

H. M. B. J.

AGAINST THE WORLD.

BY

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A MUCH-NEEDED PREFACE.

ONCE upon a time I wrote a book, in which an angular old maid lived, moved, and had her acidulous being. Quoth the wise public, "The book is plainly autobiographical."

Once upon a time I wrote a magazine-story, wherein the ubiquitous Mrs. Grundy figured in character. "That is my wife!" cried a vestry-man, whose existence until that moment had been an unrevealed fact; and, in his wrath, dire and multifold were the threats hurled at my most innocent head.

Once upon a time I wrote a newspaper-article, in which a certain well-defined marital proclivity "*to point the right, but still the wrong pursue,*" was meekly commented upon. "That's me!" chorused a score or more of conscience-stricken Benedicts. And in my heart I blessed the social prejudices existing against that venerable institution, "the ducking-stool."

And now I appeal to an impartial public, Is it my fault

if people will keep trying on my shoes, and crying out that they pinch?

I send this youngest-born of my brain out *against the world* to plead for recognition as pure fiction. It is the child of my brain, begotten of fancy, nourished by imagination. As such, I commend it to the tender mercies of my friends and those it may make for itself.

THE AUTHOR.

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AGAINST THE WORLD.

CHAPTER I.

1825.

"MARRIED to-night!"

It was a purely confidential communication, made by Miss Almira Stanley, the prettiest girl in all Chester, to the only safe confidante for any female, — her looking-glass.

Not that it was much of a secret, after all; for all Chester knew it; had known it, in fact, some time before Miss Stanley herself: and all Chester was to haste to the wedding that very night, that wonderful, wonderful night, — so wonderful, that Mira, the sweet bride-elect, seemed in a sort of daze about it; for, after she had sent that whispered communication into the clear depths of her mirror, she drooped her pretty head upon a hand that held a flashing ring of promise, and dozed off into a day-dream.

The last day-dream of Mira Stanley. And, while she dreams, let me sketch her for you as she sits before her Psyche-glass, the true and sympathetic friend that rejoiced in her joy, giving back smile for smile, loving glance for loving glance, dimple for dimple.

Almira Stanley was her name, — a stately and a dignified name, suggestive of stately and dignified folk who talk grandly on grand subjects, walk grandly as queens and empresses walk (or should walk), whose heads have "regal poises," and all that sort of thing.

'Tis a pity her name should suggest such a variety of grand things; for the regally inclined will be much disap-

pointed, and possibly a trifle disgusted, when they come to learn that Mira Stanley was a slight, graceful girl of medium height, whose beauty was compounded of bright eyes, laughter-loving lips, rippling brown hair, and a couple of the most delicious dimples that ever quickened the pulses of susceptible manhood.

I don't think she was fully conscious of her own attractiveness; had she been, her soliloquy would not have savored so of sweet humility. The great coming event would not have seemed to her so very wonderful.

Married to-night! She — insignificant, silly nobody, Mira Stanley — about to become the wife of Philip Walworth, the handsomest, noblest, kingliest of mortals! What had he seen in her to select her from all the rest of womankind? For of course he could have married anybody he chose, — everybody, in fact, if he had seen fit to flit westward.

Would he keep on loving her as he did now? *Could* familiarity with such an insignificant bundle of imperfections as herself fail to breed contempt? Could she and "Philip her king" ever get to looking as stupidly indifferent to each other as did old Mr. and Mrs. Prodgers, who *always* went to sleep to get rid of each other after dinner? She smiled at such a preposterous fancy. The hours, the days, the weeks, the years, would fly all too swiftly for any of the precious minutes to be wasted in slothful slumbers. *He* could never change: he would always be grand and noble and kingly and perfect; and she would always bow down in worship of his perfections. But she! — her hair might turn gray; her eyes might grow dull and dim (he called her eyes starry now); her figure might lose its supple grace; time might deal cruelly with her; in short — and what then? Ah! would he love her then as now?

