissed away their blushes,
As the angels do in heaven.
I told it to the night-winds,
That sighed around my bed,
And heard them softly whisper back
The happy words I said.

I whispered to the south-wind,
The moonlight, and the rose,
What I never breathe to mortals,
When this full heart overflows;
For, when feelings stir our being
With thoughts above the earth;
Like prayers, we breathe them only
To things of heavenly birth.

When Ruby Gray had gathered these lines into her fiery soul, she sprang up like a tigress, and rent the paper into a thousand fragments, sneering at them as they fell.

"She wrote this? She dared write this to him, and of him? Did the black-haired witch know that it was Ruby Gray's lover she was heaping this sickening stuff upon? Great heavens! is there any truth in the picture she has drawn! Oh! I could tear them both to pieces!"

Ruby clasped her hands together in her mad rage, and tore them apart again and again, wounding them with the many rings she wore, and gloating over the anguish. Up and down the room she went, like a tigress in her cage, stopping now and then to stamp down the fragments of that hateful paper with which she had littered the carpet.

At last she flung her hands upward, fell across the bed, and burst into a passion of tears, sobs, and broken moans, such as had never stormed her heart before. For the first time in her life that woman found out what it was to be defeated.

CHAPTER XLVII.

IN EARNEST FOR ONCE.

RUBY GRAY never closed her eyes that night, but walked her room like some hunted animal. Hour after hour she sat in her easy-chair, pondering over the bitter thoughts that had seized upon her, till the poison stirred her whole being. In her wrath she fairly hated the innocent girl who had robbed her of the man she so madly loved; for now that she had lost him, Ruby owned to herself that with all her life and strength she adored Preston Moreton.

At last the morning broke soft and gray over the water, and with a thrill of pain such as she had never in her life felt before, Ruby watched a flood of glory break into the

sky, and kindle up the water till each tiny wavelet seemed crested with rose-leaves scattered from the heavens. Then the woman arose, with a fierce joy at her heart: the morning had come, and she could act. In a few hours young Gray would be with her to fulfil his appointment of the previous afternoon, which seemed years away from her now, so completely had the suffering of one night broken chasms into her life.

The day broke upon her sitting in front of a large mirror in full dress, just as she had gone up from dinner the day before. But all the bloom had gone from her face. Dark shadows, so blue that they were almost purple, lay under her beautiful eyes, which had lost their velvety softness, and lowered with smouldering fire.

"How haggard — how white I am!" she said, pushing the hair back from her temples with both hands. "One would think I had been ill a month; my very face has grown thin. Great heavens! is it true? *Can* I love any man like this? Can I suffer so? I, Ruby Gray, the coquette — the — the —"

A wild laugh broke from her, and, covering her face with the folds of her white dress, she rocked to and fro, now in tears, now laughing hysterically.

There had been flowers on her bosom the night before — roses, and one of those feathery Japan lilies that seem to have sprung into bloom out of a snow-drift; but they were all broken and crushed now, and lay upon her disturbed dress a handful of soiled leaves, colorless and bruised, "As my heart has been — as my heart has been," she muttered, tearing them out from the folds of white muslin, and dashing them from her, leaving a stain on the outside of her bosom, and aching heat within. "Yet they were fresh only yesterday; and I so confident, so certain of him!"

She got up, wearily, and changed her dress, brushed out her long, golden hair, and swept it back in rippling waves

from her forehead, which still remained cloudy and contracted, spite of the almost metallic splendor that crowned it. "And all this for him — for him," she cried, dashing the palm of her hand against the white cheek, as if she hated herself for the suffering she could not help. "Will nothing bring my color back — not even a blow? See how the red fades away again! But I have rouge somewhere. How I scolded the poor maid for daring to bring it to me! But I will use it now. No human being shall know that he has struck me on the heart."

With a gesture of loathing, Ruby took the rouge from her dressing-case, and brightened her face with it for the first time in her brilliant life.

"There," she said, defiantly, "who will dare to say that I have not slept well? A little on the lips, too. Let them talk of whitened sepulchres — I know what it means now."

Ruby went down stairs in the freshest possible dress, with forced smiles and false color on her face. She longed for the pure air; for the passionate sorrow that had hunted her down in the night, seemed to have drained the life from her veins like a vampire. She opened a French window and went into the garden, which was just then brilliant with verbenas and scarlet geraniums, on which the dew was hanging like jewels. A troop of humming-birds was flashing in and out of the trumpet honeysuckles, and burying themselves in the bells of the white lilies, making them tremble on their stalks in yielding up the honey which gave sweetness to their brief lives.

Ruby drew a deep breath, but the perfumed air made her faint. What was it to her that the earth was beautiful, or blossoms fragrant, if he enjoyed these things with another?

Ruby wandered on, treading down the flowers with her high heels, and dashing aside blossoming vines which trailed over her, with bitter violence. She was in haste to look to-

ward the farm-house, and see if any one was stirring there, just as one is fascinated by the writhing of a rattlesnake, which it would be happiness to kill and trample into the dust. She took out a fragment of poor Zua's poem and tried to read it, biting her lips fiercely as each word struck its venom into her soul. "Oh! if I could kill her—if I only dared!"

She thrust the paper into her bosom, though every nerve in her body shuddered from it, as Cleopatra must have shuddered when she first felt the asp bite.

"Great heavens! that she should have written like this, while I, with all this idolatry, this agony of love, am struck dumb. How dare she? How dare she?"

Ruby stopped under a juniper-tree that slanted down the bank, half uprooted, but still clinging to the rocky soil with that sharp tenacity of life which makes some trees seem almost human, and cast a quick glance toward the farm-house. A boat was putting from the shore, in which one man was rowing.

Ruby had no glass, but she could see that this person carried the dress and air of a gentleman.

What if it were Preston? He had begun to walk now, and might be coming that way to explain all that seemed strange in his conduct. He had loved her once—she was sure of that. *Could* a few short weeks change any man so completely? Billy Clark might be mistaken—she was a fool to trust his weak judgment in anything. The poem—oh! how that stung her! But was *he* responsible for the poetic frenzy of a girl so new to the world as Zua Wheaton! Besides, the best and wisest, when once given to vice, would exaggerate. What if the lines that seemed burning into her heart had sprung entirely from the imagination? Such things had been, and would be again, no doubt. Yes, yes, it must be him; the man was tall and slender; the low hat shaded his face, but it must be—it must!

She sat close to the juniper, which quivered in all its fruit-

laden branches as she leaned against it, and watched the boat, holding her breath with intense expectation. She would have given anything for a glass, but made a tube of her pretty hand, through which she gathered in every plunge and curve of the little craft.

At last she dropped the hand into her lap and uttered a low cry, which was almost a wail of pain.

"Oh! God help me! it is that other man, Wheaton! I cannot see him—I will not see him."

She sprang up, like a hunted thing, and began to make her way along the zigzag path, hoping to escape the man her coquetry had so often invited; but when about halfway to the house, she turned slowly back and went down the path again, passing the juniper on her way to the shore.

"I will see him," she thought; "he can tell me the truth. Bitter as it may be, I had best learn it from him. The man loves me as only persons of his age can love. I think that years, which should make them grand, leaves them abject, as if love were merely a thing of youth! Oh, me! I should love *him* if he were thrice my age. Why not—why not?"

She came down on the beach as these thoughts were in her mind, and seemed busy gathering mosses from the stones, and tiny shells from the sand, which she flung away again, striving by this careless exercise to gain composure, and force back the anxiety which gnawed at her heart like a vulture. All this time she seemed so occupied, that any person in the boat would have thought his approach unobserved. Her look was toward the farm-house now, and she was walking slowly, with her face to the island, stooping now and then to pick up a pebble or shell in an idle, listless way, which seemed full of indolent grace. A step on the sand, following the grating noise of a boat pushed swiftly ashore, became audible, but she did not look back.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MR. WHEATON PROPOSES TO RUBY GRAY.

MRS. GRAY! Dear lady!" The deep, manly voice that uttered these words trembled a little, and Ruby felt that it was full time to recognize the intruder's presence. Turning quickly, as if taken by surprise, she saw Mr. Wheaton flushed with exercise and breathing quickly.

"Mrs. Gray, this is fortunate—I was coming to the house."

"Indeed! It is very early. We have not breakfasted yet—at least, I have not."

"As I expected and hoped. Forgive me, lady; but I have something to say which will gain me the privilege of sharing your meal, or leave me without appetite for any other. You can guess—you must know, Mrs. Gray, how dearly I love you, how more than anxious I am to make you my wife. Be frank, be generous, and tell me if there is a shadow of hope that, some day, you may return this love?"

The man spoke earnestly, honestly, and with a certain pathos in his voice that would have aroused noble feelings in a generous woman. Ruby Gray was taken by surprise; she had not expected this point-blank, almost abrupt proposal, and was thrown into confusion by it. She lifted her eyes, softened and made serious by that night of suffering, and let them dwell a moment on the face bent so eloquently over her.

"I am unprepared, Mr. Wheaton—you surprise me so!"

The woman absolutely faltered, and the trouble at her heart swelling up again, made her voice tremulous with real feeling. She felt a sort of aching pity for this man, who, like herself, was loving hopelessly.

"You cannot be surprised, Mrs. Gray. Words are nothing when a heart loves earnestly. Besides, I have almost asked you before. Look up. Oh! give me one glance, to say that you have expected this, and are not offended."

"I am not offended, Mr. Wheaton. How could any woman be that, when so honored? But there are obstacles, impediments."

"None that a love like mine shall not remove."

"But some obstacles are beyond the power of the strongest man," she said, gently.

"You speak of my age; true enough, I cannot remove that disparity—would to heaven it were possible."

"It was not that. With me, a few years, more or less, might pass unheeded; but you have other ties—a daughter."

"Yes, the sweetest and dearest girl in the world; but she will not stay with me forever. This very morning I have had a conversation which threatens my home with deeper loneliness, unless you will turn my desolation into a paradise on earth."

Ruby Gray's face turned deadly pale, so pale that the red glow of the rouge she had used burned upon it like fire on white ashes. The voice in her throat grew husky, and struggled to her lips with a pang of burning anguish and bitter hate. She spoke almost in a whisper.

"Is your daughter about to be married, then?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Do I know the person?"

"It is his greatest recommendation that he is a friend of yours."

"You mean—you mean—"

She could not utter the name. The pride in her struggled hard, but it died on her lips, leaving them cold and white.

"You have guessed rightly, sweet Ruby. It is our guest for whom Zua is about to leave me—a noble fellow as ever lived, I do believe."

"Mr. Wheaton," said Ruby, in a low, constrained voice, which seemed to leave her lips reluctantly, "I must advise — I must warn you."

"Oh! what? Of whom? Speak out, dear one."

"If you desire me — if you are in earnest."

"In earnest? Great heavens! do you doubt that?"

"I — I doubt everything since — But what am I saying?"

"Nothing to which I could not listen forever."

Ruby had been very near making charges which might have demanded proof. She grew more cautious after the first shock passed, and retraced her steps adroitly as of old.

"I — I was about to say that if all other impediments were, or could be removed, the society of your sweet daughter would be one great inducement. You cannot think how I love her, so bright and beautiful! Oh! Mr. Wheaton, put this thing off. She is so young, and I fear — oh! I fear so much."

"Fear what, Ruby? My queen of gems — let me call you so!"

"Call me anything that pleases you; only do not say — that is, do not, I implore you, part with that dear girl so suddenly. Half the charm that seems to draw me to your house against my will rests in her."

"In her? And have I no share?"

Ruby lifted her velvety eyes after a fashion that had brought many a victim to her feet, but said nothing. Indeed, she was too keenly agitated for fluency of speech. Mr. Wheaton saw this, and prided himself upon it. What but gentle timidity, and that trembling consciousness which the truest passion of love gives, could have so affected Ruby Gray? For the first time he felt assured that she loved him well.

"Then you care for me a little?" he said, stooping over her.

"A little?" she murmured; and another glance from those beautiful eyes made the heart leap in his bosom. He threw his arms around her as they stood within the shelter of the bank, on which some cedars grew thickly together, and strained her to his bosom, kissing her forehead, her hair, and, at last, her lips; at which she broke from his arms with a struggle of revolt which startled him.

"Have I offended you, Ruby?"

She was white as marble, and her blue eyes flashed angrily. She could coquette, and deceive, and tempt, like a siren; but, with her whole heart belonging to that one man, her entire being revolted at this outbreak. But even that feeling, strong and real as it was, she soon smothered down and half concealed.

"You frighten me."

Her eyes filled with genuine tears, her lips quivered. She could subdue her anger, but that deeper feeling which true love gives, even to a bad heart, had been wounded, she dared not show how keenly. Wheaton was touched by this sensitive modesty, which seemed without alloy.

"Forgive me!" he pleaded, taking her hand respectfully, as if she had been an empress. "Forgive me! I would not offend you for the world; only say that you love me."

"I can say nothing now. See how I tremble."

She held out her white hands pleadingly. It was true, they trembled like lilies in the wind, and her face wore a look of distress that touched her generous lover to the heart.

"And I have done this. In my rude manhood I forgot how delicate, how sensitive you are. Shall I leave you now?"

"Yes, yes — do! To-morrow! Any time I shall be glad to see you; but this is so sudden. I was expecting —"

She paused suddenly, and her pale face flushed scarlet.

"You expected more — more form, more dignity in a man of my age — and so it should have been; but this new,

this exquisite passion has brought back all my youth. I cannot feel like a boy and act like an anchorite. You will not think the less of me, dear one, because I have been so rash?"

"No. Leave me now, dear Mr. Wheaton. I shall be more composed, more reasonable, when we meet again."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE FATHER'S PROMISE.

MR. WHEATON turned to obey the order of dismissal that Ruby had given him, but she called him back in a breathless, hurried way, that surprised him.

"Mr. Wheaton, will you make me one promise?"

"A thousand, if that will bring back your smiles again."

"Then do not be in haste about this marriage. I speak of your daughter. I should feel chilled to enter your house if she were away. Besides, the probation of a year will do no harm where a man like Moreton is concerned."

"Why, Ruby? Be frank with me. Do you know any thing against him?"

"I? Do not ask me. We sometimes like people, and are friendly with them, in spite of great faults. Mr. Moreton is my friend—I must not say one word against him; only be sure of this—no harm can arise by delay. The time of any engagement should not, in prudence, be less than a year."

"Oh, Ruby! how cruel!"

She smiled, in her winning fashion, and said, gently, "Unless the position of the person is so assured by general respect and long residence as to make delay a simple matter of convenience."

Wheaton took her hand and kissed it softly, as if it had been a flower he was afraid of bruising.

"How good you are!"

"In my heart, yes. But there may arise circumstances to which all feelings must yield."

"Oh, Ruby! Why raise my hopes to dash them so?"

"I do not say that anything of the kind really exists; but all things are possible."

"Except that I should cease to love you, or be content to live without you."

"Perhaps," she said, with one of her sweetest smiles.

"But you have not promised yet."

"Promised what—about Zua? Why, of course, I shall do as you wish."

"That is generous—that is trustful! Believe me, I have your daughter's best interest at heart."

"I believe it. Who could doubt such goodness? Besides, your suggestion is a wise one. I have been rash in sanctioning this engagement without more knowledge of the man. But he was so ardent, so intensely in earnest, that my better judgment was carried away."

Wheaton broke off suddenly, and flung his arm around Ruby Gray, to support her, for she turned white as snow, and was attempting to support herself by the trunk of a cedar, which was so far off that she must have fallen but for him.

"How pale you are! Look up, darling, and tell me what it is!"

"Am I pale? How absurd! It was only a garter-snake—not poisonous, I am told—but still a snake; and his very rustle in the grass made me faint. So young Moreton is urgent—impetuously in love, I dare say."

"Impetuously in love? I should think so."

"And she?"

"Oh! one does not confess such things of one's daughter."

"But, of course, she is interested—fascinated."

"There is little wonder at that, dearest, when you think of the man. Moreton is a magnificent fellow."

"And he will be hers—her husband?"

Had the garter-snake come back and crept across her heart, the woman could not have looked more coldly pale, or shivered with such bitter revolt. But, all at once, her blue eyes fired up, her cheeks became scarlet, and the edges of her white teeth shone through the curved redness of her lips.

"But you have promised me," she said, pressing his arm, till her fingers grasped it firmly.

"Promised? Yes, gladly enough! But you, Ruby—have I your pledge, also?"

"How can you doubt it? But go, now; I must have time to think."

"I shall only think of you. Say that I have not offended you before I go."

"Offended me? If I was disturbed a moment, it is passed now. I must say good morning!"

She held out her hand, smiled upon him, and turned into the zigzag path which led upward to the garden.

Wheaton watched her till the last flutter of her dress was lost amid the greenness of the trees, then went down to his boat, and pulled himself out upon the water; so happy, that he fairly sang to the even dip of his oars, and smiled back a beam of joy to every glint of sunshine that turned the drops he threw upward into diamonds.

Ruby Gray looked back upon him as she stood, sheltered and concealed by the cedar-trees. The smiles upon her face had changed to mingled pain and hate. The wrath of a heart bitterly wounded burned in those blue eyes.

"Go," she said, in a firm whisper; "go and work for me. You have had full pay in advance—smiles, and sweet words, and promises, that match yours as brittle glass meets iron; but that reward is enough. Insolent vanity! to be-

lieve that I, Ruby Gray, could love him—could accept life in that house! I wonder how such men can be so easily deceived. Charles Gray would have understood me at once."

"Yes, fair lady, Charles Gray flatters himself that he usually does understand you tolerably well."

Ruby started. She had been talking aloud, while Charles Gray stood within a yard of her, laughing pleasantly at her agitation.

"Charles! Mr. Gray! What does this mean?"

"You invited me, fair lady, and I have come. That is all."

"True, I did; but not exactly in this easy fashion, or so early."

"Oh! I have come over to breakfast. Van Lorn's cook pleases me; and after a sharp ride, one can readily put up with worse fare than I have found here. You want to talk with me, and *vice versa*. Let us start fair, with a good breakfast. The morning is all before us, and I have discovered a lovely little cove, where the water sets up into a ravine, down yonder, with hemlock shadows all around it. We will have our confidences out down there; the solitude is perfect."

Ruby laughed, half scornfully.

"With what masterful selfishness you arrange things," she said. "But this time your will suits mine; any solitude will do, if we can have it to ourselves."

"No one can reach us there, *ma belle*, unless they drop down the steepest banks you ever saw, or come upon us from the water. My horse shied from the brink as I looked down. Believe me, it is safe. Now let us go in to breakfast. I met Van Lorn in the garden, and he asked me to find you; the family is waiting."

"I have no appetite. Go in, and join me by-and-by."

"That I will not, Ruby. Go in and take a strong cup of coffee—it will stop that shivering. Come."

"Shivering! Do I shiver? Go in, Charles; I will follow."

"Take my arm, Ruby; don't be afraid. What has come over you, child? I never saw you in earnest before. Has your heart made a plunge into deep water for once? All this looks like it. Now a sharp fellow would say that he had found your weak side, Mrs. Gray."

Ruby turned away her head angrily. She felt that this bad, selfish man was getting her at a disadvantage, and made a stern effort to retrieve herself.

"What nonsense, Charles! Had I been weak in anything, you would have found it out long ago. But here is Mrs. Van Lorn, all impatience, I dare say. We must not keep her waiting."

They sauntered into the house, chatting lightly, as if no deep or painful feeling existed with either of them. They greeted Mrs. Van Lorn with smiles and excuses, chatted lightly over the table, while Gray eat a hearty breakfast, and Ruby drank two or three cups of the strongest coffee with unconscious eagerness. All this was irksome to the woman, and she fairly hated the young man for his self-possession. Of this she gave no sign, but sat languidly playing with some fruit that had been placed before her, bandying jests with him all the time.

"Now," said Gray, at last, arising from the table and taking his hat, "if you will point out that fancy boat of yours, sister Ruby, I will show you the place we were speaking of."

Ruby arose languidly, and took her hat and parasol.

"I dare say it will prove nothing worth the trouble," she said. "But I have no other engagement."

She took his arm and went out among the flowers. Mrs. Van Lorn looked after them, and observed to her husband what a fine couple they were.

"Yes," he said, looking up from his paper; "splendid,

if she would not force me to eat a cold breakfast five mornings in the week. A charming guest, but for that."

Mrs. Van Lorn did not answer: she was busy looking after the handsome couple, as they descended the hill-path. In her heart she believed an engagement would be recorded that day between the two, and took a womanly interest in the proceedings, as married ladies will, after working out a life romance for themselves.

"I should not be surprised in the least," she muttered, turning from the door.

"Surprised at what?" came from behind the newspaper.

"If they made a match," answered the lady.

"Let them; what is it to us, if she chooses to throw herself away," answered Van Lorn, laying down his paper.

CHAPTER L.

A THOROUGH UNDERSTANDING.

NEITHER Charles nor Ruby Gray spoke a word, after they left the house, till they came in sight of the little boat, which the lady considered almost as her own. The young man untied the cable, helped her into the pretty craft, and took his seat at the oars in a grave, manly way, that convinced Ruby that, for once, he was as much in earnest as herself. The sun was bright now, and flickered over the waves like quicksilver; but Gray kept within the shadows of the bank, where the very waters took a greenish tinge from the dense foliage, and rowed on in silence. More than once he cast a glance at Ruby, who sat pale and still in the boat, with quivers of pain passing now and then over her face, which was pale and resolved as he had never seen it before.

At last the boat curved into a little bay, and lost itself in the deep shadows of hemlock, cedars, and pines, that dotted the precipitous banks on all sides, except that which opened upon the blue sky and the sunshine of the waters. There rocks, covered with lichen, ferns, and moss, greener than emeralds, loomed above them, darkened by one vast entanglement of branches, and woven together by the roots of young birch-trees and wild grape-vines, that never found sunshine enough to ripen their fruit from spring-time to autumn.

Young Gray drew in his oars, laid them carefully down, and addressed the lady so suddenly, that Ruby uttered a faint shriek; for the gloom of the place oppressed her, and a sleepless night had left her nervous beyond anything she had ever experienced before.

"Now we are in a safe place; let us be honest with each other for once in our lives, Ruby," he said.

She looked at him in amazement. This was not the usual fashion of his speech. She had expected protestations of love, intercession, entreaties—anything but honest frankness.

He saw that she was perplexed, and went on.

"Ruby, the time has come when you must decide. I will be trifled with no longer. You shall not put me off, or tamper with me as you do with other men. To cheat me as you cheat them is impossible. The truth is, Ruby, we know each other too well, you and I—so let us take a fair standpoint, and have the thing out."

Ruby looked at him with wondering eyes and parted lips.

"Go on," she said, after a pause. "Go on, and let me know what you are aiming at."

"For once in my life, I am aiming to be honest. How is it with you, my dear?"

Ruby laughed scornfully. How could she help it, knowing him as she did?

"Don't attempt impossibilities, Charles."

"I will not urge them upon you, at any rate, fair sister. Still, if you can be truthful, confess at once that you detest me."

"In this case," answered Ruby, "the truth will be such a luxury, that I cannot resist it. With my whole heart I do detest you. Will that suffice?"

"Bravo! We shall get on now, never fear. You detest and dread me."

"No, sir—no, I dread nothing."

Gray shook his head (with mocking gravity).

"Oh, Ruby! you disappoint me. While the honest fit was on, why not encourage it, and say that, while you hate me more intensely than you ever will or can love any one, it is with a sort of terror lest I may block your wishes, or wound you in some way? What else has forced you to endure me?"

She looked at him bravely, her beautiful eyes wide open, her lips apart, watchful and amazed.

"What if I said it was from respect to my husband's brother?"

A loud, scornful laugh rang up through the hemlock boughs, frightening the birds out of their shadows.

"Respect for your husband's brother? Why, beautiful cheat, you never respected *him*, dead or alive."

"Is this a specimen of your honesty, sir?" cried Ruby, starting up with a violence that made the boat rock.

"Exactly," was the steady reply. "Like yourself, I find truth a luxury, and relish it."

"Why talk in this way, Charles? I came here for a serious purpose."

"True, and so did I. Tell me how it was that you ever professed to love me?"

"Did I? Or was it you that forced the subject upon me, welcome or not?"

"Did I force you to write me daily letters—and such letters?"

"No; that was my own folly, bitterly repented of."

"Now we are coming to the truth again. Why did you write those letters?"

"I have asked myself that question a thousand times."

"And the answer? For even then you did not love me."

"I did not then know what love was."

"And did not even fancy that you loved me?"

"Yes, indeed I did. The solitude of my mourning was so deep; I saw scarcely any one but you, and — and —"

"I understand. Let that pass."

"Would to heaven it could pass!" she exclaimed, passionately; "that one folly of my life has made me a slave."

"Ruby, listen to me; you love that handsome fellow over yonder." Her face was scarlet, her eyelids drooped with shame. "You love him, and this love has lifted you out of the luxurious selfishness of the old life. If I were not in the way, you would marry him."

Those white lids were suddenly uplifted, and the eyes they had shrouded flashed like stars.

"Marry him? Would I? Great heavens!"

"Yes, I see; but you dare not. I have but to toss that package of letters in his way, and any fancy he may have for you would vanish."

"Charles Gray, I am weary of these threats—they make me hate you. It was to free myself, to get those foolish letters out of your possession, that I made this appointment. It is not love that makes you pursue me so."

"As we are indulging in the truth, Ruby, I answer No, it is not love—it never was. Like yourself, I did not know what love was in those days."

"But you do now?"

"Yes, you and I have found our fate at last."

"If this is true, Charles, why persecute me? You blush

—there is shame in your eyes. I know why it is that you have harassed me all this time, and why you were so eager to marry me, till this new passion put other thoughts into your mind—the wealth which fell to me from your brother —"

"It was my father's property, and your husband had one-third more than his share. You won it out of the old man as serpents charm birds; by right it was mine."

"But you had plenty, and he gave it to me; you did not complain at the time."

"Because I expected to win it all back when you became my wife."

"Oh! I comprehend. This is a bitter truth, Charles; but I thank you for it. Still you were rich, you and your mother. Why crave that which legally came to me?"

"Ruby, I have determined to speak out. Every dollar of my father's estate is gone. You are rich, I am poor."

"And—and your mother?"

"Do not speak of her. She has one humble roof to shelter her—that is all."

CHAPTER LI.

MUTUAL CONFESSIONS.

I SEE it all," said Ruby Gray; "you were driven to seek me, and now you love another. Who is it, Charles? Zua Wheaton? Not she! If it is—if it is, I will divide every dollar I have on earth with you. Ask it of me on your wedding-day. Tell me, is it she?"

Ruby started up in the boat, eager, flushed, breathless.

"Great heavens? why don't you speak? Tell me that it is Zua Wheaton, and that it is you she loves."

Gray took both her hands in his, and drew her to his side with a feeling of profound compassion.

"Ruby, what is this? How you tremble! Why, the tears fairly flash from your eyes. Do you really love the fellow so much? I did not think it in you, Ruby; though it did seem suspicious that day when you were hanging about his bed; but you carried it off splendidly, I must say that."

Ruby lifted her eyes to his face, searching for the truth through her tears.

"Tell me, Charles—oh! tell me if that girl really cares for you?"

"Dear Ruby, do not look at me so piteously, or I shall be in love with you, spite of everything. No, no! Don't shrink so. That girl, Zua, does not care two straws for me; and I wouldn't give a look from the one you will never guess at for fifty of her. I think she is rather in your way, Ruby."

Ruby dropped back to her seat with a faint, low moan.

"You cannot help me. I would have given you half I have, oh! so gladly; but you cannot help me!"

Gray went over and took his place by Ruby; all the scorn and flippant disrespect which he had felt for her was merged in genuine compassion. She was so beautiful in her humiliation, so womanly in the passion of her love, that he was, for the moment, drawn out of himself by pure sympathy.

"Tell me all about it, Ruby; I will help you, right or wrong. The fellow ought to be your husband, you were made for each other. What is that girl, with her black hair and eyes, in comparison to you? She has got the inside track, no doubt, while he was sick; but what of that! Gratitude is sure to die out when he gets back into the world. Make a friend of me, Ruby, and we'll get him into the traces."

She lifted her eyes to his while he was speaking, and a

smile crept back to her lips, as sunlight flashes between red rose-leaves, making them glow with sudden warmth.

"But he has asked for her," she whispered; "her father told me so this morning."

"Well, what then? Get it put off. He will go up to town, and so will you. Let him see you as you are now, earnest, womanly, subdued with tenderness, and her chances are gone. If there is any one thing that you can depend on, it is the ingratitude which follows a personal service, especially if the benefactor is a woman. Men like to give care, it wounds their pride to receive. Depend on it, before that fractured bone is well knitted, Moreton's heart will swerve round to its old attachment. Why, he used to be as jealous as the deuce if I only looked at you."

The smile grew brighter and warmer on Ruby's lips; every word that fell from Gray was full of hope and comfort to her.

"How kind you are, Charles!" she murmured. "I never expected this of you. Only help me, stand by me firmly, manage to sweep this girl from my path, and I will make you rich again."

"That seems like a mercenary bargain, Ruby; but it must be, or I am ruined. Besides, Moreton is a millionaire, and a few thousands, more or less, with a wife, will be nothing to him; so that all I take from you will be given back double, and no harm to any one. Is this to be our contract, Ruby?"

"I will do all that I have promised. The day that I—that is, on our wedding-day, you shall be put in possession of half I possess."

Gray hesitated, and fell into thought.