"Mercy on me! half-past five o'clock, and here the child sits in her wrapper!"

Mira came back from dreamland on an electric current, as she found herself confronted by her mother, two bridesmaids, and a small retinue of hand-maidens, all ready and eager to assist in the sacred rites of the bridal toilet.

"Is it time to dress already, mamma?"

"Already!" answered Mrs. Stanley briskly. "My word for it, child, eight o'clock, and the minister too, will be here before that unruly head of yours is half combed."

Thus reminded that she was possessed of a head which really did need a vast amount of skilful manipulation before she could be pronounced half worthy to enter into the presence of her future lord, Mira rose up, and began lazily pulling the pins out of her hair, letting it tumble upon her shoulders, and around her bright face, in great shimmering masses, and then resignedly yielded herself to those now all-important personages, — dressing-maids.

"Married to-night! Tied up for life in less than a dozen more hours! For better, for worse: who knows? Deused ticklish business this marrying! Sweet little girl, though, — mild as buttermilk; can manage her with a look. None of your Queen Didos, forever on the rampage, for me! I don't propose to wear myself out, physically or mentally, taming a shrew. Mira is a lady, — a sweet, gentle-voiced, well-bred lady, — a credit to a man's taste, an ornament to the head of his table. Pity the little thing isn't a shade more intellectual! I must be prepared, once in a while, to blush for her deficiency in that line. Wish she had a little more of her cousin in her; but she'll do, — do first-rate. She's a safe investment. Nothing revolutionary about her. No danger of startling situations, and dramatic agitations, and palpitations generally. Life, married life, with Mira Stanley as a mate, will be placidly respectable, if a trifle respectably dull. *N'importe!* better moulder piecemeal on the rock than sink beneath some thundering social shock."

Mr. Philip Walworth had a trick of transposing poetry, or rather of dismembering it, and selecting from it such disjointed words and sentences as might convey his meaning more forcibly than any original combination of his own manufacture. The fact that it was Mr. Philip Walworth's wedding-night created more of a stir in Chester than did the coincident fact that it was Mira Stanley's wedding-night.

Half the belles of Chester who were bidden to the wedding would have given one of their pretty little white fingers to have been playing the part of principal lady in this social drama, instead of the insignificant *rôle* of smiling guest and gushing congratulation; for Mr. Philip Walworth was not only "strikingly handsome," and "wonderfully intellectual," but he was immensely wealthy, and bore, moreover, the en-

viable reputation of being an irreproachably correct young man. The breath of slander had never blown Walworthward; the worst charge that had ever been brought against him being, that he was a passionate lover of fine horses, and handled the ribbons in rather dashing style. Also he would bet on horse-races; and, if he lost very heavily, he would swear about it. But what woman, young or old, would regard such peccadilloes seriously, in the balance against his solid attractions? The men themselves pronounced Mr. Walworth "all right;" and the women pronounced him more than all right; he was "charming, glorious, simply superb;" and Mira Stanley was "blessed among women."

And he *was* an object of admiration, — especially on this night, when he was about to be united, in the holiest of all bonds, with the woman whom he did love, in his man's fashion, right dearly.

Speaking after the manner of men, the half-bottle of champagne he had imbibed, by way of steadying his nerves for the coming ordeal, had made his fine eyes flash with added lustre, making his always handsome face brilliantly attractive. Speaking after the manner of women, the light of his coming happiness shone in his luminous brown eyes, causing them to glow with a soft brilliancy that actually illuminated his handsome face. A half-smile of perfect content rested upon his finely-curved lips, bespeaking a heart void of offence toward God and man.

Mr. Philip Walworth's toilet had been accomplished with that easy indifference which came of long habitude in the elegances of life. He was dressed for the momentous occasion fully two hours before he could dare think of driving to the Stanley mansion; and as he flung himself into an arm-chair, and commenced operations on his already faultless finger-nails, he tried to while away the tedium of waiting by indulging in the orthodox vein of banter with his "best-man," who was already in attendance, having been selected to accompany him to the house of his bride.