"You think so now," he said, coloring to the temples with the shame he strove hard to conquer; "but when the time comes, it will seem a large sum to part with."

"Compared to what you will have done for me," was her

eager reply, "it will count but as a handful of pebbles. Indeed, indeed, Charles, had I known that all your inheritance was gone, much that has been painful between us might have been spared."

Gray laughed, but it was like a man who feels the tears stealing into his voice.

"You see, Ruby, how much better we are for having a little truth come into our lives," he said. "It is diamond cut diamond when you and I attempt to cheat each other. Let us start on a new basis, and at least be honorable to each other. To begin, here are the letters about which I have tormented you so long. Take them now: they might be a temptation, if you were to provoke me again."

Ruby snatched the package with a cry of joy.

"This is generous, it is noble," she said, with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Charles! how can I thank you?"

"Don't try," he answered. "We are allies now, and need not carry weapons of defence."

"But I know; I have just thought how to repay this confidence for confidence. If I had a pen and ink now!"

Charles Gray took a little fancy case from his pocket, in which was a tiny inkstand and a gold pen.

"Will this answer?" he said, smiling, as he screwed the joints of the pen-handle together. "Here is paper, too, if you do not require much; there, you can make a table of the bench."

In the excitement of her gratitude Ruby took the pen, spread the paper on the bench, and wrote a promise to give Charles Gray, her late husband's brother, one-half of the property which she had inherited from the family, immediately upon the event of her marriage with Preston Moreton. It was almost the first really impulsive act of her life; and in less than three hours after signing it, regretful thoughts crept back upon her, and she would gladly have exchanged it for a verbal promise; but it was too late for that, as Gray

remembered with exultation—not that his actions had not been generous at the time, but the distrust of a lifetime is not to be swept away by the smiles or tears of a woman who has never commanded confidence before.

"Now," said Ruby, for the first time giving a thought to Gray's affairs, "tell me of the lady who has driven me from your fancy; I hope she is lovely enough to save my pride."

Again the hot crimson swept over Gray's face.

"You may not think it. The girl will, probably, seem unformed, and even vulgar to you; but, upon my word, I believe she will make a splendid woman, worth, worth—"

"A dozen of me, you were about to say," cried Ruby, laughing so merrily that the birds above her broke into song, and shook the branches with a sudden outbreak. "Was there ever a man who did not think the woman he loved far beyond any other lady on earth?"

"But this girl is not a lady."

"Oh!"

"She is poor as a church-mouse."

"And you love her?"

"Bred by a rude, iron-natured mother."

"And this is your choice?"

"Has a romantic, silly fool for a brother."

"What—what?"

"Does n't know how to lace up her boots straight, and could n't put on a pair of gloves properly to save her life."

Ruby sank back into her seat breathless with astonishment.

"And you love her?"

"Better than my life, better than myself."

"And you will marry her?"

Charles Gray did not answer at once, the color went and came in his face. He took up the oars, as if tired of the conference and eager to break it up; then laid them down softly in the boat, and answered:

"Yes; if I had that money, I would marry her to-day. By Jove! I would, believe it or not."

"She must, indeed, be a wonder."

"I tell you she is nothing of the kind! There is n't a woman of your set who would not pronounce her too coarse for a lady's maid."

"I do not understand this."

"And will not understand her; never were two persons more unlike."

"But she must be beautiful?"

"Is she? I am not sure."

"Well, at last, pray tell me who she really is?"

"Certainly; but let it be in confidence as yet. Her name is Amanda Clark, and she is your washerwoman's daughter."

Ruby sat for a moment silent and aghast; then she seemed to gather up her faculties and come out of her astonishment.

"No," she said, "I am not astonished. Of the two girls, I should have chosen her. *She* would have been a rival that one does not easily conquer. Wild vines weave themselves so closely around a tree, and always struggle up to the sunshine. There is no guessing what a creature like that may achieve — fresh, young, with capacities of thought and beauty."

"You are muttering to yourself. Speak out and say at once that I have made an idiot of myself," said Gray, impatiently; "I expect it. But do not be too sharp. I also am going up to town, and may think twice of it. These clover-fields and pond-lilies make a fellow romantic in spite of himself."

"You are wrong," answered Ruby, coming out of her fit of thought; "that girl possesses, as the Irish say, the making of a fine woman in her. There is something very nearly approaching to genius in her originality. If I wonder, it is that you should have discovered it."

"Is this really your thought, Ruby?" said Gray, seizing the hand which lay passive in her lap.

"Upon my honor it is!"

"Thank you! Why, Ruby, if you and I were to remain here, with this lovely bay before our eyes, and these remarkable people—for they seem remarkable to me—always with us, we might be as frank and happy as they are. Even you have changed till I hardly know you."

"Yes," said Ruby, "it is a glimpse of what life could be, if men and women were really honest."

The beautiful woman spoke sadly. Some hope had been given her that day; but love had deepened her character, and made her comparatively humble.

"Come," she said again, "let us go into the open air; this place is gloomy. We are friends and firm allies; now that you have thrown off all ideas of being my lover, we can be true and useful to each other. Let us go."

Gray was about to push his boat into the bay, when the sound of dipping oars made him pause and listen.

"Some one is coming; we must draw back till the boat has passed," he whispered, backing his little craft close up to the inner curve of the deep inlet which sheltered them.

"Yes," said Ruby, breathless with agitation, "it is a boat; I even see the prow — Wheaton's boat, by the color, and pointing this way. What can we do? No one from that house must see us in this place."

Gray looked eagerly around: behind him was a broad-spreading hemlock, whose roots had in some bygone years been partly loosened from the entangling soil, and sent the tree itself downward till it bowed almost horizontally over the water, where it lapped the rocks blackest and deepest. Quick as thought the young man shot his boat behind this screen of branches, and there, concealed by the gloom and dense foliage, waited.

CHAPTER LII.

NIGHT AT THE APPLE-TREE.

A MAN and a woman stood beneath the old apple-tree near Mrs. Clark's house. It was October then. The sweet, red clover had all been gathered, leaving tufts of black stubble all over the field, which a delicate after-growth could not entirely conceal. The leaves of the apple-tree, that had been so green and thick, were beginning to curl and crisp at the edges, thinning out slowly, like the hair from an old man's head. The fruit had been mostly gathered, but a gnarled apple here and there studded the poverty-stricken boughs, and lay, unworthy of the garnering, in the grass underneath.

It was ten o'clock in the evening, and the girl had crept away from her sleeping mother's side to come out and meet young Gray, who had reappeared in the neighborhood only the day before. His arm was around her waist, his lips were upon her forehead. She was trembling beneath the mingled joy and terror of his presence.

"And you have wondered that I did not come?" he said, tenderly; "wondered and wished—I hope so."

"You know it," said the girl; "and being sure, took your time."

"No, I could not come before. The old lady has been ill, very ill, and I had many things to do."

"Ah! I am sorry, so sorry; forgive me. How could I know that your mother was sick?" cried Amanda, smitten with unnecessary remorse.

"And now I have but a moment. You got my letter?"

"Yes, it is here."

Amanda pressed both hands to her heart, as if crossing herself.

"Well, are you ready to undertake this new life that I offer you?"

"No," she answered, looking up bravely in the moonlight.

"No?"

"I cannot. Mother says that my father was a gentleman; that he worked so long as there was strength in him, and then let her work for him, out of her great love, when that was taken away; but he never took help from others, nor has she. In some things my poor mother is more than a lady."

"Then you have resolved to disappoint me?"

"No; it is because I won't disappoint you that I say this."

"You have told your mother?"

"No, I haven't. I have asked her to let me go to the city, as you told me to."

"Well?"

"She says that I shall not go."

"And you will obey her?"

"What else can I do? She is my mother."

"But I want you to study, to inform and accomplish yourself."

"And so I will."

"Amanda, this is impossible."

"No; it is hard and difficult, not impossible. Listen to me—have I not been learning all the time? Do you find no change in my speech—no words that have dropped out and given place to such as you love to hear? How many times do you think I have been through with that old grammar you saw me have?"

"I am sure it is impossible say."

"Five times!" answered the girl, triumphantly; "and I hated it so at first. If I can do that, what is there that I may not add to it?"

"Nothing, heaven knows, is impossible to a girl that can

go over Murray's grammar five times and come out alive," said Gray, laughing.

"And I know every word of it from studying by candle-light, too."

"That is more than I do, by Jove!"

Amanda laughed, well pleased by this indirect commendation.

"Besides, I have been —" Amanda broke off suddenly, as if with some quick after-thought. He did not observe this, but went on impatiently enough:

"Then you are content to see me once a month?"

"No, no. I hunger and thirst to see you every day of my life."

Gray was not thinking of her then; some new idea had come into his mind.

"You proposed once to take some place in the city and earn your own living. Would your mother consent to that?"

"I don't know — I am not sure."

"Would you like it?"

"Yes, oh! how much."

"Mandy — Mandy Clark?"

"It is mother — she has missed me. What can I do?" exclaimed the girl, clinging to her lover in sudden dismay.

He kissed her half a dozen times on her lips, her forehead, and her hair, which was so picturesquely beautiful in its rich disorder.

"Now fly," he said. "To-morrow night I will be here again. Kiss me, and go."

She did give him one passionate, frightened kiss, and fled to the house like a lapwing.

"What is it, mother?" she called out from the bottom of the stairs.

"What on earth are you doing down there?"

Amanda took a candle and an old book from the table,

where she had left them, and went up stairs, holding them innocently in her hands. Mrs. Clark was sitting up in bed, stern and grim, like one of Michael Angelo's fates; her features relaxed when she saw the book, and the angry tones of her voice died out. But she said, with some sternness:

"Mandy Clark, I won't have this getting up at night when I'm asleep. Larning is a good thing, but there is no need of sitting up all night to get it; muttering, too, till one hears you in their sleep, and dreams that two persons are a-talking out in the clover lot."

"Oh, mother!"

"Don't 'oh mother' me, but come straight off to bed. I won't have you a-studying your eyes out; that's the way your father took to his decline — read, read, read, till his life went out like a candle."

"But, mother, I have not hurt myself."

"Well, come to bed, then. I work hard, and I want my natural sleep."

CHAPTER LIII.

BILLY CLARK AND HIS SISTER RESOLVE TO ELOPE.

WHAT is the matter?" whimpered a feeble voice from a door that led to the next chamber, where Billy Clark slept. "What are you a-scolding Mandy for? You've woke me up from such a sweet dream! It's like hurrying a feller out of heaven with a jerk. *She* was standing by me, Mandy dear, and I was picking rasp — no, straw — No, well, no matter, Mandy; but I was picking berries for her, and —"

"Oh, Billy, Billy! do go to bed; I am so tired of hearing you talk about that girl!" exclaimed the old woman, wav-

ing him back, or he might have wandered into the room directly out of his dream, all unfit as he was for that presence.

"Don't be afraid, I won't come in," he answered, looking through a narrow space, and screening himself with the door. "But it ain't like a mother to turn agin her own offspring like that. I'm sure I've listened, dutifully, a hundred times, when you've been fretting over an oven-full of heavy bread, and split up new wood without a word; but now that my life is so heavy, no turnpike emptins ever made can raise it in the pan, my own mother turns against me, saying she's sick of hearing about that girl. It's enough to break a feller's heart."

Amanda, who was full of generous sympathy just then, went up to the door, and said, with infinite kindness:

"Never mind, brother, she did n't mean it. At any rate, I shall never get tired of hearing about Zua."

Billy put his slender hand through the opening, and clasped hers with all the feeble energy in his nature; while Mrs. Clark gave her pillow a vigorous shake, and settled it under her head, preparing to resume her broken sleep.

"Mandy," whispered Billy, "wait till I get in bed, then come in here; I want to speak with you."

"Wait a minute, Billy, she's just going off. I'll come the moment she begins to breathe hard."

Billy crept back to his bed, drew the clothes around him, and waited. In a few minutes Amanda stole in cautiously, and sat down close to the pillow that held his weak little head.

"I'm glad you've come, Mandy, for it is n't no use trying to go to sleep again. My heart is brimful of trouble, and I'm amost sure it will break in the end. Haven't you noticed, Mandy, how loose that dressing-gown, that I thought so much of, is a-growing for me; and the slippers will drop off my feet before long, and leave me barefooted — I have to

stuff cotton in the toes, now. Oh, Mandy! she's been the death of me. If ever a chap died of a broken-heart, I'm the feller. Don't you see me a-withering away, root and branch?"

Amanda sat close to him, in her sweet, womanly sympathy, and smoothed his hair, on which the moonlight was falling, tenderly with her hand, and whispered, "But you will get over it, brother; I'm sure you will."

Billy turned on his pillow, and covering his face with both hands, began to sob piteously.

"Not while I live, sister. It's a-carrying me off as the sunshine melts a shadow. You need n't smooth my hair, Mandy; she's took all the curl out of it. It's falling off in handfuls since she went away."

"Are you fretting after her like that, dear?"

"Fretting, Mandy? It's no use denying it. The garden seems like a sand-beach, covered with drifts of sea-weed, now that she is gone. The sea is forever moaning and sobbing to me, as if it wanted something; and when I cry out, 'She's gone! she's gone!' it answers back with moans, like a live creature, till I long to throw myself into the first wave, and die with it."

"How can I help you? How can I comfort you, brother?" said Amanda, with tears in her voice.

"Get me away from here; let me see her now and then. It may keep the poor soul in my body a little longer. I want to go to York — that is what I mean."

"And I," whispered Amanda, "I want to go to York."

"Let us go together, sister, hand in hand, like the babes in the woods."

"And leave mother?"

"She's healthy and strong as a lion. You and I, dear, must have took after our father. She can get along without us. Besides, it's to save my life. Let's elope, Mandy — you and I. She won't consent — so let's elope."

"Billy, if she won't let me go, then I'll elope—you and I."

Billy reached up his thin arms and wound them around her neck.

"Mandy, dear, you've saved my life. I was just pining to death for a sight of her."

Mrs. Clark would not consent that either of her children should leave their home; and in a week's time Billy had run away, leaving her heart-struck. She gave no sign of the sorrow which this unfilial act brought upon her, and uttered no complaint. On the contrary, those few friends who ever visited her were left to infer that there had been a satisfactory arrangement, by which the young man had started into the world to take care of himself—a state of things with which she was quite satisfied. Still, those who cared to observe, saw that her thick hair was growing whiter and whiter every day; that she would sometimes fold her arms on the wash-board, and stand for minutes together gazing down into the foamy suds, as if she saw the images of her children there. More than once, as weeks wore on, you might have seen great drops, like the first rain from a thunder-cloud, fall into the suds; but it was not often that any one was there to witness these signs of her silent grief—so she lived out that portion of her hard old life in silence.

Amanda, too, gave her mother great uneasiness. She had ceased to urge her wish for a city life, but was eternally singing about the house, and spent half her time at the old mansion we have mentioned, which some strange foreigners had hired for the season, who seemed to have fascinated the girl and thrown her into an eternal passion of music. But these people went away at last, and after that Amanda had a miserably lonely life with the silent old woman.

The whole neighborhood, in fact, had fallen into a deep autumnal stillness. The Van Lorns had started for Europe, where they would probably remain for years. Mr. Whea-

ton's house was shut up, and the widow Gray had long ago completed her visit to the Van Lorns. As for Moreton, he had not been in the neighborhood since about the time that Ruby left it; but occasionally rumors came in the newspapers and by private letters, that he had been seen at the races, or at some great party, in high spirits and perfect health. It was understood too in fashionable circles that he was engaged; but the public were in doubt whether a fashionable and wealthy young widow, who had been long the object of his admiration, or a bright brunette, young, piquant, and lovely, who had given him care and hospitality under her father's roof, after his severe injury, would prove the object of his final choice.

After an absence of some weeks, Billy Clark came back to his home, disconsolate. There was no doubt, he said, dejectedly, that his wretchedness would be complete in a few months. That fellow with the broken leg—not that it was not sound enough now—was half his time in Mr. Wheaton's parlor; and it was an awful trial to have to carry in his cards three or four times a day; in fact, it was breaking his heart, and that was why he thought of giving up and coming home.

CHAPTER LIV.

ALL IN TOWN AGAIN.

IT was true Ruby Gray had left the Van Lorns and gone back to her old rooms at the hotel. Not twelve hours after Billy Clark had told her of Moreton's intention to return to the city she was on her way there. "Letters of importance made it necessary," she said; her visit had been a most delightful one, and she would give the world to stay longer, but that was now impossible.

The Van Lorns acquiesced with commendable resignation; for, to own the truth, Ruby had far outstayed her appointed time; and she was one of those persons who can enjoy hospitality, while deranging the entertainer's household, in a way that is calculated to console a person for the loss even of a beloved guest. Be this as it may, Ruby, with her ponies, her Indian tiger, and her mulatto maid, disappeared from the gothic house on the Point, and had taken possession of a suit of the most sumptuous rooms in the hotel when Moreton arrived there. So adroitly had this been managed, that it seemed to the world as if he were following her with love-like promptness from her summer seclusion. It was well known that he had met with a painful accident on his way down to visit her; and all the rest seemed but a natural sequence.

This was exactly as Ruby had designed it. The agitation and passionate anguish which had seized upon her with such fury when she first learned of the attachment which existed between her former lover and Zua Wheaton had settled down into that cool, hard determination which was far more powerful and more dangerous than any wild outbreak of passion. She gave no sign of jealousy, or of knowing the disaffection of her admirer. In the hotel she met him with all her old, frank cordiality, changing her manner in nothing save that a certain vague and most child-like tenderness would sometimes soften her speech into absolute sadness when she conversed with him.

The man must have been very much in love with Zua Wheaton, indeed, to have resisted Ruby at this time. She made no claim to his attentions, seemed conscious of no right to resent neglect; but her blue eyes turned upon him with such tender reproach, there was so much feeling in the subdued smile with which she greeted him, that he could not help feeling the delicacy of her conduct, and reproach himself for something like inconstancy.

"At least," she said, one night, as they sat together in the little room, which her own fanciful taste had turned into as pretty a boudoir as could be found in any private dwelling within a mile — "At least we may be friends in the hereafter, we who have been almost something more."

She looked down as she spoke, her blue eyes were full of tears, like violets after a rain. She turned her face away, that he might not see them. Remember, the woman loved this man; and before true love the most perfect art must at times disappear. She loved him, and her heart yearned, in its wounded affection and passionate wrath, to load him with reproaches, and force him to ask for the tenderness which filled her whole being. It seemed to her impossible that he could turn from such feelings, knowing how real and how strong they were.

Moreton saw little or nothing of all this, for at most times Ruby was a consummate actress, and he believed her an unrelenting coquette, with whom a man might trifle forever, and leave no injury behind. He was glad to see that Ruby did not resent his disaffection; and in gratitude for that, fell into his old ways with her, after a careless complimentary fashion that wounded her to the soul. His engagement with Zua Wheaton had not been proclaimed, at the urgent request, almost command, of the girl's father, who insisted, not only on silence regarding it, but on a delay of one year before the marriage should take place.

Ruby Gray recognized her own work in this, and felt herself bound in new fetters by Wheaton's submission to her will. Indeed, in making her combinations, she had been weaving many nets that threatened to enmesh herself. But Ruby had supreme talent, and such tact as few women ever possessed. So she trusted to that, with smiling confidence, even when Wheaton wrote her that he had resolved to spend the winter in the same hotel with herself. He and Zua would be in the city within the month; meantime, he should

have no rest till her fair face rested on his bosom, and those blue eyes looked into his as they had done once, and would, he hoped, all the rest of his life.

Ruby crushed this letter in her hand, and flung it into the fire, as if it had been a viper. He live under the same roof with her, teasing her to death with his middle-aged adoration, and bringing that girl with him! Anything was better than that. She would rather die than accept his attentions, day by day, for the next six months. But, if she thwarted him, or acted coldly—he was a proud man, and careful of his own dignity—a little thing might drive him from her; and then where would her influence be to keep those two apart? Still she could not endure his presence, or submit to those thousand airs of understanding and proprietorship, which were sure to be commented on by and in the presence of the man she loved.

Ruby took a long time to think this all over. She sat in the easiest chair of her pretty boudoir, with her feet buried in the white fur of a rug, and her cheek resting against one dimpled hand, looking dreamily into the fire, perplexed and dispirited. At her feet, looking in the firelight like a favorite dog, Theo, the Indian boy, lay coiled up, with his bright black eyes lifted to hers, and reading the thoughts there.

"Which is it—that hateful Mr. Gray? Shall I kill him for you?" he whispered, taking hold of her dress.

"Hush, boy! Down, down, I tell you!" she said, impatiently; "you interrupt me."

The boy let go her dress, and cowered down upon the rug, frowning, but obedient. Then Ruby fell into thought again, beating her foot impatiently against the lace-like steel of the grate. Then, as the resolve formed itself, her foot settled back unconsciously, and fell upon the boy's bosom, where he lay with his dusky face uplifted, worshipping her.

Theo took the little, silken-clad foot softly between his two

trembling hands, and kissed it. She did not heed this audacious act in the least, nor did she see the gleam and glitter of those black Indian eyes as they were turned upon her half triumphant, half frightened. To her Theo was like a lap-dog, only more obedient and more useful when she needed him; the wild adoration with which he regarded her was exactly what she would have expected and prized in a dog, had she fancied the animal.

After a little more reflection, the widow gently spurned Theo with the foot he had been caressing.

"Draw a table here, Theo," she said, "and place my desk upon it: I want to write."

Theo was on his feet in an instant. The little ebony table was drawn up, and one of those tiny desks, that are gems of beauty in themselves, was placed upon it. The leaf unfolded, and all its pretty paraphernalia of gold-mounted standishes, enamelled pen-holders, and richly-tinted paper was revealed, glittering against the crimson velvet of its lining. Taking out a sheet of note-paper, crested with a delicate monogram, she took up her pen, and began to write the note which was to keep Mr. Wheaton and his beautiful daughter safe out of the path she had laid out for herself.

She was so glad to hear that he thought of spending the winter, as it were, in that semi-domestic fashion, which would be pleasant to both parties. At first, the idea had filled her with a delight so perfect that she forgot everything else in thinking of it. It did seem hard, but there was always something to dash one's joy where the best feelings of the heart were concerned. But in the midst of her exultation a cruel thought of prudence would creep in, chilling her with its coldness. Was it just the thing to have dear Zua under the same roof with young Moreton? Could the secret of their engagement be kept, as he had, in his wisdom, thought it wisest to keep it, with the two persons interested thrown into such close and constant propinquity? The

trait that she had most loved in dear Zua had been her exquisite modesty. Like the down on a peach, or the bloom of the grape, all that might be swept away by the easy gayety of a hotel-life.

She spoke with hesitation — his own sound judgment would of course, determine; but even she, with all her matron's privileges, would rather not be subjected to the ordeal which his presence would impose upon them both. Would it not be better to remain in that dear, delicious home, which seemed to her so much like some nook stolen out of paradise, and run up to the city now and then for a day or two. That need create no observation — and how much delight could be crowded into those few days! In this way, sweet Zua would be saved from a very embarrassing position; as for themselves, she would much prefer to keep everything connected with their plans a secret to the last. There was something that she shrank from in publicity in such matters — coarse newspaper paragraphs might spring out of it to wound her delicacy. Of course, she only made these suggestions subject to his better judgment. Perhaps she ought to beg pardon for having made them at all — he might think her too sensitive; but it was her nature, and she could not help it.

So Ruby Gray ran on, covering sheet after sheet of that tinted note-paper with her prettily-worded sophistry; while the Indian boy sank to her feet again, and watched each motion of her hand with keen interest.

CHAPTER LV.

THEO READS RUBY GRAY'S LETTER, AND GIVES HER ANOTHER.

RUBY GRAY completed her epistle, folded its leaves with care, and pressed her seal upon a drop of pale green wax, upon which it left a tiny Cupid, writing her monogram on his tablet.

"Here, Theo, put this into the mail," she said; "and be careful that no one sees it. You understand?"

"Yes, lady, I understand."

He took the letter, and was gone in an instant; but instead of going directly to the office, he went to his own room, locked the door, and sat down upon the bed, breathing quickly. Taking a knife from his pocket, he passed its blade dexterously under the seal, and lifted it, with the Cupid unbroken, from the paper. Then he gathered himself up on the bed, and began to read the letter, sheet by sheet, till he had devoured every word.

"Bah! she don't love that old fellow!" he said, folding the sheets again. "There's no fear of him; he may have the letter, it will do him good, and do Theo good to watch the way she will manage him. Does n't she throw the lasso over these fellows splendidly? — then how they struggle! But she tames them all, and then casts them loose when they'd rather not be free. Oh! but the lady is magnificent! Let them all try for her, there is not one can ever get so near her as Theo. Not one — not one!" The boy fastened the letter carefully by placing a drop of mucilage under the seal, and, softly unlocking his door, went down to the office and put it in the mail.

As Theo came up stairs again he met Preston Moreton, who also carried a letter in his hand. That moment some

friend came up and spoke with him. He beckoned to the boy, gave him the letter, and directed him to place it in the mail, which was that moment going out.

Theo took the letter, ran down the steps, and, pausing there, glanced at the direction.

"Ho, ho!" he chuckled, "she will like this; perhaps give me her hand to kiss for bringing it. Let the mail go."

He thrust the letter into his bosom and ran up stairs, again passing Moreton in the broad corridor, still conversing with his friend.

"In time?" he questioned, pausing a moment to address the boy.

"All right," answered the dusky rogue; "gone by this time."

A moment after, he entered Ruby Gray's boudoir, and laid the letter on the crimson velvet of the desk. Ruby snatched it up eagerly.

"Zua Wheaton! Where did you get this?" she exclaimed.

"*He* gave it to me for the mail. I brought it to you, lady."

"That is right; I thank you, Theo. Tear it open, boy; my hand shakes—tear it open."

Theo's dexterous fingers soon forced the envelope apart; then his mistress snatched it from him, and began to read with sharp impatience in her eyes and a fierce curve of the lip, which transfigured all her beauty, even in the eyes of that adoring boy.

"Oh, lady! don't, don't look so! I will never, never bring you another."

"You had better not," she answered, turning her fierce white face upon him. "How dare you?"

The subject of that letter, its warmth, its purity, its tender impatience, only subdued by the respect which makes the object of a true love almost divine, drove the woman

mad. She was ready to hurl bitter indignation on anything, even the poor foreign boy, who was her slave in every sense of the word. The boy cowered down upon his knees at her feet and began to cry.

"I thought you wanted it, lady; I did—I did."

That dusky face quivered with grief. The boy grovelled at her feet in abject repentance, not that he had done wrong, but that he had failed to please her.

"I thought you would be *so* pleased. Oh, my lady! I did, indeed," he pleaded, clasping his dusky little hands in an agony of regret.

Ruby crushed the letter in her hand, dashed it into the grate, and watched the flames leap upon it with a sensation of relief.

"Great heavens! and he can write so to her," she muttered, as a rush of tears seemed to quench the wrath within her suddenly as water meets fire; "this is how he *can* love! Did he ever write to me so?"

She opened a compartment of her desk, and took out a handful of long, slender notes that rustled silkily to her touch, emitting a delicate odor of violets. A tress of her own rich hair was twisted around them, and the ends curled around her fingers as she unwound them, wreathing them with flossy gold.

"If ever I gave them back it was to be thus, with a lock of my own hair, in token of amity," she remembered. "But I will not give them back—not a word, not a thought, not the breath of this perfume. He is mine, not hers—was mine long before she ever saw him."

She opened one of the notes and read it; then another, and another, growing white and still as each one met her eyes. Then her face became convulsed; she covered it with her hands.

"Foam for me, and pure wine for her. It is clear—it is clear. How flimsy and superficial all this is! How real

and earnest that was! Oh! I am miserable, the most wretched creature alive. God help me!"

The hands fell away from her face, exposing tears, heavy and thick, on her lashes, and a quiver of pain on her whole face. It was hard to feel, as she did, how completely the first and only real passion of her life had been thrown away.

She felt a gentle touch of the hand which had fallen by her side. Theo was kissing away the tears with which it was wet, as a dog licks the feet of its master when he sees tokens of trouble in the dear face. The boy thus took the pain of her tears upon his young lips. She stooped down, now gentle in her grief, and patted him on the head.

"Theo, poor boy, I think you love me."

Her voice was plaintive—those letters had left her sad and humbled, and the boy's sympathy touched her.

Theo did not answer in words, but he lifted his head suddenly from the clouds of silk that fell around her, and she fairly shrank from the wild brilliancy of his dark face.

"Lady, if you want me to kill that man, I know how to do it."

She smiled upon him wearily.

"Kill him? Kill him?" she said. "But that would be killing me."

The boy shrank down to her feet again, and lay there motionless; but for the wonderful glitter in his eyes you might have thought him asleep.

Ruby was exhausted with the fiery passion that had swept over her. She had seldom before given herself up to such fierce excitement—a sense of weary exhaustion fell upon her. She sat a long time looking into the red heart of the fire, while the boy searched her face with his keen, hungry eyes. All at once he saw what seemed to be a wisp of spun gold floating down the opaline folds of her dress, and, stealing his little dusky hand upward, gathered it softly into his

palm, which was thrust into his bosom with a shiver of delight.

Ruby gathered up the notes listlessly, and looked around for the tress of hair that had bound them. Theo held his breath, and his eyes grew dusky.

"Look upon the floor, Theo. I have dropped something, that which tied these notes."

He began to search eagerly, creeping over the white rug on his hands and knees, but found nothing.

"Did my lady fling it in the fire when she was so angry? I saw something bright flash by. Was it that?"

As he spoke, the boy thrust one hand into his bosom, and felt how loud and full the heart was beating under the coil of gold he pressed against it.

"Yes," he said, "I saw it fall into the fire."

Ruby sighed heavily, and closed her desk over the notes. Then she arose and left the room, without regarding Theo, who darted away with his treasure the moment she was gone.

A week from that time, Mr. Wheaton came to the city with his daughter—but Ruby's influence over him was complete. He only staid a few hours at the hotel, and took rooms at another not far from the neighborhood. During Zua's stay at the Fifth Avenue, Ruby was ill and did not leave her room. She could not trust herself to see those two persons in company; but Theo watched them like a lynx. His savage heart entered into every feeling that disturbed hers with a passion and power of sympathy which would have been almost divine in a gentle nature. As it was, Ruby neither saw nor felt the danger. To her the boy had no more soul than a wild hawk lured from the sky.

CHAPTER LVI.

RUBY GRAY BECOMES GENEROUS.

RUBY GRAY had seasons in which she studied hard, and was indefatigable in acquirement of such accomplishments as promised to enhance her personal influence. She possessed a sweet, rich voice, and had all at once taken to cultivating it, for Moreton was passionately fond of music, and for his sake she was ready to take up her long-neglected practice. The Italian master to whom she went for instruction had spent the previous summer on the Long Island shore, just across the bay from Mr. Van Lorn's house; and she had taken half a dozen desultory lessons from him during that period.

Ruby sought this man again when she returned to the city, and as she spoke his native tongue, it often chanced that the two fell into a gossiping conversation after the lesson was over. One day, the Italian, while speaking of his residence in the country, mentioned a young girl whom he had come across accidentally as she was singing under an apple-tree, thinking herself quite alone.

"Oh! her voice was heavenly," he exclaimed, clasping his white hands like a pleased child. "I gave her one, two, three lessons, and would have made something superb of her, but there was no time. If she could only come here and practise, what a prima donna I would give to the Opera! She was pretty too, that is, unique, fresh as a rose, with the free movements of a bird. Oh! it is a great pity! a great pity!"

Ruby Gray understood the thing at once, and being naturally a generous woman where money was concerned, she enchanted the Italian by offering to help the girl forward,

and join him in developing this wonderful voice. She remembered her compact with young Gray, and bethought herself of the debt of gratitude this act of generosity might lay him under. Besides, she had learned something of the true state of his mother's affairs, and saw in this a means of aiding her, and bringing two persons who loved each other into closer companionship. All this would bind her new ally more closely to her own interests. Besides, Ruby loved to perform generous acts with her money, and was pleased with the idea of patronizing this young country-girl, whom she had always liked.

From her music-master, Ruby drove to the residence of her mother-in-law, whom she found in a state of comparative comfort, and happier than she had been for months; for since his return to the city, her son had been singularly attentive to her. In fact, he had almost returned to her residence as his home, and had busied himself in rescuing various fragments of her property from persons who had taken advantage of her helplessness and unjustly possessed themselves of it.

This interest in her affairs and the steady kindness of her son awoke this gentle, burdened woman out of her deep unhappiness, and made a new creature of her. She began to have hope for the young man, and to think of him with the old trusting affection; and all this was the wine of life to her.

I do not think she ever allowed herself to remember the time of her great distress. The poor soul was so happy in the society of her child, so grateful for this tardy affection, that the old desolation passed away like a mist, and the home which had been so dreary in her loneliness, brightened into a paradise when he came to share it with her.

One thing was certain regarding this young man. The feelings that had conquered him while the free, bright air of the country seemed winnowing the evil from his heart,

brought back many of the boyish affections which had made him so lovable as a child. In many, many things he was, in fact, a better man.

A better man? Even at this moment, when all the exquisite motherhood of that woman awoke with fresh vigor, and clung to him like wild vines around a young forest-tree, all that was good in this man awoke to fresh, healthy vigor. The one evil purpose in his heart, which threatened to poison all its struggling impulses of goodness, was gradually dying out. Still Gray's compact with the young widow, his sister-in-law, was in full force.

Would he keep this compact? Which would prevail in the end? The dark angel, or that which stood by his mother with its white wings folded, waiting patiently.

Ruby Gray discovered something of this as she entered her mother-in-law's little sitting-room. She knew that the influence of a woman so good, so patient, and so wise, might be opposed to her power over the young man; but just then it was her caprice to be generous, and her interest too; for up to this period, Gray had received nothing from her, and she was anxious to lay him under some obligation.

"I have come," said Ruby, seating herself at Mrs. Gray's feet in her old caressing fashion, "to ask such a great favor of you, dear mamma—such a very great favor!" The old lady's soft, brown eyes were bent lovingly on that beautiful face.

"What is it?" she said with a faint blush. "I have so little power to oblige any one now, but you know how glad I should be."

"I have got a young friend, Mamma Gray, such a nice girl, but dreadfully poor—pretty, though—and you always liked pretty people."

"Or I should not have liked you, my dainty Ruby," said the old lady, putting back a wave of stray hair from the white temple nearest her. "But go on; I am listening."

"Well, I want this girl to take ever so many singing lessons of my own master; and I want some good, kind lady, like my darling old mamma, to let her come and live in this very house, as a sort of daughter, companion, or anything you may choose to call her."

"That is, you want me to take her?"

"Yes, that is just it. Not as a servant, remember, nor in charity. The girl is my friend, and must live at my expense. I only want you to protect her and give her a comfortable home, while she is to think herself engaged as your companion. Will you oblige me in this, dear mamma?"

"I would do anything to oblige you, Ruby, but—"

"Oh! I understand," cried the widow; "you are thinking of Charles; but he will make no objections—leave me to manage him. Only think how cruel it would be for any of us to put a straw in the way, when this dear Italian is willing to teach her for nothing."

"I am sure, Ruby, I have no idea of putting a straw in her way: far from it; and if you think I can be of so much use, let the girl come."

"Now I do think you are the sweetest old darling that ever lived," cried Ruby, starting to her feet, all in a glow of triumph. "Now say nothing about this to any one. I will prepare Charles, and tell him how kind you have been in taking her at my solicitation. When may she come?"

"I am ready to receive her at any time," answered Mrs. Gray, really delighted at the idea of companionship which this proposal held out to her.

"Then it is settled, and I will send to her at once. You will find her so fresh, so honest, and charming, her very face will brighten the whole house."

Mrs. Gray smiled, and such was her honest trust in human nature that she really believed that the beautiful Ruby had been actuated by a generous desire to aid her and brighten her lonely life, rather than anything else.

"Now, good-by," said the widow, lavishing half a dozen kisses on the delicate old face turned upon her so lovingly. "I shall never forget this kindness, never!"

Away Ruby went after this, smiling, and quite satisfied that she had been doing a most generous act, which, in truth, she had, leaving the motive out of the question; and she told Charles Gray, in her light, careless fashion, that his mother seemed so lonely when she had visited her the other morning, that she had determined to find some young companion for her, and hoped he would not object.

Charles Gray was pleased to have this proof of Ruby's interest in his mother, and thought the idea a good one; but took so little interest in the matter that he forgot to ask about the girl particularly; at which Ruby was delighted, for she intended to take him by surprise, and thus build a claim for gratitude which he could not evade.

So Ruby Gray wrote a letter to Billy Clark, telling him how much his presence was needed in the city. Zua Wheaton, she said, was constantly in need of him, and spoke of him so kindly; besides, she really thought his presence in the family might frustrate Mr. Moreton's intentions regarding Miss Zua. There was nothing, she added, like being on the ground: Clark ought to know that, without a suggestion from her. Another reason she had for writing. It was a sin and a shame for a bright, handsome girl, like his sister, to be buried alive in that old country-house. Ruby had thought of this a good deal, and, indeed, had taken some steps to find a pleasant home for Amanda in town. So Clark had better bring her, for a time at least, and try how she would like it. If the mother was likely to oppose it, perhaps Billy had better bring his sister away without asking her about it. It was sometimes better to evade than absolutely disobey. But Mr. Clark knew best—Ruby could always trust in his judgment; only, if there was much delay, all chances of driving Moreton from the field would become very doubtful, she was afraid.

This letter wound up with a positive request that Billy should burn it the moment it was read. Billy destroyed the letter honorably, after thrice reading it; and it was this which induced him to give up his languid attempts at gardening and accept the position Mr. Wheaton had offered him in the city. The result was, as we have seen, that the stern old washerwoman was abandoned to her toil and the loneliness of that old brown house by her only son, an act of cruelty of which no one concerned, except the poor old creature herself, was fully conscious.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE BROTHER AND SISTER.

THEY stood upon the wharf together, Amanda clinging to her brother's arm, amazed and terrified by all the rush and confusion crowding closely around them. For the first time in her life Amanda saw stone pavements and granite walks, in place of the violet banks and dandelion paths through which her feet had wandered from childhood.

Billy had been to the city before, perhaps two or three times; and these advantages gave him a sort of patronage over his sister that impressed him with a sense of profound importance.

"Now, Mandy, dear," he said, as they left the little steamboat, arm in arm, "don't you think of having a will of your own, as you used to at home. There, it was well enough, because neighbors were scarce, and your social position was what I may call independent. If you chose to run barefooted, whose business was it? If you wore a sun-bonnet every week-day, that was our lookout. But here, Mandy, in this great city, people must be particular, espe-

cially about running across the streets in the face and eyes of two rampaging omnibus-horses, as you are doing now. If it hadn't been for me you'd a-been trod under their feet this very minute; so you see how necessary a natural protector is, Mandy, and I hope you are grateful for it."

"Yes, brother," said the breathless and half-frightened girl, stopping to assure herself that she was safe, after that desperate run across the path of a heavy omnibus, "I'm so grateful that you are with me; these rows on rows of houses and stone roads are enough to frighten one. See how I am trembling!"

"But there's no use in that," said Billy; "ain't I here to protect you? Give me your basket, and come along."

"But how shall we find the way, brother?"

"Once again, ain't I here to show you how to walk these stone roads, and where to go? Just you keep pace with me. No, don't take my arm, Mandy; they'll never believe we are brother and sister if you do, but take us for an engaged couple—that's the way things are understood here in York. Now, tell me, shall we go to the hotel where Mr. Wheaton is, first?"

"No, brother. Do help me in this: I don't want Mr. Wheaton, nor Miss Zua, to know I'm here at all. They would not like what we've made up our minds to do; and I want to work out my path all alone."

"Mandy, promise me one thing."

"Almost anything in the world, William."

"If you won't go to Mr. Wheaton's, just keep away from that young Gray fellow. I don't like him."

"Oh, brother, how cruel!"

"Not a bit of it, Mandy; but I am your brother, and it's my bounden duty to keep you out of the way of harm. This York is a wicked place, dear; an awful wicked—"

"Oh, Billy! what is it that you are afraid of? I don't see anything that seems so very wrong. The roads look

rather muddy, and people crowd a good deal; and—and—yes, I admit there are a good many queer-looking children about the doors; but as for real wickedness—"

"Hush, Mandy! What can any girl brought up in the country know about it? Come along, and depend on me; it is n't every girl that comes to York that has such a fellow to rely on, I can tell you. Now, as for going to a place, Mandy, I don't mean to hear of it. Our father's daughter ought to feel above that, no matter what a fellow like me is led to do."

"But I must, brother! How am I to live without money, away from home?"

Poor girl, with all her brave spirits, the remembrance of her home, with its framework of clover-fields, groves, and sloping meadows, brought tears into her eyes.

"Poor mother!" she said. "I wonder what she is doing? I have almost a mind to go back."

"No, Mandy, no! It would all be to do over again; and I have n't found running away, once, so jolly as it might be. You've put your hand to the plough, so let it delve deep and turn up the soil into the sunshine. Mandy, I really think you are a remarkable girl."

"What! me, Billy?"

"Yes, you. It's always seemed to me that there is the making of something better than a lady in you."

"Oh, William!"

"Yes, Mandy, I'm in earnest. There is—well, I can't tell what it is; but at any rate, you are as pretty as a pink and bright as dew—that fellow Moreton said as much as that, one day. You've got a voice like a nightingale. He said that, too."

Amanda blushed like a rose, and Billy felt her hand cling still more lovingly to his arm.

"Yes, I've made up my mind, dear. No high-flown lady shall have it to say that Mandy Clark has waited on her."

I'm not up to doing great things, like some fellows; and there is n't much left of me since *she* took to *him*; but I've got hands to work, and you shan't — that's the long and the short of it."

"Oh, brother! how good you are!"

"No, I ain't; she's taken all the goodness out of me. I'm growing meaner and meaner every day."

"William Clark, there is n't a mean streak about you, not one," cried Amanda, with grateful enthusiasm.

"Never mind about that, dear. I won't be mean to you; and as for her, she would n't care if I took the heart out of my bosom and stamped it under my own feet."

"Never mind her, dear. When I see how she has broken up all your happiness, I almost hate her."

"Hate her? Don't! It hurts my feelings to hear you say so."

"Well, then, I won't. Only don't let her prey on you so."

"Ask the clover-tops not to let the bees drain the honey-dew from their hearts, or spring-water not to run down the slope of a hill. But don't mind me, I'm of no account now. Don't you see that I haven't got strength enough to keep away from her. I've tried and tried, but it's of no use struggling. I'm going to be her father's servant again, perhaps to put a gold band about my hat. Do you understand the meanness of that — me, William Clark, a menial with a gold band, perhaps a cockade? To-morrow I may come to that, and all for love —"

"Oh, stop, stop!" cried Amanda; "don't you see?"

They were crossing a broader street now, and a carriage dashed by them, drawn by two black horses. Amanda uttered a sudden cry, for she caught a glimpse of her lover sitting by the side of Ruby Gray. Theo, the little Indian, was in the servant's seat behind the carriage, and Gray was driving with a grace and dash which made the girl's heart leap.

"Oh! he did not see us," she said, following the carriage

with her eyes. "What will he say when he finds out that his sister-in-law has got me a place with that relation of hers. It is n't to be hard work, brother; only to be like company to this lady, who is the nicest creature."

"You can try it, Mandy, so long as it's no work that a lady cannot do; but if you find it hard or humbling, let me know. I've got five hundred dollars in the bank down here. One of my father's relations left some money for me when I was a little shaver, and mother has been a-adding to it till it comes to all that, which is mine, now that I am of age. I don't want money, nor any thing else. It's all yours, sister, every cent of it. I only hope there'll be enough to make a lady of you."

Amanda pulled down her green veil to hide the tears that swelled into her eyes.

"Oh, brother! I never can take your money," she said.

"Yes, dear, you can. It's of no use to me. If she had n't crushed me, I might have spent it in kid gloves, and neck-ties, and patent-leather boots. But now it's of no use trying to dress up; she don't look at me, and would n't, if I wore a smoking-cap embroidered with gold, and slippers to match. I think this is the number, Mandy. It was a rear house, and we were to look for an iron gate. Here it is, and a girl going in. I'll ask her."

The inquiry was satisfactory; and in a few minutes the brother and sister stood in the presence of old Mrs. Gray, who received Amanda with a gentle cordiality which won the young girl's heart at once.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE LOVERS' SURPRISE.

YOU find me very awkward, I'm afraid."
 "Awkward! my dear girl; you are only kind. It almost makes me feel as if I had a daughter."

All at once the smiles died out of Amanda's face, and her eyes filled with tears.

"My child, you are crying; what have I said to trouble you?" inquired Mrs. Gray, laying her delicate hand on the girl's shoulder, as she sat on an ottoman at her feet.

Now Amanda was sobbing piteously. She had folded both arms over her knees and dropped her face upon them.

"Oh! it isn't you; only the word daughter breaks my heart. I have been so cruel, so wicked! oh! ten thousand times worse than a heathen!"

"No, child, I will not believe that."

Amanda lifted up her face, all stained with tears, and quivering with grief.

"But you must believe it, lady. I ran away from my poor mother, and came here, without asking her a word about it."

"That was wrong," said the gentle old lady, with a look of trouble in her face.

"Oh! I feel it. I see her all the time, watching, watching for me—working all day long with no one to speak to—sitting down to the table all alone, with nothing on it but cold victuals, for she won't cook now that we are gone—and calling out 'Mandy, Mandy Clark,' in the dead of the night, as if she felt sure that I was in my grave—and I not to think of the cold wickedness of what I was doing till it was done. Oh, lady, you cannot tell how I hate myself!"

"But why did you come away without asking her consent?"

"I had n't the courage—I was a coward. We both thought it would be better to write her a good long letter; telling her how sorry we were, and how certain I was of doing something grand for us all, in the end."

"And did you write?"

"Not yet. It was so hard to begin. Besides, I know she will not believe me when I tell her that it was the music I came after, and that some day I will earn more in a single hour than she can get for working a whole year. Nobody could make her understand that singing is a thing that can be sold. She will believe that I am trying to deceive her, and left her all alone because I wanted to see him—I mean some one else; but it isn't so—indeed, indeed, it is n't so! I haven't set eyes on him but one minute, and then he was looking quite another way, since I came here."

"Who are you speaking of?" inquired the old lady, with an accent in her voice that Amanda had never heard before.

"Of—a gentleman, a real gentleman, who used to come to our house last year, and who—who—"

Here Amanda, overcome with a sudden rush of shame, covered her burning face with both hands, and cried out, "Oh! I can't, I can't!"

"Who told you that he loved you? Is that what you are so reluctant to say?"

"Yes, madam; he told me so."

"And did he say that he wished to marry you?"

Amanda dropped both hands from her face, and revealed her eyes full of sparkling moisture, and her cheeks all aglow with blushes, upon which the tears trembled like dew upon roses.

"Indeed he did, almost every time I met him on the shore."

"And you met this gentleman on the shore unknown to your mother?"

"Yes. I dare say it was wrong; but she took such a prejudice against him, and turned against me cruelly, wanting him to promise her never to speak to me again. It was not my fault, nor his."

"What was this gentleman's name?" inquired Mrs. Gray, getting more and more disturbed.

Amanda hesitated, looked down thoughtfully, and shook her head.

"He might not like it, if I told his name—most of all, to you. There is something very puzzling about it—so many people seem to have the name. It will all come out clear some day, but just now I'd rather not tell you any more about it."

Mrs. Gray had learned to love this strange girl during the short time in which she had been an inmate of her house, and, in her grave experience, was deeply troubled by what she heard.

"Look up," she said; "look in my face, child; I wish to read all that your eyes can tell me."

Amanda lifted her large, violet-blue eyes to the gentle face of her friend, promptly, innocently, as if wondering what meaning could lie there which any one might wish to read. Those soft, hazel eyes looked steadily into the blue for half a minute, then a smile broke into them. The gentle face drooped lovingly downward, and a soft kiss fell upon Amanda's forehead.

"You need not tell me yet," whispered the soft voice; "but should you see him again, perhaps it would be better."

"Oh, I will, I will," exclaimed Amanda, reaching up her white arms and winding them around the old lady; "for then I can tell him how good you are. But I may not see him. How can he find me, in this great place?"

That moment the outer door opened, and a light step was heard on the stairs.

"Who is it?" asked Amanda. "Jane is out: who can it

be?" Her breath came short; astonishment, hope, and fear went quivering through her frame like a summer breeze among roses. "Who, oh! who can it be?"

A door opened, and there, on the threshold, stood Charles Gray, riveted to the spot with astonishment, which, at first, flushed his face with scarlet, then left it pale and questioning.

Amanda stood motionless also. A sort of terror seized upon her, and, after taking one step forward, she paused and drew back, waiting breathlessly for him to speak.

"Mother, what is this? I do not understand."

"I did not know—I never dreamed—" faltered the poor girl, shrinking farther and farther from him. "Oh! madam, is—is this gentleman your son?"

"Yes, he is my son. But why do you both look so strange and turn so white?" said Mrs. Gray, almost severely. "Is this the person you were speaking of, Amanda Clark?"

"Yes," faltered the poor girl, and the quick tears swelled into her eyes, while she seemed ready to fall upon her knees and ask the old lady's forgiveness. "Yes; but I did not know—I did not know."

"But I knew, and I am not afraid to speak, dear girl," exclaimed Charles Gray, approaching the distressed young creature, and drawing her toward the old lady, with a brave, generous glow upon his handsome features. "Mother, I love this young girl, and mean, sooner or later, to make her my wife. Take her from my arms to yours, and bless her, as she deserves; for if there is any good in me, it springs out of the pure love I bear her."

Mrs. Gray hesitated a moment, for she was a proud woman, notwithstanding the poverty that had fallen upon her, and her refined nature shrank a little from the young creature who was looking at her so wistfully; but the next instant she held out her arms.

"Not yet," said Gray, holding Amanda back, with one

arm around her waist. "There must be no misunderstanding, mother, no bitter after-thought. This girl is the daughter of a washerwoman, self-taught, so far as she knows anything, and bred altogether out of any class you have ever known. She is generous, bright—in some things, almost grand. Can you accept her as your daughter—love her for the great good she has brought to your son?"

Perhaps it had been the fault of that gentle woman, but she had never refused anything to her son: was she likely to resist an appeal like this—the most manly one she had ever heard from his lips? No! a smile broke through the cloud which had settled on her face, and, with the sweetness of an angel, she went up to Amanda, and gave her the kiss she would have pressed upon a daughter's lips, had God granted her a daughter. Then she raised a little on tiptoe, with both hands on her son's shoulders, while he stooped his handsome head and kissed her gratefully, whispering these welcome words in her ear:

"Oh, mother! you have been so good to me!"

So, for once, Mrs. Gray was happy; and she sat down with these young people and joined in their hopeful talk, almost as unreasoning and visionary as youth itself; for she was a sweet, pure-hearted woman, and forgave wrong almost as soon as it fell upon her.

"What will I do?" said Gray, in answer to her inquiry; for she felt it incumbent on her age to suggest practical things. "What will I do? why, enter a law-office, and go on with my studies—bring home copying and do it at night—in fact, go to work as a man should, and make money, as my father did. I have lived on false pretences long enough. Let the estate go. I hope to get a little of it back for you, mother; but for myself, I must work for my living, and I will."

The dear old lady began to cry—such pleasant, soft tears as she had not shed for many a day; while Amanda bright-

ened under this new idea, and stood proudly by her lover's side, glorying in him.

After Charles went away, the two females sat down together, feeling very thankful and tender in their new relations.

"You love me for his sake," said Amanda, timidly, "and will not think it strange that—that I could not stay at home after he left the place?"

"I can never think it strange that any one should love the dear boy," answered Mrs. Gray, forgetting the property that his recklessness had swept out of her hand—forgetting the pangs of hunger, and the long, long nights of pain she had suffered, in her forgiving motherliness; "nor do I wonder that he should have found out how bright and good you are, having once seen you."

Then the old lady felt kisses drop like rose-leaves on her hand, while the white arms of the girl stole lovingly and clasped her in.

"But all the same, you will let me go on with what I was doing?" she pleaded.

The old lady started. Amanda's ambition took a new coloring in her eyes, now that she was to be her son's wife.

"Ah! you will not forbid me to help him? Think how hard I have worked, how much I have thought of it."

"But Charles, what will he think?"

"We will not ask him, dear lady; it shall be our little secret. When I am sure, and there is not a doubt left, he shall know all about it."

"Is that quite honest, Amanda?"

"Well, I don't know; but I want to surprise him. When he is hard at work copying here, some day, it will be glorious to come in with a great roll of money, and drop it down upon the papers, while I hold his head between my hands, that he may not see how ashamed I look, and whisper over his shoulder how glad I am that he need not work so hard."

The old lady shook her head, at which Amanda flushed eagerly, and went on:

"But you promised — indeed you did — to tell nobody. It was a bargain with Mrs. Ruby Gray: you cannot break that. I am almost sure she knew all about our loving each other, and wanted to make me more worthy of him by getting me under your sweet influence. Besides, it may be a very, very long time before he can earn much money; and if I have the power, it would be cruel to deprive me of the pleasure. So you will keep my secret, and help me to help him; I know you will, for to break your word would be dreadful."

"No, I cannot break my word, either to you or Ruby," said the old lady, still but half convinced, "nor have I a right to deprive you of any means by which you may hereafter be independent; but I do not like secrets, especially between persons who love each other."

"But you will like this when you see how it saves him from the hard drudgery he is bent upon. Besides, answer this, please: if God did not intend me to use His gifts, why bestow them on me?"

"I will be silent, Amanda. It may be wrong, but I promise."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE MUSIC LESSON.

MUSIC was sounding in that brownstone house from morning to night, for one of the greatest teachers in the country lived there, and he had many pupils. Sometimes the notes that came through the windows were crude and hesitating as the tones of little children when they begin to read; sometimes they came ringing out wildly, and with-

out method, as young birds try the wing, fluttering up and down in the air, unable to poise themselves, and failing to light where they wish. Again it came in a wild, shrill tumult of overstrained effort, striving for that sudden power which is only to be obtained by toil and continued effort, even aided by genius itself.

The music which had drawn that little crowd under those windows, one cold wintry night, was of a different class. The strangers who listened held their breath as the rich sounds came rolling over them with a power of harmony so sympathetic and sweet, that it held them entranced a full hour, though the evening was blustering, and snow lay on the ground.

The persons within the parlor knew nothing of the audience without; both were entranced by the exercise of the most fascinating power known to humanity, and thought of nothing else, till a muffled clapping of hands reached them through the curtained windows. The crowd were thus offering back in applause some of the pleasure that noble voice had given.

"It is for you," said the teacher, in his soft, broken English, which was so mingled with Italian that the pupil understood his gesture rather than speech. "You see yonder how all the world enchants itself. *Bravo! Bravissimo!*"

The Italian rubbed his two plump, white hands together in an ecstasy of delight, patted his pupil on the shoulder, and made himself jubilant over her, as a mother-bird flutters over the fledgling which has soared to its supreme satisfaction.

"Now, once more! once more! Charm them again, my nightingale! Your own voice has won its first audience, and, cold as it is, they listen yet."

The girl turned her radiant face upon him with a look of such eager delight as genius feels in the first exercise of its power. Her flexible mouth seemed reddened by the music

that had passed through it; light and happiness sparkled in her beautiful eyes. She pushed her hair back with both hands from her temples, and you could see all the delicate blue veins swelling and throbbing upon their snow, as if the music were yet thrilling all her pulses with its sweetness.

"Again and again," she said, seizing her teacher's hand between both hers, and kissing it eagerly, "oh! how I thank you! How I love you for all this!"

The master drew his fat hand from those eager lips, and passed it over his eyes, muttering some words of delight in his native Italian, and calling her pet names, such as he could never have found English for, so delicate and caressing were they.

"Now, once again!" he said, placing his round and rosy person on the piano-stool.

She stood beside him, bending over the music, radiant, graceful, and as ready to test her powers again as the nightingale is to sing when all the rose-thickets are in full bloom.

The crowd at the windows grew thicker and more numerous till it spread into the street; and when the young girl came forth, muffled in a cloak, with the master walking by her side, some curious persons pressed forward to see if her face was in harmony with that wonderful voice. But the veil she wore was thick, and they only saw that her person was tall, well-sized, and that she walked with the step of a goddess.

"That is right! That is well!" whispered the master, as his companion drew the folds of her veil close together. "Let them see the face when they hear the voice, not before."

The girl laughed a clear, happy laugh from under her veil, and pressed her hand caressingly on his arm, thus expressing her girlish thanks for his care.

"Oh! who could have thought this when you first heard me singing under the apple-trees, and asked me to bring

home your clothes myself? Did I not keep the secret well, even from my own mother? How good you have been!"

"No, no! I was weary, idle—dying to hear a voice worthy of my care. It was like having a bird settle on one's shoulder. Then I loved to draw out those notes, tone by tone; to see you drink so eagerly of the one great passion was a joy in itself."

"But you worked so hard, dear master—you gave up so much time—came down to the shore for health and strength, and gave everything to me!"

—And why not, my bird of birds? That dull old house by the water was dreary till you came to fill it with your beautiful young voice; and we, that is, my wife and I, were tired of that thing they call the country. To teach you was occupation—and now it will be a triumph."

"I hope so! How much I hope so!" cried the girl. "It is yours! This voice, that you praise, is all yours. If it brings anything, gold or fame, half is yours, my kind, kind master."

"Fame? Yes; I share and glory in the fame which my pupils win; as for gold, that comes after—we will not think of it."

"But I must—I do! It is of the gold I think most," cried the girl, with eager sincerity.

"Most! You think of the gold most? What sacrilege!" answered the master, in high indignation.

"But I have a wish—a reason, my master."

"So young! Such a voice! and think first of gold? I—I—that is, I blush with sorrow!"

"But, if my happiness, my life, depended on getting money—would you blame me then?"

"The happiness of an artist is in her art," was the master's answer; "she has no life but that."

The girl shook her veiled head in dissent, and a sigh rose to the lips that had been so lately given up to sweet sounds.

"Well," she said, laughing, "this gold is so far off that we need not quarrel about it yet. If wishes could bring it nearer — but they cannot — they cannot!"

"So young, and thirsting for money; it is mournful," said the master, in a low, sad voice.

They had reached an iron gate, which led to some rear building, and the master took his leave.

"To-morrow night! It will be again to-morrow night," she said.

"But you will practise?"

"Practise! Will I not? I have plenty of time."

The master turned away, and went home a little sadly. This talk about gold had annoyed him, and he was muttering discontentedly to himself all the way home.