A sonorous rap at the door of Mr. Walworth's sitting-room interrupted this last interchange of bachelor confidences.

In answer to Mr. Walworth's "Come in," the door opened, and a man appeared upon the threshold, extending toward the groom-elect a letter.

"For you, sir?" he rather asked than asserted.

The young man held out his hand for it, and read thereon his own name, traced in a style of calligraphy totally unfamiliar to him. Opening it, he found the following short communication: —

"SIR, — You are earnestly requested, in the name of humanity, to accompany the bearer of this without delay.

"Yours, &c., I. I. DAVENPORT."

"For me! Yes; but what, in the name of all that's puzzling, does it mean?" asked Mr. Walworth, glancing from the open letter in his hand back to the bearer of it.

"Can't say, sir, sure. I'm driver of cab 66, and was told by Dr. Davenport, which everybody in Chester knows, to drive the gentleman to 44 Houston Street immediate. The same I am ready to do now, sir."

"What's up, Phil?" asked the best-man, who was sitting on the side of Mr. Walworth's low French bedstead, lazily swinging his broadclothed legs backward and forward.

"Shoot me if I know myself!" was his emphatic rejoinder; saying which, he flung the sheet of paper into his friend's lap.

"Uncommonly queer, and monstrously inconvenient," said that individual, mastering the contents at a glance.

"Rather," said Philip, twisting his mustache in perturbation.

"Some poor devil in distress, who knows you are rich and generous, and wants to get something out of you," suggested the friend.

"'Poor devils' don't generally send cabmen around to fetch their benefactors," replied Mr. Walworth sarcastically. "Besides, the note comes from Dr. Davenport."

"Fact; and it's pretty strong, coming from the old doc."

"If I had time" — began Mr. Walworth.

"It'll not take ye more'n ten minutes to drive to No. 44, sir," interposed the cabman, who had no notion of losing his passenger.

"Better see it out, Phil. Philanthropy and all that sort of thing pays, you know. It will sound uncommonly well in the ears of the little girl up yonder, that, at the very moment you were about to come for her, you stopped to obey the calls of humanity," &c.

Mr. Walworth looked at his watch. "I have an hour and a half to spare yet. You will wait for me here."

"Of course I shall, my dear boy."

"There are plenty of cigars and decanters to keep you company."

"Pray don't distress yourself about me;" and the best-man arose from his lounging posture to help Philip on with his overcoat.

"Drive like the devil!" said Mr. Walworth to the cabman as he flung himself upon the seat of the vehicle.

The result of which order was to bring him in an incredibly short space of time jolting up against the curbstone in front of a decidedly shabby-looking house in a part of the city which the aristocratic Mr. Walworth had never even seen before.

His impatient rap at the door was answered almost immediately by a grave and dignified-looking gentleman, whom Philip recognized as Dr. Davenport. The front-door opened directly into a shabby-genteel room, evidently the parlor.

"Here I am, doctor," began the young man with a nervous little laugh. "I have obeyed your very urgent summons at great inconvenience to myself, as I am to be married at eight o'clock; and it wants now twenty minutes of seven. So please let me hear at once what is wanted of me."

"Married to-night!" echoed the physician. "'Tis a pity I should have been compelled to intrude upon you, young man, at such an inopportune moment; but it was an imperative necessity which forced me to send for you. Come, let us waste no more time. There is a dying woman here who wished to see you before she breathed her last. I never saw her before yesterday, when I was called in professionally. She will answer no questions relative to her past life, her name, or her friends. Has expressed but one desire; and that is to see you. Pass through that door, and you will be in her presence. I will remain here until you return."