CHAPTER LX.

COMING SUCCESS.

AMANDA CLARK stepped lightly over the brick pavement that led to the little house in the garden, and entered it with a latch-key.

Old Mrs. Gray was sitting in her cosy parlor, reading in quiet comfort: a good many articles of furniture had been added to the house since that dreary night when we first saw her there. Gray had begun to consider it as, in some respects, his home — and where he was, both luxuries and comforts were sure to follow. A piano stood by the little bay-window; his mother had been a brilliant musician in her time, and occasionally he liked to hear her play. Sometimes he touched the keys himself, but at no time had he the least suspicion that Amanda Clark spent half her time

at the instrument; and that his own mother kept that one secret from him.

"Oh, madam!" she cried, taking off her bonnet, and revealing a face which had grown wonderfully delicate and fair since her city residence, "we have gone through it gloriously! He says that even now I might venture."

The old lady looked up smiling.

"How bright you look, my good child. I thought something brilliant must come out of all that hard practice."

"And so much help," cried Amanda, stooping over the lady and kissing her. "What could I have done but for you?"

"Everything, child. Youth and genius masters all difficulties in the end."

"In the end, dear lady. But we cannot wait for that. You have saved me from so much toil. How can I ever pay you?"

"Foolish child!" answered the old lady, smiling kindly into that bright face. "Who has been most benefited, you or I? You have given to me the care and comfort I so needed, and dignified it by the affection of a friend. I am the person to be grateful, Amanda."

"No, you are not. I should not have done half so much but for him."

The old lady looked up a little surprised, for she was a little old-fashioned in her ideas of propriety. Amanda caught the glance, and answered it with a flood of blushes.

The old lady shrank within herself, and her delicate features grew white with suppressed feelings. Under all the deep, deep love that woman felt for her son, was a suspicion, forced down and buried out of sight, almost from her own soul, that he might be false, and unworthy the love of any good woman. She would not have put this bitter dread into words for the world; but there it lay, an aching sense, around which many apprehensions brooded, every one leav-

ing pain behind. When she saw that this fresh young girl, with all her vivid genius, had given a love worth ten thousand lives like his to her son, she only grew white, and was silent, waiting for the result with prayerful patience, and hoping meekly for the best. What could she have said? Can love, once given, be recalled by reason? As that good, good woman had rendered up all her worldly substance to redeem the waste of this son, she would have taken a new load of sorrow on that worn heart, could that have saved the young girl from the passion which threatened so much misery.

But it is ordained by God that every heart must bear its own burden, and that of Mrs. Gray became heavier and sadder from what she had learned, without lightening by a single shade the danger that threatened Amanda Clark, but which still admitted of a ray of hope.

Amanda saw her pallor, and that look of anxiety. She crept close to Mrs. Gray, dropped to her knees, and drew the sweet, old face down to hers.

"Don't look so sorrowful," she said. "It is for this I work, for this I practise. He will do his best, I am sure. I see, I know how it is: you are afraid — you doubt him, and tremble for me. But have faith in your son, and trust him. I can earn enough for us all. The good master is showing me the way. Wait a little, and you shall see."

The old lady kissed that blushing face, and reflected a little of its sunshine in her own.

"God help us women," she said, gently.

"God does help us," answered the girl, "when he gives us such — such — This feeling, I mean."

How could that kind heart warn or plead? And if it had, what warning or power of persuasion ever modified the sweet infatuation of a first love?

"Now," cried the girl, springing to her feet and tossing her hair back to hide the glowing confusion in her counte-

nance, "now, see how I have mastered this; but, wait a minute."

Amanda ran down the garden, and locked the iron gate, as she always did when bent on an hour of hard practice. She came back again, laughing.

"There, he is shut out safe enough!" she exclaimed, tossing the key from her. "Now for it!"

Directly all the neighborhood was startled by the bursts of music that rolled out upon the crisp air of those rear gardens. A canary-bird, which hung in Mrs. Gray parlor, began to flutter about in its cage, and kept up a tiny opposition, hours and hours after its head should have been under its wing. Mrs. Gray listened eagerly; her face lighted up; her delicate fingers began to quiver and beat time; her foot moved to the inspiration of music; and when Amanda came to her, panting like a bird overtaxed with its own rich burden of melodies, she kissed her with such passionate warmth as genius is sure to render to genius.

"Now let me take care of you. I have kept this up so long that it makes me ashamed," said the girl, looking at the clock. "Who would have thought it?"

With her young arms around the elder woman, Amanda went into the bedroom we last saw so drear and empty. There was no lack of comfort there now. A bright fire blazed in the grate; a soft carpet covered the floor; an easy-chair stood ready to receive the slender form when it needed rest without slumber. The old lady sat down, and bade Amanda leave her.

"But you are tired, and I have made you so," answered the girl, penitently. "When your head is on the pillow I will leave you."

"But I need no help, child; and if I did, the girl is still up."

"But she has no business here; and I will not let her take my place."

"Foolish child!" said the lady, patting the young head, which was bowed before her as Amanda knelt to unlace the gaiters from those slender feet; "but so kind—so kind!"

Thus the two parted, blessing each other as they said, "Good night."

CHAPTER LXI.

THE FIRST APPEARANCE.

PLACARDS, blazing with green and scarlet, at the doors of the Opera-house, at the street corners, and in every available place in the city, had for days proclaimed to the musical world that some great novelty would appear on the twelfth of that month. When the night came, the street in front of the Opera-house was literally blocked up by carriages, and swarming with persons so eager to obtain places that a great crowd rendered access, even to the closed doors, almost impossible.

Who was this living wonder who had set the musical world on fire? She was an American—that every one admitted; but from what class? Was she of the "upper ten thousand," or the lower ten million? Her teacher every one knew, for his reputation was more than metropolitan; but of the lady herself, nothing was certain; thus curiosity was at its height, and the musical world in a state of high fever.

The doors were flung open, and the eager crowd began to rush in, scattering bright faces and glowing colors over the vast body of the house, till the whole broad surface seemed to blossom with beauty, like a garden hedged in with terraces of tropical flowers.

Still the house filled more closely; superb dresses swept their way to the various boxes; feathers waved; bouquets sent forth their perfume; fans, glittering with gold or jewels, stirred the close air; graceful forms swayed to and fro in brilliant expectation. Soft, cooing murmurs stirred the air made voluptuous by so many perfumed garments. At last this magnificent picture was complete, and up from the orchestra came a first prelude to the feast of music that so many thirsted for.

"Traviata!" There was scarcely a dozen persons in the throng gathered there who had not heard this impassioned opera over and over again. But to-night they listened with new zest even to the overture, which seemed to breathe forth a glorious prophecy of something grand which was to follow.

The curtain rose with more than usual commotion; the performers of the opera came in excitedly, and performed their parts with singular animation. Every one present knew at what point the *débutante* would appear, and expectation grew more and intense as the time approached. All eyes were turned eagerly upon the stage; expectation held the breath; and lovely forms were everywhere leaning forward, eager and vigilant for a first sight.

Violetta came in, quickly, breathless, and full of timid rashness, like a fawn which some hunter had chased into an open glade. Her face was pale as snow, her eyes wild with affright, yet full of that latent fire which renders defeat impossible. She looked around, awed by the human faces swarming at her feet, and rising tier on tier above her, till the very dome seemed alive, and, for an instant, turned, as if about to escape.

The girl was beautiful in her panic and her paleness; every one saw that she was graceful, too; not the old, studied, stage grace, which palls so quickly; but her beauty was natural and fresh as the morning. With the free movement and

lithe poise of an Indian woman in her native forest, she crossed the stage, and turned her face, scarlet with loving blushes, upon the audience—then reached forth her arms like a child who pleads for help from its mother when it first begins to walk. That gesture appealed to the audience with the force of an electric shock. The silence was broken by a burst of applause, loud, generous, and reiterated. The very force and glory of this applause stunned the girl, and frightened back the notes that struggled in her throat. Again she looked wildly down the stage, as if meditating escape.

Then something like distrust settled on the audience, and whispers, that stung her like serpents, crept through the crowd.

"She will fail! She is stage-struck, poor thing!"

It seemed so; they could see her tremble in all her limbs, and the whiteness of her face was painful to look upon. Slowly the long lashes swept to her cheeks—her limbs were giving way. She had seen a face in the nearest box, white and agitated as her own—a mist swam before it. She was fainting. Then out of the stormy applause that sought so generously to sustain her, came one voice which brought back all her strength and power. The blood thrilled through her veins. The music was unchained by her heart, and left her parted lips in a gush of sweetness all the more delicious from the thrill of fear that trembled through it.

There is something in true feeling higher than art, and sweeter than music. It beamed in that young face. Up with the first notes came a flood of rosy color, suffusing the white neck, arms, and forehead, like sunset upon snow. She had lost the crowd; her face was turned to one box near the stage, and her heart leaped forth in her voice, as an uncaged bird takes wing.

Some of these people did not applaud, but drew back and stared at each other in astonishment. Was this Amanda

Clark? Had the faded calico given place to those waves of pink silk, adown which the shawl of frost-like lace, so carelessly flung over her superb head and shoulders, fell like cobwebs woven over a thicket of roses? How had that foot lifted itself from the broken, unlaced shoe, into that slipper of glossy satin? What miracle had brought her there, flooding that vast edifice with sounds that made men hold their breath with ecstasy as they listened?

Ruby Gray and Zua Wheaton were in front of this box, contrasting each other like figures in a picture. Preston Moreton, young Gray, and Mr. Wheaton sat a little in shadow; but the wonder and dawning delight in their faces gave life to the whole group.

Amanda had done her part bravely. Panting and flushed with success, her eyes turned full upon Gray as she passed the box, going off the stage. A bright smile greeted hers, and she swept from his sight trembling with joy, triumphant, thrilled with the glory of success. Once in her dressing-room, the girl fell upon her knees, and burst into a passion of happy, happy tears.

Again and again the girl came forth; she took up the scenes of passionate grief like one inspired. Never did love so warm and vital gush up from a human heart. She never thought of the person upon the stage, to whom all this was a mockery; but every note that left her red lips swelled out to *him*, the one man for whom that true heart would forever turn its love into music.

There was weeping all over the house when this wild country-girl sank down in the pathos of coming death, consumed by the poison which had been strong enough for sacrifice, but not for life. The sad cries of a broken heart filled the house with their plaintive mournfulness. Her eyes, full of piteous anguish, turned in hopeless pleading upon a thousand people, who looked down upon her through their tears, impressed by the reality of her grief.

It was real. No art ever touched a human soul as that scene stirred the multitude. Genius turns imagination into truth; and that pale, fainting girl arose from her couch with absolute pain in her chest, overcome with a sensation of exhausting sorrow.

The astonished audience called her before the curtain over and over again; but nothing could give back the vitality she had lost. Flowers were scattered in abundance at her feet; but she had no will to gather them up, or bear them from the stage. Amid all that joyous clamor, with blossoms raining over her like stars, she longed to reach out her arms to him and cry out that she was not dead, only coming out from a passionate outburst of the love which was all his, though she was longing for rest.

As she stood there, drooping and faint, a red rose came flashing out from the box over which her lover leaned: it fell upon the shroud-like whiteness of her dress, trembled there a moment, and rolled back among the mass of blossoms carpeting the stage around her.

A faint cry broke from those pale lips as it fell. The young actress stooped down, rescued it from the rest, and pressed it to her bosom. Out from the same box Ruby Gray tossed a bracelet, unclasped from her own white arm; but it fell among the flowers unheeded. Amanda had no care for aught but that one red rose.

CHAPTER LXII.

AFTER THE OPERA.

DEAR lady, have I done well?"

This voice reached old Mrs. Gray where she sat behind the curtains of another box. Amanda came in, muffled in

a cloak, and, bending down like a little child, asked meekly if she had done well?

Old Mrs. Gray kissed her three or four times on the lips and on the forehead.

"Tell me! Tell me! was *he* pleased?" questioned the girl, winding both arms around her.

"Did he fling that rose?"

"Yes; I saw it leave his hand."

"Are you quite, quite sure? I thought afterward that it might have been her."

"No; Ruby threw the bracelet."

"Did she? I knew nothing of it," said Amanda, indifferently. "But my rose, my beautiful red rose has not lost a leaf." She caressed the blossom as it lay upon her bosom, and covered it with her curved hand tenderly, as she might have sheltered a bird, had one found shelter there. "Oh! if I could live forever!" she cried out, in a passion of tenderness. "It is his first gift—the very first."

The old woman smiled a little mournfully. She was a sensitive, loving creature, and entered into full sympathy with the ardent girl.

"When he was a little boy," she said, "he was bringing me flowers every day; but all that is over now."

"No, no! he has not forgotten how to be kind! He never will, I am sure! But, see, here comes brother William: how pale and troubled he looks! He has seen her with that man, and it breaks his heart. I do not wonder. She is cruel as death—I hate her!"

Out of the opera-house, now growing dark and empty, the old lady and Amanda made their way to the carriage that Billy Clark had left waiting for them. Billy, poor fellow—wounded to the soul by a sight of his adored sitting in all her exquisite beauty by the man he loathed with the unreasoning force of a nature given up to one passion, rendered almost powerful by sullen concentration—helped Mrs. Gray and his

sister into the carriage. Then he shut the door sullenly, notwithstanding their entreaties that he should follow them, and walked back to the hotel where Mr. Wheaton was staying, muttering to himself as he went. The success of his sister seemed to have made the poor fellow bitter and miserable.

"It has come too late," he kept muttering; "she loves that other chap, and he loves her. I'm nowhere, a drift of seaweed for them to wipe their feet upon; a worthless cabbage-plant, more than there's ground for. If I was to die, she would n't come to the funeral; no, not if they were to spend all that is left of my five hundred dollars in a rosewood coffin, with silver nails. She don't care how much it makes my heart ache to hear her calling out, 'Billy Clark! Billy Clark!' in that sweet voice of hers, 'get me a glass of water,' or, 'order up the horses!' or something like that; while he sits by looking at her with them eyes. Oh! if I could smack my fist into 'em, it would do me good."

Billy ground his small teeth, and doubled up his fists viciously, as he gave way to these bitter thoughts, brought out with fresh force by the triumphs of his sister.

"Now she can see that there's something in us above taking in washing," he thought. "That's genius, I think. How splendid she looked! How she cut them all down to nothing with her voice, and her magnificent genius! That's what love can do, when it's got anything to feed on. Only give me a chance, and I could sing, too, and play tragedy, and cry, and — and make money to keep her on, like the lady she is. But with that eternal fellow always between her and me, the genius that I feel burning here counts for nothing. Dear me! there they go, a whole carriage-load, into Delmonico's, to have a champagne jubilee because of Mandy; but I'm left out in the cold — in the cold! It's enough to make a man wicked as Jehoshaphat!"

True enough! the party which had occupied that box upon the stage dashed by him on their way to a late supper.

The mud from their carriage-wheels bespattered poor Clark, and the coachman brought up his whip within an inch of his face. It was an accidental flourish of the lash, but Billy felt it an insult, for it was Preston Moreton's carriage; and leaning from the window he saw Zua Wheaton looking out as if she enjoyed it.

Billy ground out a vicious oath between his teeth, and turned a corner sharply, hiding his distress in the darkness of a cross street.

Meantime Amanda reached home, and entered the house she had left so full of doubt, in a tumult of delight. Would he be there to meet her? What would his first words convey, anger or approval? By this act of her genius had she won him, or lost him forever? Until these questions were answered her heart would find no rest — that glorious triumph could give her no real pleasure.

There was a light in the parlors, and behind the thin curtains she saw a shadow moving.

"He is there — he is there!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "Oh! what can I do if he is angry with me?"

She left Mrs. Gray behind, opened the parlor door, and stole in timidly as a little child.

Young Gray was walking up and down the room. He turned as she came in, and she saw sadness in his eyes, a tremor of feeling about his mouth. Her heart sank back heavily at this, she clasped her hands, and going close to him, said with tender humility:

"Forgive me! I did it for the best."

He turned, threw both arms around her, and covered her face with kisses.

"Forgive you? Forgive you, child — what for? That you are grander, more honorable, more earnest than I ever can be? I, who hesitated and counselled with this miserable pride — who wanting you, loved you, and yet had neither the courage nor the honor to work for you as man should

work for the woman he loves? Forgive me, girl; and you also, my mother, that I have permitted this young creature to shame my manhood so."

"He is not angry. See how your son forgives!" cried Amanda, appealing to the mother. Now her eyes grew radiant, and throwing her white arms upon the table, she buried her face upon them and burst into tears, kneeling as if in prayer: the girl was so thankful for this consecration of genius that pure happiness overpowered her. At last she looked up:

"My mother, my own, own mother, oh! if she were here now!"

Gray turned to the old lady, so delicate and gentle, who stood a little way off, touched to the soul, but silent in her sympathy.

"She is speaking of the washer-woman," he said, "who will some day be my mother. The person I have had thoughts to be ashamed of—thoughts that this noble girl could never comprehend. But, thank God, they are gone, gone forever and ever! God has spared me the sin for which I could never forgive myself, the sin of attempting to attain this good girl by unworthy means."

Amanda did not hear him, she was too busy with her own happiness for any comprehension of his words; but the mother understood everything, and, for the first time in years, with unreserved trust believed in her son. The mother crept into her son's arms, and he bent his cheek caressingly to hers: the barriers of doubt and apprehension were broken down between them. She knew that he was in earnest, and blessed him in her heart and with her lips.

Amanda looked up, and, seeing the mother and son together, came toward them.

"We shall have everything now," she said; "singers earn so much money. The manager says it all depends on myself; and I will study harder than ever, now that I am sure."

Mrs. Gray looked at her admiringly; and no marvel, for she was wonderfully beautiful just then. The radiance of a noble purpose lighted up her face like fire in the heart of a pearl.

"Ruby Gray is rich," she said; "but her money shall never come among us."

Gray started, and looked at the bright-faced girl with a keen sense of shame. Did she know—did she guess at the dishonorable compact which had bound him to the widow, and which he was even then resolving to break from at any cost? He had not lived in the pure atmosphere of those good women for months without loathing the position in which he had placed himself.

Amanda saw the shadows coming over his face, and felt that she had wounded him.

"I only meant that there will be no need of her while I can earn so much," she said, humbly.

"And no need of either while I have any manhood left," said Gray, firmly. "I have kept my word, mother, and am beginning to fight my own way up, as my father did. Thank God, I have youth, strength, a settled purpose, and two of the best women that ever shared man's hopes, to make my path bright."

"But I—I can help so much, you know!" said Amanda, beginning to look anxious.

He stooped down and kissed her.

"Not while I can think and work. It is a man's business to support his wife."

Mrs. Gray met the blank, white face which Amanda turned upon her with a gentle smile. She had found much time for thought in the solitude of her recent life; and in an earlier period had attained just ideas of those relations which constitute society, both as they exist and should be.

"Let us think of this hereafter," she said. "It is undoubtedly the husband's duty to love, support, and protect

his wife; but she also has her duties, and the first is to improve the talent and perfect the powers which God has given her."

Amanda sprang from her seat, threw her arms around the old lady, and exclaimed, "Thank you! Thank you!"

The girl was deeply in love with young Gray. She would have coined her life into gold for him to lavish, had that been possible; but she had tasted the first sweet joy of a cultivated talent also, and felt how great a power lay in her own exertion. To cast all that aside seemed like cutting off her right hand—she could not think of it without a panic. Now that her fear of his displeasure had passed, she began to appreciate the victory her talent had won, at its full value. She knew that there was a power in it which would make her the medium of great benefits to the man she loved—benefits more noble than any inherited wealth could ever confer. For the first time in her life she felt on an equality with him, and gloried in her position.

Gray did not answer his mother at first, but stood looking at the two women thoughtfully, as if he had never comprehended how lovely a thing was true, bright womanhood. A change had been going on in this young man since the first day that he met Amanda Clark weaving rushes and gathering violets in that meadow. True, he had thought many evil thoughts, and had made that one dishonest compact; but these things grew weaker in him day by day, and the underlying good rose uppermost, slowly and surely, till he became capable of great resolves, and in time might carry them out right manfully.

That night he left the two women to their rest, and gave himself up to such thoughts as had seldom visited him before.

CHAPTER LXIII.

RUBY GRAY IS NOT TO BE TAKEN OFF HER GUARD.

EARLY the next morning, Gray visited Ruby's pretty sitting-room in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where he found her all gayety and excitement. Amanda Clark's success had been a triumph to her. Had she not found the girl out in that retired nook of the country, and in many ways prepared her for the *éclat* of that night? There was not a note in that rich voice in which she did not seem to hold proprietorship. Over and over again she gave the history of this little romance to her friends; and that morning half the leading journals of the city informed the fashionable world that the young person who had made that splendid *début* last evening, was a *protégée* of that beautiful young widow, Mrs. Ruby Gray.

When Charles came in, she started up in a flutter of delight.

"I give you joy," she cried, flitting about him like a canary-bird. "What a voice! What wild grace! Why, Charles, she is lovely! I could not believe my eyes. Did you not once have a caprice for her—something wild about marrying, I remember? If it hasn't gone off, this success might make it possible."

"That is what I came to see you about, Ruby. I do intend to marry this girl."

"That is honorable, magnanimous—"

"Far from it. I was very dishonorable to wait for her till her own energies could so shame mine. I think it was love of her that made me enter into that vil—. No, I will not say that, Ruby, for you suggested it; but the contract you and I so rashly made about young Moreton. Thank heaven! I have not gone so far in it that retreat is impossible."

"What! What can you mean?" cried the widow, turning scarlet. "Surely, surely you are a man of honor."

"Yes, Ruby; and therefore will have nothing to do with this fraud. I have done wild, rash, cruel things in my life; but now that I know what love is, nothing shall make me sin against that. I tell you, Ruby, Moreton loves Zua Wheaton, and she loves him. Leave them alone. No good ever will come out of a plot like ours."

Ruby looked in his face long enough to be sure that he was in earnest. One quick sneer crossed her beautiful mouth, then a mellow laugh cut into the young man's earnest speech like a bird-song.

"Why, Charles, what on earth are you talking about?" she said. "What sinful idea is it that troubles you? Surely not the little scene we had in my pony-carriage when you lashed poor Theo? Why, the whole thing had escaped my memory. Did I feel hurt about that dusky-browed girl with the peachy cheeks? Very likely—the whole thing was provoking enough; but we are the best possible friends now. Did n't you observe that, last night?"

Gray looked at the woman in blank amazement.

"Are you in earnest, Ruby?"

"When was I ever in earnest?" she answered, with another sweet laugh. "Certainly not in the pony-carriage that day. Why, Charles, there isn't the least bit of malice or consistency in me."

"Then you never really wished to marry Preston Moreton?"

"Did I? Let me think," she answered, putting one white finger to her lip, and pretending to reflect. "No, never, in real, real earnest. He had been my adorer so long that I rather missed his flattery, I fancy. As for dark-skinned girls, they always were my detestation. No one was ever more generous in giving up beaux to blue eyes and golden hair; but these dusky women give themselves such airs!

No, I can say honestly that he is not the person to tempt me out of this delightful independence. She can have him and welcome."

"I think she will have him," said Gray, carelessly; for the supreme duplicity of the woman deceived him thoroughly.

"Yes, I dare say; everything looks like it," was her light reply. But she felt herself growing pale, and shook down the drapery of a window-curtain, that the red reflection might fall upon her face. "So you really thought we had some compact, and that I wanted to marry? I wonder you took it so pleasantly. Why, man alive, it would be cutting both you and your mother out of the property. Have you forgotten that it falls to you, in equal parts, if I leave no children?"

Gray looked on her bright, young face, and smiled frankly.

"I do not think there is much chance that we shall ever benefit by anything you may or may not do in that line, Ruby."

"Who knows? Well, you will admit that I have managed rather adroitly to force some luxuries on my good mother-in-law? I wonder you did not understand the motive."

"Ruby, this was — Well, I have no right to find fault with your generosity; but every dollar shall be repaid."

"But how, good brother?"

"Ruby, believe me or not, I am going to work in earnest now."

"You?" The word was half lost in a burst of mellow laughter; and she pointed her slender finger at him, like a mischievous child.

"You will see," was his answer.

"What, now! when you have made up your mind to marry this girl, who has a fortune in her throat?"

"Without that, I should have done as I say."

"Well, well! I am the last person on earth to check an honorable resolution: but let us go back to this nightingale. Was anything ever so wonderful? That queer, old washer-woman must be struck dumb with astonishment."

Gray winced a little at this covert malice. It required a good deal of moral courage to think of allying himself with Mrs. Clark.

That moment a card was brought in, and Ruby saw her visitor depart with more satisfaction than she cared to express. The moment he was gone, she flung the card on the table with a passionate gesture.

"Unstable as water!" she cried. "I was a fool to expect faith in him; the man who loves another woman is never sure."

She rang the bell: Theo came in.

"I told the gentleman that you had gone out, lady," he said, having obeyed a scarcely perceptible signal when she took the card.

"That is right, Theo; I can receive no one this morning." She motioned the boy to withdraw, and flinging herself into a chair, burst into a passion of tears. "Of all others in the world, to think that he should fail me—and because he is growing good!" she said. "I think the whole world is turning against me."

That moment a light knock was heard at the door, the latch was turned, and Mr. Wheaton came in, smiling and in high good-humor.

"I am sure the 'not at home' could never have been intended for me. That Indian imp insisted that you had gone to the Park; but I saw young Gray when he went out, and I knew better, for he told me that you had been at home all the morning. But you look dispirited; what is it, my rose of roses—anything that the most devoted of your slaves can remedy?"

"I am not dispirited—far from it; and there is nothing to remedy," said Ruby, biting her lips with vexation, which she strove to conceal by looking out of the window.

"I am glad to hear this; for I am anxious that you should be in a splendid humor this morning. I have come to plead against the cruelty of your past conduct, and to entreat more leniency in the future. Dear Ruby, the winter is half over, and, so far as I can learn, we are no nearer our wedding-day than we were last autumn."

"And you are getting impatient!" said Ruby, with a gleam of her old coquetry.

"I should be less than human if it were not so. Need I tell you that every day is a year that keeps you from me?"

"Still, you have not cared to take those steps that would give me pleasure."

"In what have I been remiss, Ruby? No attention has been withheld that you would permit me to give. Indeed, it has seemed to me, sometimes, that you do not always receive me with the old cordiality: is it that you shrink from our engagement as the time draws near, Ruby? If so, tell me promptly, and I will at least attempt to bear it like a man."

Oh! how Ruby Gray longed to tell the truth. She almost hated the man for pressing his suit upon her then; but her face was serious and calm when she turned it upon him.

"You have not quite kept faith with me, Mr. Wheaton. I had hoped for the society of your daughter, and you promised that she should not be considered as engaged, at least for a year."

"Nor is she."

"But she receives Mr. Moréton as her lover, rides out with him, accepts presents from him. I confess, Mr. Wheaton, all this seems a violation of our compact."

"But what do we care? these young people will form but a small portion of our happiness, Ruby."

"Still I cannot give up all female society. Besides, Zua

is young—she may do better; in short, I cannot name the day you ask until this whole thing is broken off. That man shall never be my son-in-law; I have good reason for saying it.”

Wheaton drew close to the beautiful woman as she said this.

“Tell me your reasons, Ruby—there should be no secrets between us—why do you object to Moreton as a son-in-law?”

“Because he loves me, and has told me so. Now say if it is fit that we should form one family.”

Wheaton stood, for a moment, petrified with amazement.

“You compelled me to say it,” protested Ruby. “I tried to keep the secret from you and every one.”

“You are right,” said Wheaton, gravely; “that man must never enter my family.”

CHAPTER LXIV.

EARLY IN THE MORNING.

MANDY! Mandy Clark!”

There was no answer; and the old washer-woman sat up in her bed half-dressed and looked around, wonderingly, for the daughter who had scarcely ever arisen first in all her life.

“Mandy! ho, Mandy! if you’re in Billy’s room, just give him a shake, and tell him it’s time to be stirring.” No answer: a dead stillness reigned in the house.

The old woman flung back the bedclothes, put a rusty black shawl over her shoulders, and walked across the floor, with her bare feet, to William’s room. It was empty, and her gray eyes fell upon the smooth, unused bed, with a pang of terror.

Where was William—where was her daughter? She turned a wild look back upon her own bed, and saw that Amanda’s pillow was white and smooth; no head had pressed it that night.

“Gone—gone—both gone!” she cried flinging up her arms with tragic vehemence. “Oh! God help me. My children have left me! I am all alone—all alone.”

The poor mother walked back to her bed and fell heavily upon it, moaning piteously, like a wild animal bereft of its young. She buried her face on Amanda’s pillow, and stifled the hard, dry sobs that shook her bosom. But the struggle was terrible; the rickety bedstead trembled and creaked under her anguish, in all its joints and cordage, giving out noises that seemed almost like moans.

“I have been cross to her; I haven’t done anything to make her happy. It’s my fault—oh! it’s all my fault. A better hearted girl never lived than my Mandy; but I’m a crabbed creature, and could n’t be sociable if I tried. But did I try? What did I do to make her love to be at home? What did she hear but the sound of the wash-board—rub, rub, rub, all day long? Sometimes I would n’t speak to her for a whole day together. No wonder she got lonesome. Now, she’s gone off and left me—me, her own mother! God forgive her; and oh, my God, take care of her! lead her not into temptation.”

Here Mrs. Clark lifted herself from the bed, and turned her old face, in all its sallow whiteness, to the window. A strange expression had come into it—a wild, sharp look of sudden anguish.

“Who has she gone with? Where has she gone? Has *that man* been in the neighborhood? Was it for this he came? Oh, if I only knew—if I only knew!”

With a slow, tottering step, as if afraid of what she might learn, the poor old creature went to a closet, where Amanda’s clothes were usually kept, and looked in. The pink calico

dress and a plain merino were gone, and with them a pretty bonnet, which Amanda had made out of some scraps of silks and laces that Ruby Gray had given her. A light blanket shawl, which the poor woman had found the means of purchasing for the girl who had left her, was also missing.

"She has gone!—gone in the night. Walked all the way to the steamboat landing. William has found it out, and started after her; but he will be too late, poor boy. He is n't well enough for a tramp like that. Besides, if she's set on going, there is n't the strength in him to stop her. But I am her mother. She must obey me. She dare n't look in my face and say no."

As she said this, the woman was tying on her bonnet and lacing up her boots, in a sort of breathless haste altogether at variance with her usual stern composure. In a few minutes, she came forth equipped for the road; and taking a foot-path through the locust-grove, soon came into the highway. The steamboat landing was nearly four miles distant, but the woman never thought of that. Her heart was full of wrathful grief, and the fire of a stern, impatient spirit was burning too hotly in it for any thought of the long walk.

Most of the way, Mrs. Clark passed along the winding outline of the shore; past pleasant villas and pretty cottages, embowered in trees all gorgeous and rich with ripe autumnal foliage. But she took no heed of all the rare beauty which glowed and trembled around her path. Her heart had room for but one feeling—her brain for but one thought. Who had taken her daughter away? Where had she gone?

At the steamboat landing she found everything still. The boat had left its wharf long ago, and a single man, who had taken charge of some baggage, was the only person to be seen. In all her excitement, Mrs. Clark controlled herself, and questioned this man with something like coolness.

"Yes," he said. A girl such as she described had gone

aboard for New York. Alone? Certainly not; there was a young person with her, who seemed very attentive, and was dressed quite in style. She was leaning on his arm all the while they stood on the wharf, and they kept close together, as loving as could be, till the boat got out of sight. Had any young man been down to the wharf inquiring about them? Not as he knew of; still it might be. All he knew was, that no one had inquired of him; but then the stages were about, and fifty people could have been there asking questions, and he not know it. Nothing wrong about the young lady, he hoped?

"No," Mrs. Clark said. "Nothing wrong; nothing in the world." She was very much obliged for his kindness, and sorry not to have met the young lady in time to go on with her; but to-morrow would do. At what time did the boat start?

The man told her; and she turned away with a wild, fierce light in her eyes, that might have terrified him had he looked under the pent-house of her huge, old-fashioned bonnet. Amanda had gone, and with *him*, the man she had warned from her presence; the city exquisite, whose silky voice and false words had been eloquent enough in their fraud to lure the daughter, who was dearer to her than life, out from the shelter of her love.

The old woman had already walked four miles; but she felt no sensation of weariness. Wounded love and keen indignation kept up her strength with wonderful force. She went straight forward along the roads, heeding nothing, and looking sternly before her, filled with a burning sense of shame, and a thirst for vengeance, which was keen and bitter in proportion to her wounded love.

Two boys, who were searching for clams in the muddy flats left bare by the receding tide, saw the woman as she passed down the road, and called after her saucily:

"I say, Mother Coalscuttle, want to buy some clams

when they're cotched?" cried one young rogue, giving his trousers an extra roll above the knees. "Mighty cold digging at this time of the year. Well, if you do n't want to buy, just lend us your bonnet to carry 'em home in. We'll give you a mess for the use on 't; consarned if we won't."

The urchin had taken his feet from the mud, and come out upon the road close by Mrs. Clark, where he stood holding a couple of dripping clams in his hands, while his eyes danced with impudent merriment.

"Come now, granny, are you ready for a trade? Our basket's full, and nothing to put the rest in."

"Did you speak to me, boy?" inquired the old woman, turning her eyes full upon the lad, who began to walk backward the moment he met them.

"No, no! 'scuse me. I only thought as like as not you'd like to buy a mess of first-rate clams; but, if you don't want 'em, it ain't no matter."

The old woman passed on, giving no further heed to the young scamp, who ran down to his companion with a scared face, and protested that the woman had run him through and through like a spear with them all-fired sharp eyes of her'n."

The other boy, who was busy with his feet in the mud, toeing out a clam that lay near the surface, gave out a cackling laugh as he unearthed the bivalve, balanced it on his toes an instant, and sent it with a jerk of the foot into the basket.

"Got your match when you tackled that old gal, I reckon," he said, plunging his right foot into the mud again. "Oh, my! how you backed down when she turned on you!"

"Backed down, did I? Not as you knows on. Only I was afeared of bursting out laughing in her face, that old bonnet loomed up so," cried the boy, turning crimson with shame that he had not been deemed sufficiently impertinent.

The other boy rested from his work long enough to place

the thumb of his right hand to the tip of his nose and set his four muddy fingers to twirling in the air, which was the only answer he gave.

"What do you mean by that?" cried the young bravo, firing up, and clenching his fist. "Jist speak it out, if you dare!"

"Oh, you git out!" answered the more industrious boy. "I don't want to quarrel nor nothing. Jist you come down to work now, and help fill up the basket. The tide will be coming in before long. Where's yer hoe?"

"Can't hist another clam till I've been round to South Neck with a letter I've got to carry to an old woman over there," was the answer to this reasonable request. "That old soger put me in mind of it—promised to have it there afore breakfast; so just grub away yourself. I'm a-going."

With this, the lad rolled down the legs of his trousers, and washed his hands in a little pool of water the tide had left in a hollow of the flats, making ready for the walk before him; while his companion bent to his work again, muttering:

"I wonder if there ever was such another shirk; ain't worth shucks any day."

This opinion made no impression on its object, who had reached the shore, and was searching in the cap he had left on a flat rock, for the letter, which had been carefully placed beneath the lining.

"All safe!" he exclaimed, tossing the cap on one side of his head, and turning into the road; "fifty times better than digging clams, if the old woman shells out handsomely, as that young fellow did. I won't ask her nothing, but just look into her face sort of innercent and wishful, as if I knew she'd forgot something, but didn't want to mention it. That won't be cheating—a fellow has a right to his own looks, anyhow."

Thus pondering over the best means for obtaining double

pay for his walk, the lad set forth upon his expedition. He stopped now and then to club down a handful of chestnuts from the clustering burrs that the frost had opened along the rugged boughs of some old forest-monarch; and occasionally went out of his way to climb for the frost-grapes that hung in long, slender bunches among the golden leaves of an ash or young elm. Thus the lad made his walk rather pleasant than otherwise, but protracted it till long after Mrs. Clark had reached her home.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE OLD CHEST IN THE GARRET.

MRS. CLARK walked home rapidly. The terrible idea that her daughter had abandoned her for the man whom she had feared so much and repulsed so persistently, had become a certainty, and the blow was terrible. In her way, the old washer-woman was proud as a duchess, and as affectionate as the most sensitive mother that ever lived. She remembered, with a pang of sharp resentment, the visits of that man to her house, the earnest protest she had made against them, and the joy with which she had heard of his leaving the country. She remembered how sad and lonely her daughter had been for a time, and how, in order to cheer the girl, she had gathered up all her little savings for the year, and purchased that pretty blue merino, and the many-tinted shawl, which could now only cover her child's disgrace.

Now and then a gleam of hope would cross these bitter thoughts. It was possible that Amanda had gone away to be married. That proud man, with his silky voice and waving mustache, might have been ashamed to marry the

girl where she was known to be a washer-woman's daughter, and intended yet to deal honorably with her. The thing was possible; but if it proved otherwise—if that man had lured the child from her own strong, loving arms, to cast her forth upon the world with a stained character and broken life, why then—

Mrs. Clark reached her home, and without taking off her outer garments, went up to the garret, where she found an old wooden chest, which held some moth-eaten garments, a few books, and other relics that had been dear to her husband in his lifetime. From among these she selected a pistol, which had been lying there untouched for years; rust had gathered about the lock, and eaten into the brightness of the barrel. She took the weapon in her hands, and examined it drearily, remembering how many years it had rested among those sacred relics, a harmless thing: now, what terrible work it might do before the wrongs of her child were avenged. In a tilt of the chest she found a set of bullet-moulds, old-fashioned and clumsy, but sufficient for her purpose. These she carried down stairs with the pistol.

With slow, stern deliberation, the old woman brought forth the requisite materials, and scoured away the rust from these implements of death. In doing this, her features expressed the iron resolution of a soldier preparing for battle; her lips were pressed together rigidly, her cheeks grew hot and red, with a steady growth of hate that fired her blood slowly, until the scar upon her forehead turned scarlet, and lay like a ridge of fire across it.

When the rust was all cleared away from her husband's pistol, the old woman, who was accustomed to handling tools, tightened the screws and fastened the lock with such rude implements as the house afforded, and laid the weapon of death down, ready for use. After this, she mounted a chair, took an iron ladle from the top shelf of a cupboard, and laid three pewter tea-spoons—half of her every-day

set—into it. She was about to place the ladle on the fire, when a consciousness struck her that none had been built that morning; nothing but a heap of gray ashes and half-burned brands lay in the fireplace. Never in her whole life had the woman been so forgetful before.

"No matter," she muttered. "I have time enough. The train does not go out till afternoon. I will reach there to-night—God help me—I will reach there to-night."

While she was half muttering, half thinking these stern resolves, the matches she had applied to a handful of shavings took fire, and the sticks of wood, arranged carefully for her purpose, began to blaze. On these she placed her ladle, and drawing a chair close to the hearth, held it by the long handle in grim patience, watching the spoons melt into a bright liquid mass, which glittered like quicksilver in the reflections of the fire.

When the metal was seething hot, Mrs. Clark rested the handle of her crucible on the andiron, pressed her bullet-mould firmly together, and poured the hot fluid into it. The hand which held the mould was firm as iron, nor was there a quiver in that which slanted the ladle down to its work so steadily that not a drop fell to the ashes. Mrs. Clark had eaten nothing that day; but she never thought of that. She was completely absorbed by those bright, round globes, which dropped one by one from the mould till her tea-spoons were turned to a handful of bullets. These lay in her lap, and she was transferring them into a small shot-bag, when some one knocked at the door. She started, looked around sharply, then turning to her work again, gathered the bullets in a handful from her lap, dropped them into the bag, and tied it up with singular deliberation.

Again there was a knock at the door. She arose, and, with the bag in her hand, opened it. A boy stood on the stone steps, with a letter in his hand; but he stepped back in dismay when he saw the woman.

"By golly, if it ain't old Coalscuttle herself!" he broke out, preparing to run away.

The stern features of the old woman relaxed the moment her eyes fell upon the letter.

"Stop, and give me that letter!" she cried out, reaching forth both hands.

The lad flung the letter to her feet, and backed off, regarding her from a safe distance.

The old woman did not heed him, but seized upon the letter. The hands which had been so firm while at their death-work, shook violently now, and her old face began to quiver out of its iron repose. She could not find strength to walk, but sank down upon the door-sill, and read her letter:

"DEAR AND MOST ESTIMABLE MOTHER: Do not be angry with Amanda. It is not her fault, but mine—all mine. I could not stay in the country, when my heart wandered off every minute to the city, where *she* is enjoying herself with *him*. As young lambs, not to speak of older sheep, will hanker after laurel, that poisons them with its sweetness, I cannot live without the poison of seeing her. I am going to be Mr. Wheaton's servant, to go her errands, and perhaps I may be called upon to black his boots; and if so, I can stand even that. If it will make her one grain happier to see me with a band on my hat, gold or silver, I am ready for the sacrifice. Yes, mother, I give up my agricultural pursuits for a menial office. Forgive me; do not blush for me. It is my destiny.

"As for Amanda, I could not leave her behind to pine, like a wormy rose, with green and reddish—I think that is the color—melancholy. She, like her unhappy brother, is a stricken deer, and goes forth with an arrow in her heart; but she goes with me, her only brother, whose broken soul swells with the thought that one of his father's children shall be made a lady of. That five hundred dollars shall finish her up, and you shall be proud of having a regular lady for your daughter. This is why she leaves the holy shelter of the maternal roof-tree. No human being knows about it but our two selves and Mrs. Ruby Gray. That

beautiful and lovely female has selected a nice, quiet, and rather ancient relative of her own, who will board our Amanda, and give her lessons in gentility. When she comes back to South Neck, you will thank the day that I acted a father's part by her. Do not blame us that we did not ask your consent. You know, my estimable parent, that occasionally—only occasionally—you are just a little self-willed, and the truth is, we thought it better to run away quietly, like 'the babes in the woods,' than quarrel with the kindest and best of mothers, and run away in the burst of the storm.

"I beg of you, dear mother, have no anxiety about Mr. C. G. He could no more have enticed our Amanda to leave her mother than a parsnip-bed could turn itself into a bank of violets. She is pure as ice, and chaste as snow: a magnificent creature is our Amanda, and this minute thinks more of her dear old marm than of all the C. G.'s in the world. She felt awfully about leaving you all alone, and cried like everything before we started; but I promised to write this letter before the steamboat started, and as you will get it about breakfast-time, the trouble won't be so very great. As for not forgiving us, why, it is n't in your nature to turn against both your offspring at once. Don't fret yourself one minute about Amanda. I am with her, and she is sure of an affectionate brother's protection. I may have a dark path to travel, but Amanda will come out all right. I hope you won't be very lonesome, dear mother, and that you won't work hard: washing, at your time of life, is heart-rending to your son, so don't do more of it than you can help, for his sake.

"I gave this to Amanda to read, but she's crying so it is of no use. Your affectionate son,

"WILLIAM CLARK."

The letter fluttered down into the old woman's lap, her arms sunk to her knees, and the gray head bowed itself slowly upon them. The boy, who was looking on, saw that she trembled from head to foot. He went toward her, somewhat relieved of the fear which had held him back till then.

"Well, marm, you've got your letter all right, and I suppose I ought to be getting back about this time."

The old woman lifted her face—it was quivering all over with pathetic tenderness. The large gray eyes were full of tears, the mouth tremulous with kisses it had pressed on the senseless paper as it lay in her lap.

"Did you ask me for anything?" she inquired. "I was thinking of other things, and forgot you."

"No, I did n't just ask for anything, 'zactly. Only, I brought the letter, you know."

"You brought it; oh, yes, God bless you for it!" she exclaimed, feasting her eyes once more on the paper.

"Mebby he will, for being told to, and mebbly he won't," muttered the lad, disconsolately. "Money is a little more certain—not that I ask for money—oh, no."

"Money—I forgot—of course you ought to have money, my good boy; I only wish I had enough to make you rich."

"You don't wish it no more than I does," answered the lad, drawing close to the door-step; "not for my sake—oh, no; but then you would be above-board yourself, and could afford to get a new bonnet."

The last words of this speech ended in a low giggle, which Mrs. Clark did not hear; for she was busy counting some five-cent pieces and pennies out of an old black teapot, which had served her for a bank many long years. "Thirty, thirty-five, forty—it is all I have got, little boy, every cent. I only wish it was five times as much," she said, coming forth with the money in her hand.

"Aint I a-robbing you?" questioned the young rogue, holding his hand out with seeming reluctance; "half'll do, and I wouldn't take that, only the letter seemed to chirk you up so."

The little wretch thrust the money deep down into his trousers pocket as he spoke, and held it there persistently as a banker closes his safe.

"I only wish it was twice as much," answered the old woman, with a smile so bright and beaming that the boy

could hardly believe her the same woman he had seen that morning on the beach.

"Well, then, if you think so, I may as well be off."

Away the lad went at a quick run, well pleased with his share of the morning's work.

Mrs. Clark went into her house almost singing, so great was the relief that had come to her. She took the pistol, the moulds, and the bag of bullets up into the garret, and laid them back into the old chest, which she closed reverently, exclaiming, "Thank God, I was not driven to that!"

Relief from a terrible anxiety for days and days, seemed like happiness to this bereaved woman; but as winter came on, she began to feel her loneliness with a heavy, dragging weight of oppression, that took all the spirit out of her life. Abandoned by her children, she had nothing on earth to work or live for but the shelter of that humble roof, and the food she scarcely deigned to cook for herself alone. If it had not been for the letters which came to her from time to time, that poor old woman, with all her force of character, would have prayed to die. The days she got along with, for hard work makes short hours; but the long, dull evenings, spent upon that gloomy hearth-stone in dead silence and utter loneliness, were hard to bear.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THEO TAKES TO CHEMISTRY AND PENMANSHIP.

THERE is a drug-store near the Fifth Avenue Hotel, to which Theo was in the habit of going for perfumery and such expensive cosmetics as his mistress was in the habit of using. The boy was a strange creature in many ways—quick as lightning, unscrupulous, passionate, cun-

ning. He had no idea of religion, nor any fixed principle of morality. If he worshipped anything, it was the beautiful woman who had been his benefactress, and was now almost his only friend. For her he studied; of her he thought continually. With her, he was happy; from her, all that was vicious in his crafty Indian nature came out in repulsive force.

One day, a careless expression, forgotten by Ruby as soon as uttered, made a deep impression on the boy. A few freckles had been left on her face after a picnic on which she had been greatly exposed to the sun, and in her impatience at seeing them, she exclaimed, "I think I could fall in love with any one who knew how to keep these provoking spots from my face."

The boy's eyes flashed at this. The words fired his imagination, and he that day went to a clerk with whom he had been very familiar in the drug-store, and confided to him a strong desire to learn the business.

"Only teach me what all these things mean," he said, pointing to the jars and bottles, "how they are put together, and what they are good for, and I'll give you every cent of money I've got in the world."

"And how much is that?" inquired the clerk, laughing at the idea.

"Three hundred dollars. Is that enough?"

"Yes, more than enough for anything I can teach you."

"Is it so hard, then? I only wish one could get it from books. I would study nights."

"Well, it is mostly to be obtained from books. I will lend you some."

"You will?" cried the Indian, and his eyes sparkled like diamonds. "Oh, how I shall study! But let me come here and see how it is done. Who knows but I may be a doctor some day?"

"Come, if you like; it will do no harm," said the clerk,

rather pleased with this scientific turn in a creature he had looked upon almost in the light of a lapdog. "I will teach you all I know."

"How to make perfumes that smell like violets—can you teach me that?" asked Theo.

"Oh, yes."

"Well, give me the book."

Theo took a volume home that opened new ideas to him, and in fact completely absorbed his whole mind. It treated on many things for which he cared nothing; but his keen mind seized upon the properties of opiates, intoxicating drugs, and, most tenaciously of all, on the history and nature of poisons. I do not think, at this time, the boy had any particular reason for this class of studies; but there is a fascination in them for a peculiar grade of minds, that seems irresistible.

Before Theo returned that book, he had become acquainted with the name of every poisonous substance, from the woorara of Brazil and the Calabria bean to a simple dose of laudanum or a drop of prussic acid. The avidity with which the sharp intellect of the boy seized upon these subjects was appalling. His mind seemed to thrive on them. He was not content with mere study, but became acquainted with the drugs in their various substances, learned their names by heart, and experimented on their different combinations with an acuteness of analysis that astonished and almost terrified his teacher.

The lad was reticent, and crafty as a serpent, even with the mistress whom he so blindly worshipped; but sometimes he would, in the midst of his studies, break out with a sort of fierce joy over the new power that had entered his life, and cry out aloud:

"Let any one attempt to harm her; let them try! No man shall ever make her shed a tear, and live after it!"

One day he had seen Ruby looking very sad, and knew,

by the flush about her eyes, that she had been weeping. Who was it that had wounded her so? Could he but be sure! The boy crept close to his mistress, sat down upon the rug of white fur on which her foot rested, and pressed his lips to the hand that fell by her side. She half rose from her reclining posture in a great silken easy-chair, and seeing who it was, fell back again, saying, wearily:

"Is it only you, Theo?"

"Only me," whispered the boy. "Only a poor little fellow, whom you have saved from starving, and who would rather die than see one tear in those beautiful, beautiful—"

"Hush, Theo. I do not like it. Of what use is my beauty, if it cannot bind one heart to me?"

He knew by her voice that she was crying, but strove to conceal it.

"The man whom it cannot bind, sweet lady, has no heart," he answered.

Ruby rose up in her chair, and put the flossy curls back from her temples.

"Theo, I wish you were a little older."

The boy's eyes flashed such passionate fire that she shrank away from him, as she would have done had a pet dog shown signs of madness.

"I am old enough to die for you—or make others die," he added, in an undertone.

"What were you saying, Theo?"

"Nothing; only that youth is sometimes stronger than age, and love is more powerful than both."

"I think *you* love me, Theo," sighed Ruby, laying her hand on the boy's head; for, just then, she felt so sadly desolate and low-spirited, that even his devotion was of value to her.

"If I only could tell you how much! Trust me, lady; only trust me with anything, and see if I do not prove it."

"Theo."

"I am here, lady—here at your feet, where no one but myself shall ever lie. Oh, promise me that, sweet mistress!"

Ruby laughed. The idea of any one else sitting at her feet like a spaniel, as Theo did, brought a gleam of merriment through her tears.

"Yes; I think I can always promise you this place. No one shall ever attempt to contest it with you."

"I will come here to die, when they have broken my heart," answered the boy. "No one will envy me that."

"I should think not," said Ruby, leaning back in the chair again.

The boy rose to his knees, and looked at her earnestly.

"You said 'Theo,' lady, as if you wanted something of him."

"Yes; perhaps I did," answered Ruby, closing her eyes languidly. "While I was gone, Theo, you stayed with Mr. Wheaton, and sometimes rode out with the young lady. Did she usually drive out alone?"

"Not always," answered the boy, keenly disappointed. "Sometimes her father went with her; once or twice, Mr. Moreton went."

"Theo."

"Well, lady?"

Ruby lifted one hand to her face, and shaded it from the boy's keen gaze.

"Does Mr. Moreton love—that is, does he seem to care much for Miss Zua now?"

"I think he does," answered the boy, with savage satisfaction.

Ruby uttered a little cry.

"Are you hurt, lady?" said Theo.

"Yes; I am hurt," answered the woman, pressing a hand to her heart.

"And this man—is it he who gives you the pain? Tell me so, and I am ready."

"Ready for what, Theo?" asked Ruby, faintly.

"To kill him, and die for you!" answered the boy.

These words had no meaning for her, except as they conveyed wild devotion; but they brought fresh tears to her eyes. Since she had found out how precious love was, there was something pleasant even in the homage of this little savage.

"I do not want you to kill any one for me, Theo," she said, smiling faintly through her tears; "but if you could—if you only could—" She hesitated, and turned her face away.

The boy arose to his feet, and stood looking at her keenly. He was ready to seize upon the next word, and, if it conveyed but a hint of what was in his own mind, act upon it.

"You have been reading strange books of late, Theo."

"Yes, lady, they are strange; but they teach so much, those strange books."

"What do they teach you, boy?"

"I wish you would let me try the things I learn there."

"Well, perhaps I will; for instance, can you take out the stains of ink from paper?"

"Can I? oh, that is nothing. I thought—I thought—" The boy faltered, and turned away gloomily, muttering: "Only ink-stains—only that!"

Ruby did not heed his discontent; she had fallen into a train of uneasy thoughts.

"Theo."

"Well, lady?"

"You write a good hand, I think, Theo, and use the pen often; but you could not change the style, I fancy."

"Could n't I?" exclaimed the boy, kindling up; "there is n't many things that I can't do."

"Well, for instance, can you imitate my writing?"

"Yes, lady."

"Try."

Ruby dipped a pen in the standish, and pushed a quire of note-paper across her writing-table, toward the boy. He took the pen, and began to write slowly, trying his hand.

"Write something, lady, that I may have a guide."

Ruby took up another pen, and wrote: "I trust you; be silent and faithful."

Theo took the paper, read it, and the slow color came into his swarthy face, while he bent over the paper before him. After a little time, he tore off the half sheet, turned away for an instant, and laid the two papers upon the table.

"Tell me which is yours, lady," he said.

Ruby took the papers, and examined them with great scrutiny. It was impossible to make out a difference; she could not distinguish her own writing from the other. She turned her eyes upon the eager face of the boy—they were flashing with pleasurable excitement.

"Theo, you are a wonderful boy. In my whole life I have never seen a creature to equal you. Where did you learn so much?"

"Lady, Theo wishes to be something more to his mistress than the page and pet people say he is. He would do for her what no other person can."

"Do what I want now, and you will be the best friend I ever had," said Ruby.

The Indian laughed till his white teeth glittered in the large mouth which seldom even smiled.

"I could be of service, if you would think of something grander than this," he said.

"But if this is enough to accomplish a great object," she answered, smiling, "will it not be as well?"

The boy did not answer, but stood gazing upon her so earnestly that the color came and went across her face in swift flashes.

"Is this all that I am wanted for?" he inquired.

"No; what is the substance with which you can take out ink? that is, can you get it at once?"

"In ten minutes, lady."

The boy took his cap, left the room, and came back again in a few minutes, with a small vial in his hand.

"What is it I am to take out?" he said, uncorking the vial, and dipping a camel's-hair brush into the liquid it contained.

Ruby Gray unlocked a little writing-desk that stood on the table, and took out a package of notes, around which a narrow blue ribbon was twisted.

She opened one, and pointing to the date, bade him change the year to that which was already passing.

"That is," said the boy, "you want the letter, written a year ago, to be dated this year: it is only blotting out a single figure, and making another."

"See if it can be done," said Ruby, turning down the top of the note, that he might read that alone.

Theo saw that the writing was that of a man, and his hand shook violently as he attempted to use the brush.

"You will not be able to do it," said Ruby, in a disappointed tone.

"I will," answered the boy, nerving himself. "Give me another, if there is more to be done."

The lady and her slave worked on in silence, until all the dates were altered. Then Ruby took up a pen, wrote some lines on a scrap of paper, and told the boy in a whisper to add them to one of the notes, which contained but a few hurried lines, and was signed with a single initial.

This was what the boy copied:

"You reproach me with unfaithfulness—you, who have been so persistently cold and cruel, seek to exculpate yourself by doubting me. You smile derisively when I tell you that I have never ceased to love you, hopeless as the passion

was and is. This entanglement with Wheaton's daughter sprang out of my despair, and a sentiment of gratitude which for the moment deceived me into a belief that it might become love. But since then I have seen you, and know that love for her or any other woman is impossible. The heart you have so wounded by your coldness, can never belong to another. Heaven knows how deeply and truly I loved you, cruel woman—how madly I love you yet, spite of these bonds. Do not say that this is dishonor, that my allegiance belongs to Zua Wheaton. Only give me one gleam of hope, and I will break through everything, and lay my heart, with all its mad worship, at your feet once more."

Theo's hand shook and his cheek burned as he wrote this. Had Ruby been less occupied with the evil thing she was doing, she might have seen that her Indian slave was trembling from head to foot with a passion of silent rage, but, true to the craft of his race, he gave no other sign.

"There is the signature," she said, unfolding one of the notes, and revealing the clearly cut letters which composed the name of Preston Moreton. The boy flung down his pen.

"How dare the man write this to my lady!" he exclaimed, fiercely. "I will not sign it."

"What! jealous, Theo? How silly!" said the widow, touching his hot cheek with the handle of her pen. "What a petulant child it is! No one wrote this but ourselves; can't you understand that it will only make mischief with the gentleman you dislike so?"

"But you have no dislike; you —"

"Hate him, and want to punish him, so that he will go away entirely. Now sign the note, Theo: if I ever use it, which is not likely, it will be only to annoy him."

"Are you sure?" questioned the boy.

"Come! come!" answered Ruby; "let us have no more of this. Sign it, or go away."

Theo signed the note. Ruby rewarded him with a pat on the head, and sat down to arrange the package of notes according to their dates.

"Dear me! how little trouble it was," she murmured, "and how complete! The boy is really worth his weight in gold."

Theo stood by the window clouded and sullen. He was by no means pleased with the work that he had done—was not even certain what it all meant; for the mistress had given him no information that she could possibly withhold. For aught he knew, some of those papers might have been a marriage contract with the very man he hated so bitterly.

Ruby was placing the package of notes in her desk, when a servant knocked at the door, and she took Mr. Wheaton's card from the silver tray he carried.

"Tell him to come up," she said, with a smile. "Theo, you may go out."

The boy went out of the room with tears in his eyes, and rage in his heart. In the passage he met Mr. Wheaton: the sullen cloud left his face, and he passed on, muttering, "Only him."

Wheaton seemed a good deal disturbed: he sat down by Ruby, and, without a word of compliment, opened the subject that lay close to his heart at once.

"Before acting on the subject we were talking of, I wish to be better informed of this man's dishonor. You forbid me to use your name in the matter; in fact, spoke so vaguely, that I hesitate to open the subject even with my daughter without some proof of his unworthiness. Zua will not be easily convinced."

"But if convinced, would she cast this man off?" inquired Ruby.

"Undoubtedly. She is my daughter, and a Wheaton."

"Without seeking an explanation which would compromise me? You understand that I place myself in a most delicate position. Nothing but the wish to save your child could induce me to occupy it for a moment."

"I understand that; have no fear—my honor shall protect yours."

"But Zua—I think your daughter does not love me. Will she not feel constrained to give up your authority?"

"I will answer for that: if she can be satisfied of his worthlessness, he will get no explanation from her. There is not a prouder girl living than my daughter Zua. She would never stoop to reproach him."