Startled and awe-stricken, Philip Walworth passed through the door indicated by the physician. He found himself in a small, sparsely-furnished bedroom. Half a dozen strides brought him to the bed where lay the dying woman. A pair of sunken, blue-veined lids were feebly raised at the sound of his footsteps; a startled glance from eyes that

must once have been ravishing in their loveliness was raised to his face; an attenuated little hand was stretched eagerly but feebly forth.

"Amy! good God!" And Philip Walworth, in all his bridal bravery, sank humbly upon his knees on the bare and dusty floor beside the bed. . . .

The minute-hand of the clock on the mantle of the shabby-genteel parlor was pointing to half-past seven when Philip Walworth again stood before the physician.

"Will she certainly die?" His face was very pale; and his voice trembled as he asked the question.

"Before the dawn of day," was the grave rejoinder, spoken in positive tones.

"Can you give me paper and pen?"

"You will find both on that table," replied the medical man, pointing to a table filled with medicine bottles.

Seating himself thereat, Philip Walworth hastily wrote a draft on his bankers for a thousand dollars. Folding it in two, he handed it to the physician. "If more should be needed, you know where to find me;" with which words he turned his back upon No. 44 Houston Street, and had himself whirled back to his rooms.

In the space of another half-hour he stood before the minister of God, holding the small, fluttering hand of Almira Stanley in a firm but nervous grasp as they twain were made one in the sight of God and man.

"The groom was twice as much agitated as the bride," whispered one lady-guest to another. "I never saw any thing like it. He let the ring fall twice! Thank Heaven it wasn't me! I should look upon it as a bad omen."

But what recked Mira Stanley of omens? "Philip her king" was hers, her very own, — hers to have and to hold until death did them part.

And what recked Philip Walworth of omens, or of the past? Had he not closed the door on the past when he closed the door of 44 Houston Street? It was all over now. There was nothing to do but forget. Mira was his, his wedded wife; and there was not a cloud to dim his happiness.

Not a cloud! No; but a something — a strange, sad, impalpable something — that went with him, that staid by him, that clung to him, all that evening, that gay, brilliant,

festive evening,—his wedding-night, the happiest night of all his life; a something from the silent past that would not give way before the noisy present; a something that came between his hand and the soft warm palm of his new-made wife, making her rosy-tipped fingers feel cold and clammy and ghost-like; a something that flitted across his vision when his gaze sought Mira's shy eyes across the dance, but in their stead saw a pair of haunting violet eyes, faded in their loveliness, wistful in their sadness; a something that chilled the air to a graveyard dampness; that made him "smell the mould above the rose;" a something, that, when he stopped to whisper tender words into his sweet bride's ear, made the long white veil that fluttered from the orange-wreath upon her pure white brow cling dismally around his arm like a winding-sheet; a something that made the stalwart form of Philip Walworth sway and bend like the lofty mast of a storm-tossed vessel, and fall prone in the midst of his wedding-guests!

Only a swoon!—a swoon from which it was very easy work to restore him.

And, returning to the parlors after an absence of half an hour, Mr. Walworth applied himself assiduously and successfully to the task of making the company forget his "ridiculous display of nerves."

"Nerves! I am afraid his suffering is all champagne," whispered a punning guest of the male sex.

"Nerves! Horrible to think of marrying a man with heart-disease!" exclaimed one young lady, who had drawn a blank in the great Walworth lottery, to a sister-sufferer.

"Nerves! Hang me if I don't believe 44 Houston Street has something to do with this!" murmured the best-man.

"Mem.—Investigate at first opportunity."

CHAPTER II.

1850.

It was the closing day of the session at Madame Celestine's academy for young ladies. The day before had been a grand day,—a triumphantly successful day, in which madame had "finished" more than a score of demoiselles with *éclat* to herself, and satisfaction to their friends. The day before had, in fact, closed the session; and to-day madame had nothing to do but to see her young charges safely despatched to their various destinations, after having held a very Frenchy parting interview with her graduates, in which a great many adjectives were used up on madame's part, and a great many pocket-handkerchiefs on the part of the young ladies.