Ruby Gray arose from her chair, unlocked her desk, and took out the package of letters, from which she quietly abstracted the envelopes containing her address.

"Take these," she said, unwinding the blue ribbon and casting it into the fire with a gesture of disdain. "Let your daughter read them, and judge for herself if they can be explained away. But every note must be returned. Nothing but a sacred duty would justify me in exposing this man's duplicity. Another thing I insist on: there must be no quarrel with Mr. Moreton, at least for the present. I shall meet him as usual; and I trust you will protect your daughter without quarrelling with the man. To change our social relations will only excite scandal. Have I your promise?"

Wheaton answered, "Yes," and went away, carrying the letters with him.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE PACKAGE OF NOTES.

"ZUA."

Miss Wheaton was half-reclining on a sofa in the prettiest nook of her sitting-room, when her name thus pronounced made her start. It was her father's voice, sterner than usual, and with a ring of anger in it that had never reached her before.

"Why, father, is it you?" she said, laying down her

book, and regarding him with something like apprehension. "What is the matter? what have I done?"

"You, nothing," answered Wheaton, drawing a chair close to his daughter. "But I have heard something that troubles me, Zua."

The girl sat upright at once, and looked earnestly in her father's face, wondering what the trouble could be that disturbed him so. She was devotedly attached to this her only parent, and there was scarcely anything on earth that she was not prepared to suffer or relinquish for his sake.

"Is it anything I can help you in, dear papa?"

"It is about you, my child, that I am filled with anxiety."

"About me, papa! but what have I done?"

"Nothing, child, that I ought not have prevented. It was my duty to have protected you from an unworthy attachment."

"Unworthy attachment, father!"

Zua drew her graceful figure back, and poised her head proudly: she began to comprehend that some attack was to be made against the man she loved.

"Do not answer me with that look, girl. I speak advisedly when I say that the man whom you are in some sort pledged to marry is unworthy of you."

"Father, I cannot believe this!"

"But I am certain of it."

"What has he done? who accuses him?"

"While he has been pleading for your hand, Zua, professing the utmost devotion, urging me to abridge something of the time I desired him to wait before any definite pledge should pass between you, this man has been making ardent professions of attachment to another lady."

A flash of crimson burned over Zua's face. She held her breath in utter amazement.

"Father, I cannot believe this," she said, in a low voice.

"It seems like treason against an honorable man while I

listen. No other person on earth would dare to accuse him to me as you are doing."

"But I do not accuse him unjustly, or without proof."

"Father, father, be careful what you say—very careful, for I love this man!"

She spoke rapidly, and almost with a cry of pain. Wheaton looked upon her pale features—for the flush had died out almost as swiftly as it swept across them—with an expression of infinite pity.

"Would to heaven it were not so!" he said, tenderly. "I can feel, I know how terrible a thing it is to doubt the creature we love. I would not have said this thing, but that I know it to be a truth."

"And the lady, father—who is the lady?"

"That I am not at liberty to tell you, my child."

"But how did you learn it?"

"From the person herself."

Zua smiled scornfully. Wheaton saw it, and the smile stung him.

"She is truth itself, Zua. A more honorable person does not live."

"Yet she boasts of her lovers."

"No, no, this is unjust; the lady knows and loves you."

"Ha! perhaps it is Mrs. Gray," said Zua, flushing scarlet with the idea. "She has always seemed to take great interest in my affairs."

"You have no right to use Mrs. Gray's name in this connection, Zua."

The girl looked upon his face with amazement. It was stern and angry.

"Father!"

"Well, Miss Wheaton?"

"Why is this lady's name always a signal of discord between us?"

"Let that pass," answered Wheaton, curtly; "we were talking of another matter."

"But she always comes in. What is Ruby Gray to us?"

"As I have already observed, this is not the subject I came to speak upon."

"No," said Zua, sadly; "you insist upon making me distrust the man who gives me all his confidence. If you could succeed, father, it would break my heart. That is all."

"Better a broken heart than a broken life," answered Wheaton, whose resolution had for a moment wavered under the pathos of this speech. "I would rather see a child of mine dead than united to a false man."

"But there is no danger of that. The very doubt slanders him!" cried Zua, with kindling vehemence.

Mr. Wheaton arose, walked up and down the room awhile, greatly disturbed. He shrank from giving the death-blow to all this beautiful, womanly confidence. At last he drew toward the sofa, where Zua was leaning back, with her eyes closed, and great angry tears forcing themselves through the black lashes that quivered on her burning cheeks. After looking at her in tender compassion for a moment, he laid the parcel of notes, which Ruby Gray had given him, into her lap, and, moving to the other end of the room, sat down in gloomy silence.

The notes had all been taken from their envelopes before they left the possession of Ruby Gray; and her name had never been used by the writer, except in the address. Thus Mr. Wheaton was enabled to lay the fact before his daughter, without betraying the person who gave them. Zua heard the rustling of paper as they fell into her lap, and an involuntary shiver crept through her frame. At last she opened her eyes, dashed away the tears, that half-blinded them, and took up one of the notes. Slowly and coldly the color left her face as she read. One after another she unfolded the cruel papers, and searched them with a sort of breathless terror. Some were playful, some pleading; others teemed with graceful compliments, and hinted at deeper feelings.

More than once a picture was mentioned, about which there seemed to have been some anger and much graceful badinage; but no name appeared. Now and then a pet term supplied the place; but the burning heart of that poor girl could only guess at the person to whom these notes had been addressed. Sometimes an endearing epithet, that had become familiar to herself, would strike her with sudden faintness; and she would lean back, so weary and sick at heart, that her father, as he looked anxiously that way, became terrified. But directly she rallied herself again, and went on with that hateful task.

At last she came to the letter that spoke of herself. Now the cold chills were swept away from her frame by a sense of burning indignation. She could not, at first, comprehend the keen insult couched in those lines; but, at length, they fastened themselves in her memory, and, with the uplifting pride of an empress, she arose, holding the notes in her hand.

"Father," she said, "you have no doubt—I have none. Let us forget this—this—"

She lifted one hand wearily to her head, moved a step forward, and sank to the floor, noiselessly as a snow-wreath falls.

Wheaton lifted his daughter from the floor, and held her tenderly in his arms. As consciousness returned, she clung to him with the pleading trust of childhood.

"Let us go home, father. Oh! let us go home. There I can breathe again."

"Be firm, my child; be the brave girl I have always loved. Why should we leave this, or any other place, to avoid his presence? He must not know how keen is the wrong he has done us. Be brave, my girl."

"But I am so weak—so weary, father," pleaded the poor girl. "Let us go home till I get a little strength."

"Pride will give you strength, my darling."

"Pride? Oh, yes; I may come to that. But everything is desolate now, and I have no one but you left."

"And I will be all the world to you."

"Tell me that it is not true," she said, piteously. "No other woman! You will never bring this Ruby Gray to fill my mother's place. Some one has told me that you would, and I said nothing; but now, when—when—oh, father, you will not let me lose you also!"

Wheaton kissed her tenderly, and promised to love her always; but, even in the depths of her distress, she remembered that he made her no pledge, and evaded the subject.

An hour after this, Zua was lying on the sofa, weeping such bitter, bitter tears as wronged love alone can know, when she heard a step on the stairs, and a happy voice speaking her name. She started up wildly, pushed open the nearest door, and fled from the man whom, even at this moment, she loved better than her life.

Mr. Wheaton remained behind, and met Preston Moreton alone. He entered into no explanations, but gravely and coldly accepted the call as if to himself.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

RUBY GRAY HAS A BOLD IDEA.

PRESTON MORETON entered Ruby Gray's parlor with a flush of excitement on his face and a disturbed manner, which the widow had seldom observed in him before. She understood at once that something had happened, and prepared herself to be sympathetic. Not a word was said about the subject which filled both their minds, yet the conversation drifted into channels that were constantly verging toward kindred ideas. Ruby, as if in delicate sympathy

with feelings she could only have an intuitive knowledge of, was so gentle and kind that he could not avoid feeling touched and grateful. The contrast between her delicate tact and the proud coldness with which Zua had received him of late, forced itself tenderly upon him. Was it possible that he had, after all, mistaken these two women? Was Zua all haughty reserve, and this winning little creature really capable of deep feeling? Just then, Moreton felt bitterly toward Zua and her father. Without the shadow of an excuse, they had taken cavalier airs upon themselves of late. Indeed, Zua seldom saw him alone; and when she did, her manner was constrained and repellant. The young man was far too proud for an attempt to bring about an explanation after it had been coldly denied to him once. Thus a chasm of distrust was dug between him and Zua, which widened every day.

From the unpleasant feelings which sprang out of this state of things, Moreton found a refuge in the society of Ruby Gray. This woman had almost loved him once. He was sure of that; and sometimes he doubted if the feeling had mellowed down into indifference. If she really had loved him, he could not refuse to admit that his conduct toward her was capable of grave questioning. Yet how sweetly she had forgiven him! never even hinting a rebuke, unless the look of touching sadness with which she sometimes lifted her eyes to his might be so construed.

In all this there was hope for Ruby Gray, and danger for Zua Wheaton, if she still loved the man.

Zua had no proof that Ruby Gray was the person to whom those notes were written, but she suspected it, and, knowing how frequently Moreton visited the lady, steeled her proud heart more resolutely against him. Thus he drifted more and more into the power of that strange, fascinating being, feeling the consolation of her society, but heedless of its danger.

As for Ruby, she kept herself well under control; and while her heart was beating with hope, and her breath was held in suspense lest some false step should drive him away, she laid her snares and lured him on, now with gentle sadness, again with a dash of pleasant gayety, which would have completely enthralled any other man on earth.

"Oh," she said, in the solitude of her room, "if I could but break the hold she has upon his honor! If I had the power to win him away from her, he would worship me. I can see it in his eyes; he almost speaks it out in words. Ah! if I could but think of some way by which return to her would be impossible. But how?"

Even her ingenuity could not answer this question. She had planted estrangement and coldness between the affianced couple; but how was their union to be broken off entirely?

One morning, as Ruby lay in bed thinking all these things over, a sudden idea, bold to audacity, shot through her mind. She started up from her laced and frilled pillows with an exclamation of absolute delight.

"I will do it! I will do it!" she said, clasping her hands in a paroxysm of excitement. "Let me place a barrier between them that no law can remove—no matter how it is done—and he is mine—all mine!"

Then she fell back on her pillows, and began to reflect how her idea could best be carried out. Her plan required instruments which she could control absolutely. Gray had abandoned her cause, but the man Clark was true to her yet. Then Theo—no; Ruby was afraid to trust the Indian. He was too passionate, and might destroy everything by some absurd fit of sullenness or flash of childish jealousy. No; she would depend on Billy Clark.

"If Gray had but remained firm, nothing could prevent my success," she thought, with a glow of impatient wrath. "I

did not think that he would desert me when I needed him most. Still, I can do without him. This sudden sense of honor, but that it almost defeats me, would be laughable. But I will make the other do."

Ruby would hardly wait for a proper hour to arrive before she summoned her Indian page. "Theo," she said, "go and see if you can find the man who came up with Mr. Wheaton from the country. Say that I wish to see him. You know who I mean?"

"The man they call Billy Clark?"

"Yes; he is in town yet, I suppose."

"I will go after him."

The boy went off like lightning. Ruby sat down in an easy-chair, and, burying herself in the azure cushions, gave way to the excitement that burned at her heart till its flame rose hot and red to her cheeks. Her foot beat the carpet impatiently; her hand clenched itself on the cushions, and tore at the lace which fell over them.

While the woman sat there pondering over her new idea, Theo came back, followed by Billy Clark. The Indian boy would have lingered in the room; but Ruby ordered him out peremptorily, and he closed the door with fury in his black eyes.

I need not describe the wiles by which that artful woman worked upon the heart of Billy Clark; how she wounded him by remorselessly describing the evidences of love between Moreton and the young person whom he worshipped. She had no mercy on the poor fellow; the pallor of his thin face deepened under the torture she inflicted, and his poor hands trembled weakly when she told him that nothing but devotion to her, and thorough obedience to her directions, could possibly prevent the marriage of Moreton and Zua Wheaton.

"What shall I do? Tell me, and I'll not flinch! If it is to kill him, I—I'll do it. She shan't have him. I'm

weak as a kitten, and all fallen to nothing; but he shall find that there's life in me yet: just point out the way."

"Have patience, and trust to me. Do that, and the wedding never shall take place."

"I'll do anything—you can trust me for that; but waiting patiently is just what is eating the flesh off my bones like this."

Billy folded the leg of his pantaloons over his knee, and exhibited the outline of his wasted limb, with tears in his eyes.

"You see what it's doing for me. I'm going off like this with looking at them two; just as a bird watches a black-snake when his tongue is quivering. It's poison to me; but I can't help but watch them."

"But they haven't been together much of late, I should think," said Ruby, struck with a fresh pang of apprehension by Clark's words.

"Not so much. Oh! I've had a little time to breathe lately; but they'll begin again. Sometimes I think it would be better for me if the worst was over."

"That never shall be!" said Ruby, stung by the same venom that was consuming the poor fellow.

"But what is to be done?" asked Billy, in piteous helplessness. "They are determined on it, or, at any rate, were, only a little while ago."

"Be in readiness when I want you, Billy."

"I will, marm; never fear."

"Is the door shut close, Billy?"

Billy got up, tried the latch carefully, and came back to his seat.

"Come nearer to me," said Ruby. "They might hear us if we were to speak aloud."

Billy drew his chair close to the lady, and bent forward to listen. She whispered to him some ten minutes; gradually the color came into his face, and his weak eyes opened

wide. At last he sprang to his feet, and drawing back, clasped both hands behind him.

"You don't mean it? You wouldn't do it?" he cried, in great excitement.

"Will you help me?" was her answer.

"Will I? Will I? Madam, you are a jewel—a trump—a brick! I—I don't know how to say all that I feel. But you're the general, and I'm a whole regiment; order me as if I was a dog, and see if I don't come up to time."

"Then I can depend on you?"

"Depend! I should think so."

"And you will be silent?"

"As the grave."

"Then it is a compact—we will help each other."

She reached out her hand, which Billy Clark kissed as if she had been a goddess. That moment Theo came into the room.

"Lady, Mr. Wheaton is waiting."

"Not to-day, Theo. Tell him that I am ill, dead—anything. But I must be alone to-day."

Theo went out, casting vicious glances at Clark, who followed him like one in a dream.

CHAPTER LXIX.

OLD MRS. CLARK VISITS THE OPERA.

NIGHT after night, Amanda Clark filled the opera-house with her music, charming crowds together like the enchantress that men called her. Her quick, ardent, sometimes impassioned genius, had something new and vigorous in it, which brought a breezy freshness of the country upon the stage. The girl might have taken her place among the

élite of the profession personally, as she had already done as an artist; but she shrank proudly from the frothy homage of stage-struck boys and fastidious amateurs, without regard to the popularity she might lose. She tossed their bouquets from her with imperious disdain, and kept aloof from their flattery as a lark mounts to the purest air of heaven while giving forth its morning song.

This girl loved earnestly, and with all the strength of a strong, romantic nature. She possessed all her mother's vigor, and her father's delicate genius. The idea that possessed her was noble in its grandeur. She could not believe the man she loved anything but perfect, and this faith promised, in some degree, to realize itself; for young Gray began to comprehend how trivial all his aims had been, and how little he had accomplished, compared to this young girl, who had soared out of that little brown house on the pinions of love, and wrought out a destiny for herself. Her bright womanliness shamed his wasted manhood, and he was fast becoming worthy of her devotion.

Amanda's triumphs belonged to the public; but her life was her own. After wading ankle-deep through floral offerings, she would fling off her robes of mock royalty, tie on her bonnet, and walk home with her brother William animated and joyous, striving to comfort him by her own success, and practising many a gentle wile, by which she hoped to win him from the mournful despondency which weighed down his weak mind at this period more than ever.

So time wore on, and it was deep in the winter before any event arose which could disturb the triumph of Amanda's life. One night, when the opera was crowded to witness Amanda's first personation in *Norma*, a tall woman, with a coronet of iron-gray hair visible under a black silk bonnet, whose front curved up portentously from the forehead, and the general dimensions of which would have answered for a moderate-sized coal-scuttle, presented herself in front

of the opera. When once there, she looked around in utter bewilderment. The crowd was rushing in, and a confusion of brilliantly dressed people jostled her hither and thither, while she turned wildly from face to face with a half-defiant, half-beseeching look, that would have seemed ludicrous had it not been so intensely real. At last, a gentleman, who came in alone from the street, saw the woman, and kindly addressed her:

"Have you lost any one?" he said.

The woman laid her hand impressively on his arm, and drew him on one side.

"I want to go in there and see my—see what is going on," she said, pointing to the door, through which a stream of people was pouring into the body of the house.

"But you are not alone, surely?" said the gentleman, smiling.

"Yes, I am all alone, and that is what I want—some place where I can see, and hear, and have nobody to take notice; but I don't know how to manage it."

"You want a private box, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir, that's it; and the more private the better," she answered, eagerly.

The gentleman hesitated.

"That will be expensive," he said, at last.

"Oh! I've got money. Look here!"

The woman opened a rusty old pocket-book, and reached forth a twenty-dollar note.

"It is all mine; she sent — That is, I came honestly by it. Just get me a place, all by myself, remember, and never mind the price. I shan't!"

The gentleman was amused and somewhat interested. Old-fashioned as the woman's dress was, she wore it like an empress; and there was an unpretending decision in her manner that excited his curiosity. He went to the box-office, and came back with the order she wanted. She reached

forth her hand, encased in a brown cotton glove, but he gently put it back.

"I will place you under the care of an usher," he said.

"Come this way."

That instant a party was set down near the entrance, and Mrs. Ruby Gray rustled by, with a scarlet opera-cloak falling back from her white shoulders, and a shimmer of silver sparkling out from her white dress. The tall woman caught her breath and drew back, huddling the large shawl of bright, old-fashioned gorgeousness around her person.

"Mercy on me! how handsome she is! There, too, is Mr. Gray, and Mr. Wheaton, and Miss Wheaton, going into the door, and — Oh! there is my Billy. Go on, sir! Please to go on. I want to get into that box-seat you was talking of, before any of 'em sees me."

The gentleman passed on; and in a few minutes after Mrs. Clark sat alone in one of the private boxes which overlooked the stage, gazing with wistful eyes on the great drop-curtain, which answered all her ideas of a magnificent painting, and would fairly have taken away her breath with its grandeur, but that her heart was too earnest in its search for another object.

There was something of Indian stoicism in this woman. Even in her solitude, with the curtains of the box more than half concealing her, she scarcely deigned to indulge the natural curiosity which would have induced another person to look around that densely filled house. She saw Ruby Gray, young Gray, and Moreton in an opposite box, and dragged the curtains forward that they might not see her. The orchestra struck up, but this only made her impatient, and she beat her foot on the carpet almost savagely — that was not the music she came to hear.

The curtain went up with a dull, rushing sound, bewildering the old woman with glimpses of unexpected scenery, and of people moving to and fro, singing as they went. She

never knew when or how the impatience that consumed her merged into that dream of ecstasy. But all at once the hard hands clasped themselves under her shawl, her firm lips began to quiver, and those large, gray eyes were so full of tears, that the queenly figure upon the stage floated in a mist before her.

"It's her! That's her voice; that's her face! It's — it's my Mandy!"

Up went her two hard hands to the old face, and in an instant they were wet as if a heavy rain had drenched them, while her tall figure swayed to and fro, shaking the curtains till those underneath wondered at the strange commotion.

Amanda saw nothing of this. With her soul given up to the grand idea she had assumed, all that crowd, and even the solitary woman sitting behind the curtains, were without substance to her. Every pulse of her heart seemed to have been touched with music. Her soul was full of passionate cries, which took the melody of grief as they passed through her lips. She forgot herself utterly; but still that love, which was the best part of her own life, grew powerful as it ennobled the grand creature she assumed to be.

CHAPTER LXX.

AMANDA CLARK IS RECONCILED TO HER MOTHER.

NOT a word did that strong woman understand; but the music thrilled her like electricity. Wild enthusiasm swelled in her own heart, heaving her stern bosom as tempests lift a wave. As the passion of the piece rose and deepened, that stout frame began to tremble; intense sympathy shook

the woman from head to foot, she stretched forth her arms and cried out:

"Mandy! oh, Mandy Clark! come to me—come to me! They are killing you."

No one heard her, for that moment the despairing creature, whom even that stern heart was afraid to claim as a daughter, rushed down the stage in the climax of her agony. The gas-light quivered around her feet and lighted up the waves of her hair; her cries of anguish rose with terrible pathos, and stirred the house like a tempest. Thunders of applause frightened the old woman; and when the orchestra crashed into the tumult she started up trembling, and cried out piteously that they had killed her child and was glorying over it.

In the confusion of an excited crowd her voice were lost, and the brilliant throng poured itself through the various doors, leaving her alone. Then the woman came to herself, and remembered where she was. Pushing against the door with both hands, she let herself out; but the gas was getting low, and she found herself wandering through some narrow passage, and into a broad, dim space, which was broken up with weird black shadows. Through these shadows came gleams of light, which the woman followed till they brought her into a little dressing-room, where she saw her child standing, pale, breathless, but triumphant, with the coronet of gold in her hand. Amanda saw the tall figure that darkened the threshold; the coronet dropped, the pale face became radiant, and reaching out her arms, she cried out:

"Mother! mother!"

Then the proud Norma threw herself into the strong arms outstretched to receive her, and down upon her sweeping hair fell great drops that seemed like summer rain, and kisses came thick and warm upon her face, each stamping a blessing there.

"Tell me, you did not mind it much? Oh, mother, I have been so sorry!"

Still the kisses fell ; slower, but tenderly.

"Have you been very lonely, mother?"

Mrs. Clark held her child back at arms'-length, and laughed through her tears.

"Lonesome, child? Yes, yes; but this makes up for it all. I thought I had lost you, Mandy—that you would be ashamed to own your mother."

"Ashamed! Oh, mother!"

That generous face was scarlet—the fine eyes full of reproach. The mother saw it, and was satisfied.

"I got your money, Mandy, and came here with some of it, just to see you, daughter; nothing more."

"Dear, dear mother! I have wanted to see you so much. How often I have thought of you in this cold winter weather, all alone! But I could not get free for a single day."

Amanda was wrapping a heavy shawl around her. She flung half its soft, warm folds about her mother, and went out embracing her.

"Come, mother; come! There is a carriage outside."

She flung the door open, and went into the green-room, where some of the singers were still grouped, talking over the opera. With them were half a dozen gentlemen, such as find pleasure and a sort of glory in hovering around the footsteps of a successful artist. Proud, fastidious men they were, who waited to congratulate the prima donna on her new triumph.

When Amanda Clark appeared in the door, with her arm around that strange woman, whose bonnet alone was a marvel in their eyes, something like confusion seized upon them; but, with her, there was nothing of the kind. She came up with a pleasant smile upon her face, and said, with the graceful freedom of a child:

"It is my mother, gentlemen. Allow me to present her."

There was nothing in the demeanor of Mrs. Clark to hu-

miliate her daughter, even in that company. Her manners were stiff and independent, but not vulgar. Indeed, as she stood there, wrapped in her old-fashioned shawl, crowned with that imposing bonnet, there was something picturesque about her, which might not be out of place in the mother of Norma. At any rate, the manner of the young girl won respect for the mother; and looks of no ordinary admiration followed her as she went out, quite unconscious that there was anything like heroism in her conduct.

Billy Clark stood at the carriage-door, waiting for his sister. He turned to help her in, when his eyes fell on the tall form of Mrs. Clark, which looked grim and threatening in the shadows. Billy dropped his hand from the carriage-door, and began to plead with her.

"Don't—don't be hard on Amanda," he said, in his weak, plaintive voice. "She isn't to blame. It was all me. I coaxed her to run away, and helped her to do it. If you've come here to find fault, do it with me. I'm a man, and—and— No, mother: I ain't strong, and it's of no use saying that I am; but yet I can bear a little more; and it's all my fault."

Billy broke off in a sharp, dry cough, which seemed to strike his mother as something appalling, for she turned and looked in his face with a long, anxious gaze, before entering the carriage. When he sat down by her side, she gathered the poor fellow in her arms, and held him close, stricken with sudden dread, and suffering it in silence.

"Mother," said Amanda, who had no idea of the pain which had come upon her mother, "you will stay with us now. Let us all be together."

"No," answered the woman, with singular mournfulness; "I will go back to the old home. It's the place for an old woman. But I'm glad I came. It'll be pleasant enough in the old house after this. Billy, here, will go with me. There is no place like home; is there, my boy?"

There was no answer ; but Billy wound both arms around his mother's neck, and she felt that he was trembling.

"I can't leave her. Not yet — not yet," he whispered.

The old woman held him close, and kissed him silently.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE SNOW-STORM.

THE snow was falling fast and thick, filling the air with drifting particles, and mantling the earth with fleecy whiteness, till the vast city, from pavement to house-top, seemed wrapped in spotless ermine.

Ruby Gray sat within her pretty *bijou* of a parlor, and watched the drifting flakes gather on the window-sill with a look of keen interest. She was not thinking of the "beautiful snow," but of something that it might bring to her sooner than she had dared to expect. Few people look out on a snow-storm without some shadow of sadness; the broad, dead whiteness is so shroud-like and ghostly, as it gathers over the earth, that it imperceptibly fills the mind with something like awe. But the feelings in Ruby's heart were too keen and selfish for sadness. The snow, to her, was an instrument. The wicked thoughts in her bosom swept off all its poetry.

"It is now a foot deep, and the earth frosted like iron under it," she said, unconsciously talking aloud. "Hark! there comes the tinkle of bells. It will be glorious sleighing to-morrow. Ha! Theo, is that you?"

The boy crept toward her, shivering as an Italian grayhound might have done — the snow always terrified him.

"Come here, Theo; I want you to go on an errand."

"Not out-of-doors — not through that," he said, pointing to the snow. "It makes me cold to the bone."

"But it is to serve me, Theo."

"To serve you? Then I will go. For you, lady, I would be buried up in it so deep that no one could see how I froze to death."

"Still it is but a little thing, Theo. Indeed, you need not go far — only to the drug-store. Here, take this, and get what I have ordered."

Ruby drew a small pencil from her pocket and wrote upon a card, which she gave to Theo with some money.

"Take this, and bring what they will give you," she said. "I will wait for it here."

Theo took the card, and went hastily down stairs. On the way he met Preston Moreton, who asked if Mrs. Gray was in her room. The boy answered, "Yes," and went into the drug-store with the white teeth clenched under his lips, for he hated Moreton with an instinct of jealousy that nothing could equal. On that stormy day few people came to the store, and the clerks, knowing Theo, began to talk with him, laughing at his sharp answers, and encouraging him to ask questions about the drugs, regarding which he always evinced great curiosity.

"Would this kill any one?" he asked, as the vial was placed in his hand. "Is it poison?"

"Not a bit of it," answered the young man. "We do not sell anything that kills to youngsters like you."

"Well, what is it good for, then?"

"Take a spoonful of it, and you will find out," laughed the clerk.

"Tell me about it, for I mean to be an apothecary, or a doctor, you know."

"Not now; come again, some time. Take care, old fellow, do n't handle that jar so carelessly; and remember to mark 'Poison' on what you take out."

This was addressed to another clerk, who had just taken down a small jar from the shelves.

"Never fear," was the reply; "I know all about it."

Theo was shaking up the vial in his hand, but he kept a sidelong glance on the jar, drew close enough to read the gilded letters upon it, and loitered in the store till it was replaced on the shelf.

"I should like to help about here, to-day; would you let me?" he said, in a soft, winning voice, to the clerk. "It learns me so much."

"Oh, yes! come in, if you like. We are setting things to rights — always do, stormy weather."

"That will just suit me," answered the boy. "I will come again."

"I would rather see your handsome mistress," laughed the clerk.

Theo, who had been all smiles, now frowned blackly, and went into the hotel, muttering to himself.

Meantime, Moreton had proceeded to Ruby Gray's parlor, where he found her seated by the window, looking out upon the snow.

"Ah!" she said, starting up in confusion, for she had not heard his knock. "Is it you? Welcome as the snow! What glorious sleighing we shall have!"

"Yes, nothing could promise better. I have come to talk with you about a party. Let us get up something unique, by way of a sleigh-ride."

Ruby Gray turned white and cold. Had the evil one answered her thoughts so readily? There was a look of absolute affright in her eyes, as she turned them on Moreton.

"Does not the idea please you?" he said. "I thought you would have been delighted."

"And so I am. What has got into your head? Of course, Miss Wheaton will go?"

"Certainly — that is, I hope so."

"And we shall have your horses?"

"Yes; the whole stable."

"That will be splendid. But where shall we go?"

"That is what I most particularly wished to consult you about."

"Not in the city, or near it, then. There is no pleasure in sleighing where the snow has been trampled into mud by a thousand horses. What if we make two days of it, and have a regular old-fashioned New-England sleigh-ride, such as we read of — a long drive into the country, supper and a dance at night, then a dashing ride back to town. That will be something like a sleigh-ride."

"Capital! I was sure you could help me out. I must be the host, remember — but that is between ourselves; you shall give the invitations, act as lady patroness, in fact, do everything in your own name."

"Of course I will; but we must have music — a country fiddler will never do."

"Let us settle on a place, and I will send a band in advance."