As madame concluded with a very neat epilogue, and swept majestically out of the parlor, to which she had summoned her graduating class for this farewell harangue, the tongues of the emancipated began to wag in full chorus.

What they were going to do, what they were going to see, what they were going to have, what they were going to enjoy, in the great maelstrom of fashionable society, toward which their eager glances were turning so joyously, occupied every tongue. The chorus of fresh young voices was like the chattering of blackbirds in spring.

Slightly apart from this gay group, gazing wistfully out of an open window, sat a young girl dressed in deep mourning,—not handsome, stylish black, be-bugled and bedecked to that extent as to make the occasional death of a friend rather a windfall than otherwise, but plain, sombre

black, rather the worse for wear. Very soft and white and delicate were the long, slender hands that lay folded listlessly on her lap; very graceful and swan-like the white throat which the dingy crape collar encircled; very lovely the soft violet eyes, with their long black fringes, albeit mournfully sad their expression as she gazed out the open window, with a far-away look in them, hardly hearing the gay chatter of her classmates; very graceful the contour of the small head, with its coronet of brown braids drooping low down on either side until they rested upon her pink shells of ears.

"And what is Queen Zenobia going to do with her royal self now that the stupid school-books are done away with?" and a girlish arm was thrown around the black-clad shoulders, while a bright, sweet face stooped caressingly over to look into the sad blue eyes.

A look of affectionate greeting was flashed up at the pretty questioner as one of the slender white hands went up and rested upon her school-fellow's soft palm. "No royal destiny awaits me, Mira dear. Nor are the stupid school-books, as you so irreverently call our late companions, done away with, so far as I am concerned: in fact, they loom in mountainous proportions on the horizon of my future. You know I shall have to teach for my livelihood." The words were spoken quietly, but without any bitterness, any repining at the hardness of the lot awaiting her.

"But not right away, Essie, — not without a speck of rest from study! You who have studied so much harder than any of the rest of us, — you must have some rest, some fun."

Esther Brandon smiled bravely up at her friend as she answered, "To you, Mira Walworth, who have been reared in luxury that knew no stint, surrounded by love and tenderness from your cradle until now, sheltered from the very winds of heaven by a doting father and mother, I don't doubt my lot seems a very hard one; for it promises very little 'fun,' as you call it, which is something girls of our age are too apt to think indispensable to existence. But I am not one of the sheltered ones of the earth, Mira; and the sooner I recognize the fact that I have no one but myself to depend upon in this world, and the sooner I act upon that knowledge, the better will it be for me."

"You are a brave, brave darling! What would I not give if I had a tithe of your self-reliance?"

"Don't praise me too lavishly, Mira dear. I do not think I am naturally self-reliant. But a woman would be in a bad way, wouldn't she, if she could not rely on herself when she has no one else in the world to rely upon? But not even you, *mon amie*, who, alone of all my schoolmates, have ever wrung any thing like confidence out of me, can have any conception of the yearning, the positive longing, I sometimes feel for a mother's love, a father's guidance, a brother's sympathy. O Mira, Mira! this thing of guiding one's self through the great unfriendly world is weary work, — such weary, weary work, my friend!" and the dark-blue eyes filled suddenly with great blinding tears.

An impulsive kiss on each tear-laden lid was all the sympathy Mira knew how to offer.

Presently she spoke again: "Come, go home with me, Essie, and rest your head and heart for a little while, dear, before you buckle on your armor for the uneven battle ahead of you. Go home with me, and make a friend of my precious mother. Let her talk to you as she does to me, and it will make you good and strong and brave, — braver even than you are now, dear. Come with me, and make my people thy people for a season, at least; and then, when you do go out into the world, you shall not say that you are utterly alone in it: for father and mother will both have to love you; and Alfred, dear precious old Al! — who knows what havoc you may make in that quarter? Will you go?"