"Ah! that is a question. Well, what if we go unto the Islands — any country tavern that has a ball-room will do, provided it stands on a good road. What say you to Blanktown? It is a lovely village."

"That will do. I will send a man at once to bespeak accommodation and carry down supplies. We will make it a winter frolic."

"I will go to Miss Wheaton at once, and tell her to be in readiness," said Ruby.

"Let me go with you," said Moreton, glad of an opportunity to see Zua, for whom, in fact, the party was intended; as he hoped, in the course of it, to win her from her proud coldness.

That moment Theo came in, glided up to his mistress, and stole the vial into her hand. She blushed crimson while re-

ceiving it, and instantly dropped it into the pocket of her dress, motioning Theo away from her.

Moreton saw the action, but it occasioned no surprise, for the strange boy was always hovering about his mistress, and giving an appearance of mystery to everything he did or said in the presence of visitors; but Ruby's disturbed conscience impelled her to an indirect explanation.

"Is it violet?" she said.

"Yes, lady; the very best."

All this was lost on Moreton. Impatience to see Zua and win her to join this sleigh-ride, rendered him unconscious almost of Theo's presence. Indeed, the lad was regarded by all Ruby's friends much in the light of a rather troublesome lapdog, entirely out of place in a lady's reception-room.

Ruby spoke to Theo as she went out.

"I shall be back in less than an hour. Stay here till then," she said, wrapping herself in a cape of Russian sable. "And — Oh! I forgot! Come here!"

She stooped down, whispering through her veil, that Theo should go in search of Billy Clark, and have him waiting when she came back. Then she followed Moreton, who was moving impatiently toward the staircase, and springing into a carriage, drove away.

Theo watched his mistress from the window, and his black eyes burned with all their savage, Indian fire.

"She loves him! Oh! how I *hate* him! I hate him because he don't love her, and would want to kill him if he did. It was n't that Mr. Gray, but this man; and they think I do not know. They think Theo is a dog, deaf and dumb. But dogs bite—dogs bite. I saw his arm around her waist when he helped her in, and she lifted those eyes to his. Oh! I was looking on—the dog does n't sleep."

CHAPTER LXXII.

MORETON AND RUBY GRAY MAKE A VISIT.

MORETON and Ruby Gray found Miss Wheaton at home. These two persons certainly did not love each other; but when Ruby Gray wished to be intimate with any one, it was difficult to resist her; and even Zua's pride failed to protect her from the woman's fascinations. Besides, she came with Moreton, and this stung her pride into extra courtesy.

Mr. Wheaton had gone down to the country-house, Zua said, but she would be happy to join the party; a good, old-fashioned, regular sleigh-ride would be delightful. She only wished, for Ruby's sake, that her father had been at home.

Ruby's eyes flashed fire under her veil. Did Zua Wheaton really think that she had come to such a social poverty as to miss the presence of the middle-aged man whose very admiration was becoming an annoyance? Had her acting really deceived the girl? With these bitter questions in her mind, she said sweet things to Zua about her father, and expressed a thousand regrets, which the young girl scarcely heard, for Moreton was talking to her in a low voice, and she was listening breathlessly.

Still Ruby talked on, hiding her annoyance under a world of smiles. All the details of the party were settled as she wished, for no one cared to interfere; and she went back to the carriage, waving kisses to Zua from her gloved hand as she entered it.

Ruby found Billy Clark in her parlor when she returned to it. Moreton had left her at the entrance of the hotel. Billy was very thin and careworn. He looked at Ruby reproachfully. Had she not promised to save Zua Wheaton

from that man, and give him a chance to worship her as of old?

Ruby sent Theo out of the room, wounding him with her quick impatience. She turned toward Billy Clark eagerly, trembling with the vehemence of her own passions.

"You thought I was not in earnest, that I never would redeem that promise. But I will—I will. The time has come; only do your part faithfully, and in three days she shall be beyond his reach."

"Will you? Are you really a-going to do it?" cried Billy, clasping a hand on each knee, as if that were necessary to hold his poor little figure in place.

"Will I? Yes, if it kills us all in one crowd, Billy Clark. Come over here, while I tell you what is wanted on your part. I am afraid Theo listens sometimes."

She sat down near the door of her bed-room, and Billy listened to all her directions with a drooping head, and that wild light in his eyes which approaches insanity. Ruby was very positive in her orders, and clear in all the details, thinking herself safe. But she forgot that one door of her bed-room opened into the hall, and Theo's step was so cat-like as he crept through, that she never dreamed of his presence. But there he stood, so close to her that he was compelled to hold his breath, or she would have heard it pant through his shut teeth.

"There, all is arranged," she said, at last. "You will be sent down to make preparations—I have settled that. You can be trusted?"

She looked at him keenly. His eyes, full of feverish light, answered hers before his thin voice confirmed the look.

"Trusted? You love him—I love her. See, if you think I don't."

The poor fellow lifted his thin hands, now pale from a respite of out-door toil, and the light fairly shone through

them. "You pretend to love him," he said; "but how plump and rosy you are!"

"Because I will not give up; nor must you, Billy."

Billy looked at his hands again, and sighed heavily.

"If this was only over, I, too, should get stout," he murmured. "You know it is a case of life and death with me."

"Then you will be firm?"

"As a rock—as a rock!" answered Billy, surrendering his limp hand to her pressure, for, in her anxiety, the woman forgot all distinctions, and almost caressed the poor fellow, whom sorrows made a safe instrument.

"Good-by!"

Billy went away, his eyes full of fever, his hands trembling like dry leaves. His feeble nature was given up to one idea, and that made him crafty and reticent. The next morning, Moreton sent him into the country to make preparations for the grand sleighing-party.

Ruby Gray had many things to arrange after Billy left her. First the invitations were to be made out: among the first, she wrote two pretty notes, one to young Gray, and the other to Amanda Clark, who happened to have a week's rest just then, and had gone down to the old brown house to spend the time with her mother. This note was sent by Billy, who promised to have his sister at the place of rendezvous, which was not ten miles from his native town.

Theo took invitations, and delivered them promptly; but he managed to spend a good deal of time in the drug-store, where he was very inquisitive about the nature of certain chemicals, and would have created some annoyance by disturbing the bottles and jars on one of the shelves, but his movements were so stealthy that no one observed him.

That night, as the boy sat alone on his bed, some conflict, surely, was going on in his mind, for he remained for more than an hour gazing at the white snow that glistened through his window, unconscious that the sharp air was chilling him

through and through. At last he settled down in the bed, with his black eyes glittering like stars in the moonlight, and muttered to himself:

"No; if I told him, it would be all the same — she would go on loving him; and he — I don't believe he cares for the other one. Who could, and she by? Once I saw him kiss her. He did — he did! She held up her lips and tempted him; but she pushes me away if I only try to kiss her foot. No, I won't tell, but —"

The boy uttered no more words, but lay with his eyes gleaming like those of a serpent, and shivering with cold, till the dawn of a new day stole upon him.

Then he arose, sat down by the little table in his room, and wrote a letter, which he directed to Miss Wheaton. "If she had told me all, I would not have done it," he muttered; "but she uses me, and she cheats me. Since those notes were changed *he* comes twice as often. I understand more now. Miss Wheaton will get this; there will be a quarrel, and that may stop all."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER AT HOME.

AMANDA CLARK was at home with her mother once more, and her happy face fairly lighted up the old house like a burst of sunshine in a wintry day. The old woman had made wonderful preparations for her daughter's reception. A new rag-carpet, clouded with stripes of scarlet, blue, and brown, gave a comfortable look to the parlor, in which a bright wood-fire was burning behind a pair of huge brass andirons, which flashed back the flames like pillars of burnished gold. The looking-glass, in its old-

fashioned mahogany frame, caught the reflection, and did its part toward lighting up the room into a gold aspect.

All this warmth and comfort was in strong contrast with the frosty night and the great snow-drifts heaped in cold whiteness against the house, as the heaviest storm of the season had left them. A sharp, stinging frost was penetrating everywhere, and all the broad expanse of snow, seen for miles and miles around, glittered under a sky that seemed giving birth to new stars every moment. Beautiful it certainly was, but fearfully cold; and the two women smiled upon each other lovingly as the wind whistled by them, and lashed the naked boughs of the locust-forest till they sent out continuous moans on the frosty night.

"It seems to give the fire double warmth," said Amanda, drawing closer to the hearth with a sympathetic shudder, for it was impossible to be cold where she sat. "How pleasant you have made the old house, mother!"

Mrs. Clark smiled grimly, and, planting a foot on each supporter of the nearest andiron, lifted her dress so that the fire-light could shine upon her ankles.

"Yes, Mandy, I thought I'd try to make the old place look a little more like other folks's, so that you would feel as if it was your home yet. Seems kind o' natural, don't it, now?"

"I never felt so much at home in my life, mother. If Billy and — and Charles were only here now, it would be splendid."

"You mean young Mr. Gray?" questioned the mother, a little sharply. "I have told that young man, once, never to come on these premises again till he can humble his pride, and ask you, like an honest man, to be his wife."

Amanda leaned back in her chair and laughed, pleasantly enough.

"Why, mother, he has done that, long ago."

The old woman took her feet from the andirons, and sat

bolt upright, staring at her daughter in blank astonishment. Then she stooped forward a little, smoothed down her apron, and shook her head.

"I understand it all," she said. "Singing is a good business, and it brings in money, which is more than he has got, Billy tells me. You'll have to support him, Mandy."

"Not with singing, mother," answered the girl, while the laugh mellowed down to a mischievous smile; "because I've promised to give it up after the next year. In that time, I mean to earn enough to make you independent of hard work, and to buy fifty acres off the next farm for brother William."

Here Mrs. Clark drew a deep sigh, and shook her head gloomily.

"But I can do it," cried Amanda, misunderstanding these signs of distrust. "Besides that, I mean to turn this room into the kitchen, and build a pretty cottage against it, large enough for us all to come down and spend the summers with you. Mr. Gray proposed it himself."

"But, Amanda, how is he going to live when you stop singing?" inquired the old woman, going into the question with hard, practical common sense.

"Why, pretty much as he does now, mother; for some months back he has earned his own living."

"Earned his own living—how?"

"Copying, carrying notices, doing half the work of a law office, where he is preparing himself for the Bar."

"Why, Mandy Clark, you don't say so?"

"In a year he will be a member of the Bar; then I shall have a little money, and do all I spoke of here beside. After that, we shall do well enough. Mrs. Gray has a neat little house ready to take us in winters, and you will let us come here in the summer-time. Now isn't that a glorious plan for us all?"

Amanda threw her arms around the old woman's neck,

and kissed her with a love so genuine that it brought tears into those hard, gray eyes.

"Hark! what is that?" cried Amanda, leaning forward to listen. "Sleigh-bells, as sure as I live!"

The old woman went to the window, and looked over Amanda's shoulder into a cross-road that led to the house.

"It's a sleigh, with two men in it," she said. "Who can they be?"

"It's he! it's them! Oh, mother, bring out some candles, while I throw some more wood on the fire. I tell you it is our William and Mr. Gray. I heard their voices. Be quick; they are stamping off the snow."

Down went some dry sticks on to the already blazing fire, and two more candles were being lighted, when quick, eager footsteps crossed the kitchen, and Gray came in fresh and smiling from the frosty air, which had chilled poor Billy to the vitals.

"She has promised to be my wife, and so I'll take the liberty of kissing her, if you don't object," said Gray, taking Amanda in his arms, and deepening the roses on her cheek by half a dozen kisses, at which Mrs. Clark turned her back square upon them, and became wonderfully busy winding some cut paper around the ends of the candles, and fitting them into a pair of tin candlesticks. As for Billy, he sat down by the fire, shivering all over, and began to cry.

"William," whispered the old woman, leaning over him, after she had placed her extra lights upon the mantel-piece. "William, don't look so down-hearted. Your old mother loves you."

"I know you do," answered Billy, winding his thin arms over her neck, and leaning his head on her bosom; "but no one else ever will. Look there, mother; it's enough to break a feller's heart!"

Billy pointed to the window, where Gray and Amanda stood talking together in low voices. "That will never be

for your poor son. His arm will never dare to touch her waist like that."

"But you will always have me," said Mrs. Clark. "I'm getting old, Billy, and shall need my only boy to take care of me."

The old woman's voice broke as she finished the sentence, and she turned her face away from Billy's wistful gaze. Well that poor mother knew that his arm, weak as it was, would never lead her down the dark valley. Even then his cheeks were on fire with the hectic she understood so well.

Billy followed her with his eyes as she left the room. The contrast of her iron health with his feebleness seemed to strike him, for he looked at his little, shivering hands pitifully, and, leaning his head against the framework of the fireplace, allowed the tears to fall down the burning red on his cheek in silence.

"Mother!"

Mrs. Clark was busy in the kitchen, and the sound of her preparations reached the poor fellow where he rested.

"Mother!"

"What is it, my boy?" inquired the old woman, looking through the door.

"Mother, if you could just heat me a good, warm bowl of bread and milk, it might warm me a little."

"I'm doing it. I was just putting it on. You must n't think that mother has forgotten how you love it."

"That's very kind," murmured the poor fellow, closing his eyes; "but everybody is kind to me except her."

"Come out — come out a moment, and look at the night. The moon is just fairly up, and the sky is one tangle of stars! You never saw anything like it."

Amanda threw a shawl over her head, and went through the door young Gray held open for her. It was indeed a glorious night! Broad, crusted snow everywhere — on hill-

side, in hollows, and along the curving promontories that broke up the sparkling waters of the Sound on either hand. Clumps of trees and denser groves pencilled their shadows on its pure whiteness, and gave back strange music to the wind that kept those shadows in perpetual motion. The house was picturesque as a mammoth bird's-nest planted in the snow. Its roof was crusted over, and along the eaves long pendent icicles hung like a crystal fringe. Every window was illuminated, and gleams of warmth struck out into the coldness of the night, turning the icicles to great diamonds, and lending a tinge of gold to the snow.

"Ah! there is the old apple-tree," exclaimed Gray. "How cold and naked it looks, with its roots in the snow and its branches trembling in the wind! By Jove, it is cold! and you are shivering; but I could n't have slept without a good look at the old tree. Bless it, I say, root and branch!"

Amanda laughed. She had a very vivid remembrance of some hard scoldings delivered under that old tree, which perhaps took away the romance just then.

"One moment," she said; "you haven't told me what brought you here. We had n't the least expectation of seeing any one."

"Well, nothing very momentous," answered Gray. "Mrs. Ruby is getting up a sleighing-party down on the Island, to which you are, of course, invited; so is Mr. Wheaton, who is at the house down yonder, I believe?"

Amanda nodded.

"Well, Ruby insisted on sending William to look up a place and make arrangements. I saw a splendid chance of spending a few hours with the sauciest girl in Christendom, and came with him."

"You did not guess how our hearts leaped to receive you, saucy as we are. One word more: have you found a place for all these festivities?"

"Yes; an inn some ten miles from here. William and I

are going back there to-morrow, when we shall be active as bees preparing the ball-room. I only wish you could go with us."

"Who says I will not," answered the girl, drawing her shawl closer; "but come in now — my teeth are chattering."

"Just in time," cried Gray, setting down his hat, as he saw that a table had been spread in the parlor, from which the steam of a newly-filled teapot was floating like a mist, and the savory odor from some slices of ham, which lay under the golden burden of half a dozen fried eggs, gave out a most appetizing invitation.

The old woman had been a good deal troubled about the question of refreshments for her city guest; but she made no excuses, and found that none were required, if the keenness of a man's appetite was any proof of an acceptable meal.

Amanda sat by the table and chatted gayly while the humble supper was in progress. She saw that her brother looked thin, and once or twice observed that he was shaken by a sharp, dry cough: "But it is only a cold," she thought, and gave herself up to the delight of having the beings she loved most by her side, without a harassing thought of the future.

"Am I going to join the sleigh-riders? Of course I am," she said, kissing her hand to the young men as they went up stairs. "I intend to start with you in the morning."

Amanda carried out her intention.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

WILD WORK IN THE SNOW.

IT was a glorious day. The town was jubilant with bells; and even the streets of New York looked white and clean, until this mantle of snow was fast becoming torn and mangled under a wild succession of muffled hoofs. A bewildering jingle of bells and the sharp cleaving of runners followed so close upon each other that the whole scene was one rush of excitement, and all New York seemed pouring itself into the streets, maddened by a sight of "the beautiful snow."

When the noon was highest, and the icicles on the house-tops flashed back the sunlight in ten thousand diamonds, several large sleighs, each drawn by four well-matched horses, dashed down the Fifth Avenue, followed by two or three fanciful little affairs, glittering and shell-shaped, which answered to the large sleighs as pony-carriages compare with the ponderous barouche. On they went, dashing through the streets like a royal cavalcade, the horses rampant with exuberant strength, the harness flashing back a golden light to the sunshine, and the crack of whips, no one thought of using on the horses, sounding sharply through the noises of the street. The occupants of each sleigh were half buried beneath piles of snow-white or rich brown furs, and through them came gleams of blue or scarlet cloth, enriching the effect with a variety of colors. Beautiful faces, rosy with happiness, and bright from the frosty air, looked out from the furs, and pure young voices laughed forth their joy or bandied harmless jests beneath the silvery ringing of the bells.

Thus, amid a crash of sweet noises, and the fall of hoofs muffled to the fetlock in virgin snow, that sleighing-party

dashed up from the ferry, and swept away down the undulating hills and across the plains of Long Island.

Oh, it was splendid! Everywhere the crusted snow flung back myriads of crystals to the sun; the houses were half buried in whiteness, while the rich green of the hemlocks and pines stood out grandly and covered the sharp nakedness of the woods. Sometimes they dashed across a brook, its little cascade tangled over with a network of ice, and its pure waters singing their way under the snow like a troop of fairies imprisoned by the winter and making merry over their misfortunes.

At last they came fairly out into the open country, and now the fun commenced. The horses, hitherto restrained with difficulty, took their own wild way; a storm of snow flew from their hoofs, sometimes breaking in a shower of pearl-dust over the inmates of the vehicles—sometimes pelting them with hard balls, that called forth sharp cries from those they struck, and shouts of laughter from the lookers-on. Then the excitement rose to joyous abandonment; delicate hands were ungloved and thrust down, ever and anon, into the snow through which the sleighs were flying; and each, as it passed the other, poured volleys of flashing balls upon the vanquished, while shouts of laughter rang out clear and loud above the sweet jingle of the bells and the rushing tread of the horses.

Thus, through that bright, beautiful country, intoxicated by the exuberant oxygen which made the air sparkle like champagne, this whirl of gay life swept on—a thousand reckless things, wild, witty, or silly, but still entrancing, escaping from lip to lip. Bright eyes grew brighter; red lips had no time to close in seriousness; cheeks, hitherto pale as lilies, gathered blooming roses from the frost and snow. Indeed, the whole ride was one riot of gayety, controlled by nothing but that refinement of high breeding which can make even recklessness elegant.

There was only one person in that whole party who did not give herself up to the joyousness of the occasion. Zua Wheaton could not tone her spirits into sympathy with her brilliant companions. She sat by Ruby Gray, in the equipage which Moreton was driving, covered to the neck by a robe made of the white fur of a polar bear, but shivering with inward cold, as she was apt to do when Ruby was close to her. Why was Zua so unsocial? A warmer, sweeter, or more beautiful creature could not well be imagined than the young widow appeared that morning. The scarlet feather in her hat was not of a richer red than her lips when they laughed out joyously at the flight of a well-aimed ball; nor could anything be more childishly graceful than her action when she shielded her laughing face from the return volley with her pretty ermine muff. Never had Ruby Gray been more attractive and fascinating. Brilliant she always was, but this day she surpassed herself.

All at once, as the horses were dashing on at full speed, Ruby gave a scream, that really appeared to be one of fright, and, flinging back the fur robe, looked down at her feet as if she expected to find a serpent there.

"Why, Theo! little wretch! how came you here?" she exclaimed, angrily. "Did I not tell you to remain at home?"

Theo saw by the hot flush of her face that Ruby was very much annoyed; so, dog-like, he crouched down in the bottom of the sleigh, and laid his cheek upon her feet, lifting his black eyes to hers, silently pleading for pity.

"Why did you come, I say?" she demanded, spurning him with her foot, as if he had, indeed, been some animal.

The boy grew angry at this, and showed his white teeth. Ruby was afraid to urge him further, for she knew how keenly vicious the creature could be when driven to the wall. "Well, as you are there," she said, more placably, "get up, and let us see what can be done for you. I wonder you have not smothered."

Theo struggled to his knees, and laying both arms on her lap, said, in his soft, pleading voice:

"Let me stay here; I will crowd no one."

Ruby laughed, and turned to Zua.

"Did you ever see such a creature! What must I do? I really think he cannot exist away from me."

Zua smiled, and answered, pleasantly: "There is no harm in it. He can sit between us."

The boy pressed close to his mistress.

"No; let him stay as he is. I dare say he will manage to make himself comfortable," she said. "There, there! I am not very angry with you; only, give no trouble."

With this Ruby seemed to regain her good-humor. She drew up the furs, as if quite careless whether she smothered the little Indian or not, and gave herself up to the hilarity of the occasion with more spirit than ever.

Now and then, Moreton would turn and glance at Zua, hoping to wake up her smiles, as sunshine rouses a poppy from its sleep; but only once did she give him an answering look. Then her splendid eyes turned upon him a glance of proud scorn that cut him to the soul.

When Ruby Gray saw this, she laughed with more ringing sweetness, and, rippling her hands in the snow, tossed it backward, as if she were strewing pearls along the highway. The man who has four horses in hand, half the time on the run, does not find much opportunity for observing those behind him. Besides, Moreton was used to Ruby Gray, and her pretty vagaries had ceased to interest him much; but Zua observed that she sometimes forgot the extravagant spirits with which she had set forth, and fell into deep fits of thought, starting strangely when some gay challenge from the other sleighs called her out of them.

There had been arrangements made at a wayside inn for an early dinner, at which there was little ceremony, but unchecked conviviality. There Ruby was again the gayest of

the gay. But the moment she found herself on the road again, that strange, thoughtful mood seized upon her, and saying that she was getting tired, she sank into silence.

At this place, Moreton made an effort to speak with Zua. Her manner toward him had become so chilling, that he could no longer endure the pain it gave him; and he resolved to cast away all the pride that had held him back till now, and insist upon knowing the cause of her strange conduct. But the proud girl avoided him resolutely, and so completely surrounded herself with others, that he had no opportunity of addressing a syllable to her unheard.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE SLEIGH-RIDE BALL.

WHEN that gay cavalcade came dashing up to the country inn, the whole village was in a state of wild commotion. Never had anything so magnificent been witnessed in that part of the world. Half the town seemed to have surrounded the inn. Directly the smoking horses were comfortably stabled, and lights flamed out from every window in the house, which was soon swarming like a beehive.

A baggage-sleigh had been sent down for the accommodation of the ladies, and they were soon in a bustle of preparation. Jaunty little hats were flung on the beds; furs and rich shawls were ignominiously cast aside; lovely faces were constantly peeping into the little mahogany-framed mirrors, brightening the glass with approving smiles. For the first time, those homemade carpets were swept with rustling silks and costly webs of lace that might not have been out of keeping with the palace of an empress.

A lovely group came out of those primitive dressing-rooms later in the evening. One moved softly as a snow-storm, in soft gossamer lace, through which gleams of white satin came fitfully, like frostwork under floating snow. This was Ruby Gray. A rope of pearls was around her neck; diamonds and pearls clasped the whiteness of her arms. In the flossy gold of her hair, gems would have been too heavy, so she gave it up to a garland of white poppies, that seemed to have blossomed out from the first flakes of the storm.

The widow was all in white. Not a tinge of color floated in her garments or her hair, save when the light struck fire from the diamonds on her arms and bosom. But for them her dress would have seemed too cold and bride-like for the occasion.

Zua Wheaton also came out of that group of lovely women, and stood, by chance, close by Ruby Gray. The contrast was beautiful; but I think you would have liked Zua best, with those scarlet berries in her raven hair, and the dress of black lace, looped up with wheat-ears and glowing poppies.

I single out these two from the rest because destiny forced them together; and, in after days, many of the persons present that night remembered with a thrill of pain how lovely the two looked standing side by side.

They stood thus when Moreton came into the room, and paused near the entrance a moment, regarding them. Certainly no two creatures could be more unlike. Ruby, in her soft, blond beauty, with hair like flossy gold, and eyes so blue and large that they had all the pure coloring of infancy, was loveliness itself. Her dress, soft and white, floating around her like woven thistle-down, gave angelic grace to her delicate beauty, and made it ethereal.

Zua stood by her side, regal in her queenliness, but clouded in black, and with far less than her usual bloom. There was a mournful look in the beautiful darkness of her eyes,

and a faint tremor of the lip, that struck the young man with surprise. Surely the girl was suffering from some cause. He made a vow to himself that before the morning he would know what it was that seemed to have chilled all the life out of her. But for the burning poppies on her dress and scarlet berries in her hair, she might have passed for a statue of grief.

That ball-room had certainly been touched by the hand of genius; its white walls were so garlanded with evergreens and starred with colored lamps that its very identity was lost. The evergreen woods had given up their most delicate hemlock spray, richly-tufted pine boughs, and glossy laurel. The walls were embowered in them. Sumptuous garlands draped the windows and the doors with an effect no lace or satin could have equalled, for starlike lights shone everywhere amid the foliage, and its feathery greenness was broken up with an abundance of trailing bitter-sweet and stately sumach cones, which had kept their ripe yellow and burning red in spite of the winter frost, and now glanced out like clusters of burnt gold and masses of coral among the lamps, that kindled up wreaths and branches like a fruitage of stars.

Thus, with the ball-room turned into a noble bower, and music sounding from the garlanded orchestra like a challenge of silver trumpets, the graceful revellers glided into the first dance, and whirled off into a bewildering waltz. As those beautiful women glided in and out of the dance, glowing with flowers and sparkling with jewels, it seemed as if fairy-land had broken loose, and was turning that old stone tavern into an enchanted palace.

Zua had taken one or two turns around the floor with Moreton; but she retreated, with a faint smile, and refused to dance again. Then, annoyed and disheartened, Moreton took Ruby Gray in her place: after this, he seemed to be in

extravagant spirits, and passed Zua once or twice without appearing to regard her. Zua had accepted Mr. Gray's invitation with little hope of enjoyment, but because she had resolved that no one should guess how wretched she was. Still she could not see those two persons so happy without bitter pain.

Just as the pleasures of the evening were becoming brilliant, Mr. Wheaton came into the ball-room, followed by young Gray and Amanda Clark. A drive of ten miles from the old homestead had landed them among the revellers in high spirits. Mr. Wheaton's face clouded over when he saw Ruby Gray floating through the dance with one hand on Moreton's shoulder and his arm circling her waist. But, as Ruby whirled by, she gave him a welcome glance over her shoulder, which swept all the gloom from his eyes and filled them with smiling love-light.

No crafty cat ever loved to play with her victims as this woman did. Heart and soul, the creature was a coquette. With her warm hand clasped in Moreton's more tightly than he was aware of, and her flushed cheek resting on his very shoulder, she had bewildering smiles to give this other man, for whom she cared nothing, and intended the keenest mortification and pain.

After a little, Moreton released her from his arm, and she fell into a seat, panting and flushed with pleasure. Mr. Wheaton came up and bent over her fondly, as a man might be expected to do near his affianced wife.

"I have come for your decision, dearest," he said, smiling down upon her. "Remember, it was a promise that, when next we met, you would name the day."

Ruby laughed, and waved her fan gracefully toward him, scattering perfumed air on his face.

"Yes; it shall be settled to-night for good and all. I am glad that you have come."

"Ah! if you could but know how happy this makes me,"

whispered Wheaton. "I really am the most fortunate fellow on earth. But here comes Moreton to take you out again. If I did not know that he has been once rejected, all this might make me jealous."

Again Ruby laughed, struck his arm lightly with her fan as she closed it, and gave herself to Moreton's arm again.

All this time, Amanda Clark stood by the door, leaning on the arm of young Gray. She had never waltzed a step in her life; so Gray refused to join the dance, that he might converse with her. He, too, was becoming impatient of a long engagement, and began pleading with her in a low voice.

"I have done everything that you asked of me," he said, "and more. There is not so steady a fellow as I am in the city. I am standing now at the foot of the ladder, ready to start life again, if you will only share it with me. Could we live on a thousand a year, darling?"

"Oh, wait a while, till I have earned more money! The thousand would be enough for me; but for you, no."

"But I want you, Amanda. Anything will be enough, if you are with me. Surely you are not getting fond of the stage?"

"Fond of the stage? No. But I want money for you. A woman should help the man she loves upward, not drag him down."

"You are a brave, good girl! and God knows I love you dearly. What a worthless life mine was till I knew you! But you shall not earn money for me."

Tears stood warm and bright in Amanda's eyes. She turned them away, that even he might not guess how proud and happy she was.

"In a year, if you wish it so much," she said. "It was love of you that took me to the stage, and that will make me give it up cheerfully the moment I can."

Just then supper was announced, and the dancers swept Gray and Amanda with them into the dining-room.

It chanced that Ruby Gray was dancing with Moreton, and took his arm as they broke up, casting a look of pretty defiance back at Mr. Wheaton, who shook his finger at her playfully, and assumed the charge of his daughter.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

AT SUPPER.

THE supper was unique, and promised to go off splendidly, as the ball had commenced. Choice wines, confectionery, and hot-house fruit had been sent from the city in abundance, and these gave a glow of rich coloring to the table, which concealed all deficiency of cut glass, silver, and china.

More wine than usual was drunk that night; the weather being cold and sharp, exercise gave it a delicious flavor, which was full of exhilaration. Moreton, naturally a temperate man enough, drank freely, and urged others to follow his example, feeling himself to be the host, in fact, though Ruby Gray alone knew it.

Once, when the servant brought a particular kind of champagne to Ruby, she placed her clenched hand over the glass, as if to prevent its overflow; and Theo, who stood behind her, saw the flash of an empty vial between her fingers as she dropped the hand into her lap.

A moment after, Ruby pushed her glass toward Moreton, and softly exchanged it for his. If people observed that the host was more than usually gay and reckless after that, it was imputed to a dash of unusually high spirits, and no one was disposed to be critical.

Ruby watched him closely, and her eyes danced with joy as she saw a hot crimson stealing over his cheeks, and marked his voice grow deep and mellow, as if he had been fed on ripe peaches for a month.

A clever young girl sat at Ruby's right hand, who considered the widow a creature worthy of adoration; and to this girl the woman spoke now and then in whispers.

"Yes, it would be splendid—regular old-fashioned plays, such as we read of. If you propose them, dear, I will sustain you. Nothing could be more delightful; the whole idea is excellent."

So the girl, apparently from her own thought, proposed that after supper they should get up some old-fashioned country plays, and dance the German after. That would make the whole affair a regular country sleigh-ride.

This proposition became popular in an instant. The table was soon deserted, and the revellers went back to the ball-room, singly and in groups, eager for this novel amusement.

On her way to the ball-room, Ruby turned into the darkness of a narrow passage, and found Billy Clark at the end, waiting for her.

"Is he here?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"Yes; I told you he should be."

"I know! I know where he is! Let me look at him! In this room, alone!"

She stole to the door of a small room opening from the passage, in which a thin little man sat, reading what seemed to be a Testament, by the light of a single oil-lamp.

"You are sure that it is right?" she whispered, stealing back to Billy, who was pale as death, and trembled as if with cold. "You are sure?"

"Yes, I am sure; but do go—some one will see us talking together."

"Yes, I know," whispered the woman. "But keep on the watch—remember how I trust you." Then she started,

looking over her shoulder in alarm; then seizing the hand of her trembling accomplice, she wrung it almost fiercely. "Be silent and faithful, my friend!"

The next instant, Clark saw her flitting toward the ball-room, which she entered quietly, but holding her breath as if some pain were cramping the action of her heart.

The old-fashioned country plays took wonderfully with those merry young people, who accepted the novelty in high glee. Here Amanda Clark came out with great brilliancy, and while the simple words and homely music rose like bird-songs from her lips, she lent a regal grace to each action of the different plays, that made her, for the time, a very queen of the revels.

When her white arms were uplifted in teaching them how to play "Thread the Needle," or exposed in all their flexible gracefulness in "Turning the Trencher," she reminded more than one of the lowly maiden whom Raphael loved and made immortal by his genius.

"Come, now, let's play forfeits," she cried, with a hearty love of the sport, which inspired the whole company to enthusiasm. "We must use the trencher for that also."

She took a wooden bread-plate, and, holding it up in one hand, addressed the laughing crowd around her:

"Now I set this to spinning around, calling the name of some person as I commence: if he or she does not catch it before it falls to the floor, I am to exact any forfeit I like. So look sharp and spring quick, for I shall be an unmerciful judge."

"Let it be my chance; do, please, call my name," whispered the girl who had sat next Ruby Gray at supper.

Amanda nodded, gave a willowy bend to her person, and set the plate spinning, as she called out:

"Miss Burkheart."

The girl sprang forward, seized the revolving trencher between both hands, held it aloft, and took a graceful waltz-

ing step in her triumph. As she paused, the wild eyes and pale face of Ruby Gray, who stood leaning against the door, fascinated her. But a quick smile flashed like a sunbeam across the beautiful face, and, relieved of her anxiety, the girl cried out:

"Ruby — Ruby Gray!"

Swift as the flight of a bird, the widow sprang forward, made a grasp at the trencher, fell on one knee, and missed it — thus subjecting herself to punishment.

"How stupid! how miserably stupid!" she exclaimed, looking ruefully at the trencher, which had fallen flat on the floor. "It is too provoking."

Miss Burkheart clapped her little hands, and went off in an ecstasy of triumph.

"Let me think," she said, pressing a finger to her lip, and pretending to reflect; "how shall I punish you? Ah! ha! I have it! You shall go through the marriage ceremony with Mr. Moreton. Mr. Gray blundered, too, in starting forward at the wrong time. He shall be married to Miss Clark."

A burst of merriment followed this sentence.

"Yes, yes! Let them be married! Let's have a wedding! Who will be the minister? Stand up! Stand up! There, what a splendid couple! Here, Mr. Gray, Miss Clark! But we can't have a minister in a ball-dress," cried a chorus of laughing voices.

In all this merry clamor the young friend of Ruby Gray was most eager.

"Oh! there is Billy Clark in the passage," she cried out. "Billy, here are lots of people that want to be married: do find us a minister. Anybody that wears black clothes will do, only he must look grave — that will be all the fun."

Billy disappeared. The girl came back laughing.

"Now take your places, the minister is coming," she cried, placing her arm through that of Preston Moreton, and half

forcing him to the side of Ruby Gray. "There, that's all right. Now, Mr. Charles, come up to the hymeneal altar with Miss Clark—she looks willing."

Young Gray drew Amanda's arm through his, and marched boldly up to his destiny, he said, with a keen enjoyment of the farce. Miss Burkheart, having got her victims in place, ran to the door, again looked out, and came back on tiptoe, with her finger on her lips.

"Now all hush, and be quiet. This is a serious business, I tell you. Hush! h-u-s-h!"

As the mischievous girl said this, a thin, seedy little man, who was an absolute stranger to every one in the room, came through the door, looking so absurdly solemn and shy, that several of the ladies were compelled to smother their laughter in their handkerchiefs, though they struggled hard to keep up an appearance of gravity.

"Oh, it is too comical!" cried Miss Burkheart, retreating behind some ladies in order to conceal her laughter. "Where did any one find the droll creature? Such exquisite fun!"

Every person in that giddy throng seemed to enjoy the joke as much as the girl did herself. There was something deliciously natural in the air and manner with which the mock parson advanced to that group in the centre of the room, and severally asked the names, which made the gravest man there shake with suppressed merriment.

Nothing could be more natural than the shy solemnity of this little man, as he went through all the details of this double farce with a gravity that threatened to throw his audience into convulsions.

"Now," he said, in a feeble but solemn voice, "by the power invested in me, and in the name of the living God, I pronounce you husband and wife."

There was something so earnest in these words, that all the laughter which had threatened to burst forth every instant, was hushed, and the four persons turned pale, as if

not till then conscious of the sacrilege they were guilty of; but this feeling only lasted a moment. When the little man stepped back and bade them salute each other, with a gentle wave of the hand, and retreated to the door, observing meekly that it was a little out of order, but he had been requested to dispense with the usual prayer, a burst of gleeful laughter and mock congratulations followed, that made every spray on the walls tremble.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

AFTER THE MOCK MARRIAGE.

THE gay tumult in the ball-room was gradually subsiding, when the little man very unexpectedly came back with two slips of paper in his hand, which he extended to each of the mock brides.

"I brought the printed forms with me. You will find them correct," he said.

Was ever acting more perfect! It seemed so real that the whole party was sobered by it. Amanda Clark looked bewildered. Ruby Gray was pale as death, and the paper in her hand trembled so violently that she let it fall.

"Upon my word, this is magnificent acting," said Moreton, who had not offered to take the salute, for which he certainly had a good excuse. "You should go upon the stage, sir."

The man answered, with an uneasy smile:

"It is possible to carry levity too far," he said. "A follower of Christ, though humble in himself, is bound to ask respect for his calling."

"Excuse me," said Moreton, who felt shocked by this

irreverence. "A joke is a joke, but we need not drag the Saviour's name into it. Pray tell us who you are, sir, and let us thank you for as fine a piece of acting as is often seen on the stage: but we will carry it no farther; the whole thing is becoming too much like sacrilege."

"You will find my name on the certificates," said the man, coloring painfully. "It has an honorable place, I trust, among the ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church. If I have fallen short in any formality, while performing these marriages, it was because both time and place were embarrassing."

A marble statue could not have been whiter or more rigid than Preston Moreton became, when the truth in this man made itself thoroughly felt. For a moment, his lips refused to utter a word; then he turned a wild look on the spot where Zua Wheaton had stood. She was standing there yet, pale, mute, horror-stricken, with a face so still and locked that it wrung a groan from his heart.

Mr. Wheaton had drawn close to his child, and supported her with an arm that shook till all the black drapery of her dress trembled around her; but on his face was written such stern indignation as an honest, proud heart feels when made conscious of a base betrayal.

Charles Gray was the first to come out of the panic that had fallen upon them all.

"Thank God," he said, kissing Amanda tenderly on the forehead. "Thank God, that with us it is real. Look up, my wife, and say that you are glad."

Amanda lifted her clear, blue eyes to his face, and a smile quivered through the blushes his kiss had deepened.

One by one the revellers withdrew, following Mr. Wheaton, who bore Zua out in his arms; for she had fainted quite away.

Then Preston Moreton was left alone with his wife, cold, resolute, and hard as iron.

She lifted her face to his, wondering what she would find there; but the very heart shrank in her bosom when she saw the fiery gleam in his eyes, and heard the first tones of his voice.

"Woman!" he said, "give me the truth: was this fraud yours?"

She tried to say "No," but her tongue refused to utter the falsehood; and she only looked into his white face mutely, like a dumb animal that fears to be spurned.

"Speak!" he said, almost savagely. "Speak, I say!"

She clasped her hands and held them toward him, shivering from head to foot.

"Speak, woman!"

"Oh, Preston! Preston! I loved you so!"

"Then let that love be your punishment. After this hour, I will never look upon your face again!"

She uttered a sharp cry, and fell upon her knees before him.

"Not that! Oh! not that! Anything else, and I will endure it!"

"That, and that only! You have made yourself my chain — my curse; separated me from the only being I have ever loved — ever can love! But my wife you shall never be!"

She fell to his feet, not insensible, but strengthless.

After all, she was a woman, and he could not leave her there so helpless. He lifted her to a settee, and went into the hall.

"Give me a glass of water, wine — anything!" he called out, leaning heavily against the door-frame.

Standing in the hall, with all his savage blood on fire, was Theo, the Indian boy. The red light flashed into his eyes when he heard this call, coming hoarse and dry from that wretched man's throat.

"I will get it — let me!"

The lad sprang up and was gone. The next instant he came into the hall, carrying a glass of water. He paused a moment in the dark, a faint tinkle of glass followed, and then he came forward.

"Here is the water — take it — drink it!"

Moreton was too much excited to mark the words or manner of Theo. He took the goblet, strode across the ball-room, and lifting Ruby's head, held it to her mouth. She drank eagerly; but while the glass was at her lips, Theo sprang through the door like a young tiger, snatched it from Moreton's hold, and dashed it across the room.

But it was too late. A strong odor of prussic acid arose from the broken glass, and from the lips of that dead woman. In a moment the very air was oppressed with a renewal of the same deadly perfume. A portion of the fatal liquid still remained in the vial which the boy concealed in one hand. He drew close to his dead mistress, clenched the neck of the tiny vial between his teeth, and died with it locked there.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

BILLY CLARK RETURNS HOME ALONE.

THAT night, old Mrs. Clark was sitting up, with a great wood-fire blazing on the hearth, waiting for the young people to come home. An hour or two after midnight, she heard a faint noise at the kitchen door, and started up just in time to see her son William come staggering in, white as a ghost, and with a scared look on his face.

"Mother," he said, "*you* won't turn against me for what I've done? She wanted him, and he ought to have loved her, if he did n't. I saw 'em married, and came right away."

"You? Who married?" inquired the old woman.

"Why, that feller Moreton, and — I could n't help that, it was none of my doing — but somehow, Gray and our Mandy got married too."

"Married to-night?"

"Yes, mother; it's wrong, I dare say, and nobody wanted 'em to stand up, that I know of; but there it is — he and our Mandy are man and wife."

"Come in to the fire, William, and let me look at your face; I'm afraid you are getting crazy."

"No, marm, I'm not crazy, because I meant to separate them from the beginning, and I've done it. He can't marry her now; that good man has tied him up; she will come home again. What is that? Oh! nothing but a little blood. It often comes to my lips so — faster — faster! so it does! But that is nothing. I'll hold a little snow to my mouth; that will drive it back."

The old woman looked at him drearily. She had gone through such scenes before.

"Could you just bring me in a handful of snow, mother?"

The old woman went out and gathered some snow between her hands, which she hardened into a ball; some drops fell upon it from time to time, and the still air was broken by something like a woman's sobs; but when she went in, no sign of all this could be found on Mrs. Clark's face.

Billy shivered as he took the snow from her, and asked sharply why his mother did not shut the door.

It was not long before the pure whiteness of that snow-ball was entirely red; but Billy held it to his mouth until the sound of sleigh-bells disturbed him, when he flung it back of the fire.

"Don't tell her about it," he said, sharply; "it's her wedding-night, and she must n't be made uneasy."

Almost while he was speaking, Amanda came in, pale and shivering with excitement rather than cold.

"What is it, Mandy, that William has been telling? He says that you are married."

"Oh, mother, don't mention it; the whole thing is fearful enough to drive one mad!"

"What is the matter, Amanda?" said William, lifting his wild eyes from the fire. "I thought you loved him, and did not care."

"I do love him, brother, and can't find it in my heart to feel sorry for what has happened to us; but, oh, poor Ruby Gray!"

"What of her — what of the butterfly? are her wings broken?" inquired Mrs. Clark, curtly.

"Mother, she is dead!"

Billy Clark sprang to his feet.

"Dead — dead! did you say?"

"Yes, William, she is dead. The snow out there is not colder than she is."

"Did *he* kill her, when he found out? — that Moreton, I mean."

"No, William, it was the boy, Theo."

William Clark sank to his chair, and covered his face with both hands.

"Mother," he said, "bring me more of that; poor Mandy will have to know it now."

That moment Charles Gray came in, very serious and troubled.

"Oh, Charles! Charles! my poor brother! what can we do?" cried Amanda.

Charles took the poor, trembling fellow in his arms and carried him up to bed, where he watched by him all night. Billy was fearfully excited, and would not rest till Gray told him everything that had passed at the inn that night. After this, he slept a little from pure exhaustion, but at daylight became excited again, and asked for his sister.

Amanda, who had scarcely slept, heard that feeble voice,

and, turning her face to the pillow, cried bitterly. Again Billy asked for her in a voice that penetrated the thin partition.

She got up hastily and went into his room. The poor fellow was lying on the bed, whimpering out a sort of strange hysterical laughter, which came from his lips in sobs more touching than tears.

"Mandy, dear!" he said, "tell me, did you hear bells in the night — Mr. Wheaton's bells?"

"Yes, William, I think so!"

"Did he bring her home? Miss — Miss Zua, I mean!"

"I don't know, but it is probable."

"Mandy, if I could only see her just once before it's over, you know?"

"You shall, brother, if she is at the house. I will go myself, and tell her how ill you are."

"That's kind; you've been a good sister to me, Mandy."

"I wish I had been kinder, Billy; indeed I do!"

"You could n't be, nor mother either; she's good as gold. You must n't let her grieve over it, when I'm under the snow, Mandy?"

"Don't, don't talk so — it breaks my heart!"

"No, it won't! I was n't of much account! if *he* had only kept away; but it's of no use now. You'll be sure and go after her?"

"Yes, William; I will get my things at once."

Amanda put on her shawl, and started for Mr. Wheaton's house. The snow was heavy in the fields, and she was obliged to go around by the road, which, even then, was not sufficiently trodden down for comfortable walking.

While she was toiling along the drifted cross-road, Mrs. Clark dressed herself, and went into her son's room.

He was sitting up in bed, watching Amanda through the window: the poor mother shrank from the brightness of his eyes, and the fiery red of those thin cheeks.

"Do lie down!" she said sharply: the pain at her heart penetrated through her words.

"I was only watching her!" answered the poor fellow, with touching meekness. "How slow she is! But then it is drifted; I dare say she does her best! Mother, she's gone after her!"

Mrs. Clark made an impatient gesture. Looking upon Zua Wheaton as the cause of her son's hopeless condition, she could not endure to hear her mentioned.

"Don't look so hard mother, please don't; she is n't to blame because I could n't help loving her."

Mrs. Clark did not answer; she was striving to subdue the unreasonable prejudice that possessed her. This hesitation threw Billy into a fit of painful excitement. He began to tremble violently, and pushed her feebly away when she attempted to arrange his pillows.

"You sha'n't be cross to her, I tell you!" he attempted to say; but his voice broke into a pitiful whisper, and moaned out, "Oh, don't be cross to her, don't!"

"I won't, I won't!" cried the mother, frightened by the agitation that threatened to carry his life with it. "She shall wipe her feet on my hair, if it will quiet you, my poor boy."

Billy gave a faint sob, and settled back on the pillows she was now suffered to arrange for him.

After a little, he sat up again, and made an effort to get out of bed.

"Mother, she is coming; I can feel her treading through the snow: bring out my dressing-gown — there, in the lower drawer, with some rose-leaves folded in it; my slippers, mother, and the cap: she'll think I've been smoking, perhaps."

The poor fellow turned his feet over the side of the bed, in his eagerness, and tried to put on his clothes; but Mrs. Clark found him helplessly holding a stocking in his hand when she came in with the dressing-gown.

"I can't get it on," he whispered faintly. "I've tried, and tried, but I can't."

Mrs. Clark dropped on her knees, took his pale foot between her hands with a great sob — for she remembered what a little thing it was when she held it in the first loving clasp — and, with a most gentle touch, put on the stockings and the slippers; then she warmed his other garments by the fire, put them on, and folded the gorgeous dressing-gown over them, relieved for a moment by the smile with which the poor fellow regarded his precious finery.

Then she took him in her strong arms — again remembering how sweetly he had rested there when a little babe — and set him down among the pillows arranged in an old rocking-chair, folded the dressing-gown over his knees, and put a footstool, with a shabby embroidered cushion, under his feet, which lifted the slippers in full view.

"Let me put on the cap," he said, brightening a little. "You won't know how — just a little on one side — so!"

With his shivering hands he arranged the cap, and closing his eyes, waited.

It was nearly an hour before Amanda returned with Zua, whom she had found sitting drearily in her room, too fearfully shocked for an idea of rest. She also heard the footsteps of Mr. Wheaton passing to and fro, in a neighboring chamber, with the unequal and heavy tread of a man who suffers greatly. But all this was nothing to her own sharp anguish. She believed her brother to be dying, and, in such words as nature wrings from a sorrowful heart, besought the girl to go with her at once. Zua arose without a word, put on the cloak and furs that still lay in a heap on the sofa where she had flung them, and followed Amanda out into the cold gray of the morning.

It seemed as if that poor invalid really did feel Zua Wheaton's footsteps in the snow, for, long before she reached the house, he called out:

"Mother dear! won't you put another stick or two on the fire? How good of you to make one up here! But then you always were good to me—so good! so good!"

"No, no! I have been a cross-grained—oh! my God, my God!"

"Don't!" whimpered Billy. "You make me feel bad."

The poor woman thrust back her agony for the moment, but went into her own room, fell across the bed, and cried till the old corded bedstead shook under her.

Billy did not hear her sobs, but leaning back, closed his eyes and listened. All at once a faint smile broke over his face: that moment Zua Wheaton entered the house.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

DEATH OF THE WIDOW'S SON.

WILLIAM," said Zua, drawing a seat close to the old rocking-chair, "I am so sorry! Are you very ill? I hope not, oh! I hope not."

The girl was greatly troubled, and her voice was very sorrowful.

Billy looked up, and saw the heavy sadness in her eyes, while she shuddered at the fearful brightness in his.

"Yes, I am very sick—so sick, Miss Zua, that it won't be long before they will have to tear up the snow-crust to make a grave for me."

Zua laid her hand on the thin fingers that were grasping the arm of that old rocking-chair.

"I hope not, Billy."

"Do you? Do you really care?"

Billy dropped his feet from the footstool, and turned, that he might look in her face.

I think you might be sorry," he said, turning his eyes away; "but not when I tell you that it was William Clark who got that minister."

Zua started.

"You, William?"

"Yes, it was me. Mrs. Gray loved Mr. Moreton, and I felt sorry for her. But it was n't that!—oh! it was n't that."

"And you knew that she intended the—the act that cost her life?"

"Yes, I knew; I helped her. I was the evil spirit. No wonder you hitch your chair away!—no wonder you breathe hard! Such wickedness would drive my own mother from me. No, no, it would n't; for she loves me! She loves me!"

Billy clasped his hands as he said this, and great tears rolled one after another down his poor face.

"But why did you take a part in this, Billy?"

"Don't you know? Have n't you guessed?" inquired the sick man, turning his eyes, in all their deathly brightness, upon her. "Zua Wheaton, it was because I loved you better than that Moreton ten thousand times!"

Zua turned even whiter than the late trouble had left her, and shrank together in her chair, shocked beyond expression.

"I loved you, and I hated him! It was to keep you from marrying him that I did it."

"But the death of that poor woman. Surely—surely—"

"No, no; I had nothing to do with that. Did n't know it till Mandy came home. But I helped about the marriage."

"I am very sorry," said Zua, gently.

"You never can forgive me! You'll hate the sods that cover me!" said Billy, with sad humility.

"No, no. I do forgive you."

"And for loving you — can you forgive that?"

Zua burst into tears. The love of this poor invalid touched her heart. Out of her own sufferings sprang infinite charity, which covered even this poor weakling.

"I can forgive everything, William."

"And think of me kindly sometimes, though I did dare to love you?"

"I shall always think of you kindly, William."

The invalid fell into a fit of weeping, and for a while both were silent. Then he started forward, and called for his mother. Mrs. Clark came, with tears on her face.

"Mother, feel in the pocket of my overcoat. You will find a letter. I want it."

Mrs. Clark went down stairs, and came back with the letter.

"It's for your father first," said Billy, giving it to Zua; "but he told me to give it to you, and tell you to read it, if I could n't find him. It was before we left New York; and the boy — Theo, I mean — was anxious that some of you should get it before the sleigh-ride; but I kept it back on purpose, for I never trusted that boy. I knew well enough that he meant to break up that ride, but I did n't think he would kill her."

"I do not think he meant it," said Zua, taking the letter. "The poison was doubtless intended for Mr. Moreton."

Billy shook his head, and muttered:

"Nothing but wickedness — nothing but wickedness; and I the worst of all! Oh, Miss Zua, do you believe God can forgive me?"

"God is love!" answered the girl, reverently.

"But the ministers preach that He is angry with the wicked every day."

"But He is also merciful to those who repent, and I know that you are sorry."

"Yes, I am sorry. Oh, very — very sorry!"

"You would not do it again?"

"No; not to save my life."

"Then be at peace, my poor friend. God, who is all-merciful, does not punish wrongs that are repented of."

Billy turned his imploring eyes on her.

"Miss Zua."

"What can I do for you, William?"

"Would you kiss me? I would n't ask, only it seems to me as if I was dying!"

Zua arose, bent gently over him, and kissed his pale forehead. As she lifted her head, his eyes closed, and a faint smile spread over his whole face, which turned almost imperceptibly toward her; but, with the smile, came those solemn gray shadows that fall like a holy veil over the stillness of death.

Poor Billy Clark! They buried him under the snow on the very afternoon that Ruby Gray's imposing funeral swept toward Greenwood, casting black shadows along the whiteness of the road.

CHAPTER LXXX.

ON THE ISLAND.

ZUA WHEATON leaned over her father while he read the letter which the boy Theo had intrusted to Billy Clark — read it with sorrow and consternation; for Theo revealed the whole fraud — the altered dates, the interpolated passages, and, most important of all, the letter in which Zua's name had been so cruelly used. This note was transcribed word for word in what seemed to be Moreton's handwriting; but that was impossible, as it was embodied in Theo's

epistle, and given as a proof of his power to commit the forgery. "She told me it was to send him off—far away from the country," the boy wrote, "and it was for that I prepared the notes; but my lady cheated me: she loves that Moreton; she means to make your daughter quarrel with him, and then marry him herself. And she'll do it, unless you, sir, put a stop to the grand sleigh-ride they are getting up; or if I— Well, I have said enough. Keep Mr. Moreton from going out on any sleigh-ride; if he does—"

Mr. Wheaton closed the letter—its contents sickened him.

"Zua," he said, "in mercy to the memory of that unfortunate woman, let this rest a secret with us. I will see Moreton, and apologize, without exposing her part in the matter. Thank heaven, we have nothing but coldness to take back—no act of our own to blush for."

"Oh, father, this is terrible!" said Zua. "I cannot sleep, I cannot rest—everything around seems so dreary."

"We will go away a while longer; when the spring comes, it will be pleasant again, and more like home to us both," said Mr. Wheaton. "Now that we have seen that poor young man buried, there is nothing to keep us here."

On the very next morning, Wheaton and his daughter went back to the city, where they read a dozen distorted accounts of Ruby Gray's death in the daily journals. Coupled with these, there were glowing descriptions of the marriage of Charles Gray with the young American prima donna, with a world of regret that the large fortune Mr. Gray would inherit on the death of his sister-in-law, might withdraw from the operatic stage the most brilliant and promising American artist that had ever graced it—one whose success had been so wonderful, that the lady's marriage and her husband's good fortune might be deemed a public disappointment. * * * * *

The papers were right: Amanda had no idea of returning to the stage, where her triumphs had been brilliant as they

were brief. All her talents, her bright youth, and her beauty were given, with simple, honest trust to the man she loved, and whom she had in some sort redeemed from a trivial and useless existence. As a proof of this thorough regeneration, Gray continued his studies as a law-student, after his accession to Ruby Gray's wealth; and in after years, many a poor man, wrongfully accused, found an able defender in his eloquence and energy, without money and without price. Indeed, in this, Charles Gray occupied the broadest field of public charity to be found in an imperfect social system.

A modern villa, commanding a glorious view of the Sound, half a mile from the old brown house, is his country residence. Amanda made an effort to persuade her mother away from her humble abode, but the old washer-woman refused to abandon the locust-grove, under whose green branches her son lay sleeping, and persisted in maintaining an independent home over her head. But she consented in many respects to change her mode of life, and astonished the whole congregation at the village church, one Sabbath, by appearing there in a heavy black silk dress, and with a modern bonnet on, though she refused absolutely to part with the old coal-scuttle, and packed it daintily away in the original bandbox, which was large as a good-sized trunk. The old woman no longer took in washing, but appeased her energies in that direction by giving a day in each week to the getting up an indefinite number of little white dresses, half muslin tucks and the rest Valenciennes lace, which a little blue-eyed darling up at the villa wore, with the unlimited freedom of a lily that takes its whiteness from the sunshine. In order that this child should be made more and more beautiful, the old woman went to the city one day, and came back with a patent wringer and a newly-invented fluting-iron, which she hid in a closet, as if they had been a sin, but used surreptitiously, ashamed of the innovation on her old-fashioned way of doing things, but ready to put

up with that much-abused word, modern progress, for the child's sake.

Sometimes, as the neighbors pass Mrs. Gray's mansion at nightfall, or in the evening, they hear the tones of a piano touched with careless power, and the clear, rich volume of a magnificent voice, pouring its melodies on the air with such prodigal sweetness that the very workingmen pause to listen as they go wearily home from a hard day's toil. These wonderful notes the whole world has not gold enough to purchase; but that little azure-eyed child can call them forth whenever his lisping voice chooses to entreat.

Some six months after the great sensation created by the events connected with the disastrous sleighing-party, the fashionable world had an opportunity of reviving it; for cards appeared for the marriage of Preston Moreton and Zua Wheaton.

A few years later, the old farm-house on the bay had changed its appearance somewhat. The flower-beds have broadened and grown more brilliant around it; rose-thickets have become doubly numerous since Mr. Wheaton has persuaded Zua's husband to make the old place his summer residence; and it seems as if all the birds in the neighborhood flocked into that grand old orchard to build their nests and sing their sweetest love-songs, when Zua's child comes among them.

In the broad veranda, which looks down upon the water, half a dozen cages full of musical prisoners hang among the honeysuckles and crimson roses. Just now one of these cages is sitting on the floor, and two little girls, with their bright eyes wide open in astonishment, are peeping in at a couple of half-fledged canaries, that lie like a golden fluff of thistle-down in that nest, lined with cotton-wool, around which the parent birds settle and chirp with a flutter of supreme delight. Directly, a dainty old lady comes through the hall-door, with her hair, white as snow, rolled

in flossy puffs under a delicate lace cap, and her dress of silver-gray silk rustling richly as she stoops over the children, and tells her own little grand-daughter that it is time to go home.

The pretty blue-eyed darling allows Grandmamma Gray to tie that delicate combination of lace and blue silk over the pale gold of her curls, and, after saying good-by to a handsome lady within the house, is led away through the rose thickets, pulling at the hand which guides her, while she lisps out:

"Good-by, Zua! good-by!" and flings kisses back to her lovely, dark-eyed playmate, who peeps through the railing of the veranda, ready to cry because her little visitor is hurried off before that funny mite of a bird has hopped out of its nest.

THE END.

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