"Gladly," replied Esther without hesitation. "Madame has offered me a situation in the primary department of her school; but, for the two months that it will be closed, I should find it lonely enough here: so I accept your offer in the spirit in which it is made. The lines have fallen to us in very different places, Mira Walworth. I am not one of the favored ones of the earth. You are rich, and I am poor; but I will not do your pure nature and noble soul such cruel injustice as to think myself unworthy of your friendship because of that difference. Ah! Mira dear, your affection is now the one bright thing in an otherwise intolerably empty life. Love me always, please, and I shall not consider my lot entirely joyless."

So it came about, that, when the travelling-carriage arrived for Miss Walworth, in addition to her own portly-looking trunk, a modest little black one, bearing the name of "Esther Brandon," was placed in the van, and started for Chester, whither we will precede our young travellers.

Time had dealt gently with Philip Walworth and his wife Mira, *née* Stanley.

His riches had multiplied themselves. Men called him a "solid" man. His word was as good as his bond. He was a power in his community. The rich respected him, and the poor blessed him. His home, presided over by his gentle-voiced, well-bred wife, was the abode of luxury and refinement. Struggling genius was always kindly welcomed there, and went away calling down manifold blessings upon Philip Walworth the Christian gentleman, and Mrs. Walworth the saintly lady.

The youthful adoration that had once filled Mira Stanley's soul for "Philip her king," years had mellowed into placid affection. Time had answered the question, asked a quarter of a century ago, "Would she and Philip ever get to be like old Mr. and Mrs. Prodgers?" She and Philip were not exactly like old Mr. and Mrs. Prodgers (long since gone to their rest); for life held new interests for them in their son, just nearing his majority, and their daughter, now ready to dazzle the world with her beauty and accomplishments. Therefore, instead of going to sleep after dinner to get rid of each other, they sat, one on each side of the fireplace (with the space of a *whole* hearth-rug between them), discussing the "children."

King Philip's head, now decidedly bald on top, rested its polished circumference against the rim of his cushioned easy-chair, enjoying his after-dinner pipe, listening in placid content to the soft, steady stream of words that poured from his wife's lips with soporific effect. She was detailing with feminine minuteness and prolixity her plans for making Mira's *début* an affair to be remembered in the neighborhood for all time to come.

An occasional "Yes, my dear," or "Certainly, my love," was all the interruption the even current of her monologue met with.

"You know, father, daughter has written word she is

going to bring home with her that poor young Miss Brandon, whose mother died when she was such a young thing."

"Yes, my dear."

"We must try and make the forlorn child happy while she is with us."

"Certainly, wife."

"Poor thing, so young, and all alone in the world!"

Mrs. Walworth's spectacles grew cloudy from sympathy; and, taking them off to wipe them, her eyes wandered from the knitting that had hitherto engaged them to the face of "Philip her king."

It was evident that balmy sleep was rapidly getting the better of him. The hand that held his pipe had gradually lowered itself until his arm rested upon the arm of his chair. His eyes opened and closed spasmodically in a frantic effort to appear interested in what his wife was saying. The contest between Morpheus and politeness was an uneven one. Morpheus carried the day; and Mr. Walworth slept the sleep of the just.

"Dear heart!" exclaimed Mrs. Walworth softly; "I have talked him actually into a doze;" and, rising tenderly, she dropped a gauze veil as softly as a zephyr over the beloved face to exclude marauding flies, and tip-toed quietly out of the room to see that the house was kept quiet, the dogs awed into silence, the roosters intimidated out of incipient "crows," and the world — her world — bidden to hold its breath while her lord took his ease.

And, while he sleeps, an element of noise and disquiet is travelling toward the handsome old house, as rapidly as two sleek carriage-horses can bring it, in the shape of Mira his pretty daughter, and Esther Brandon the beautiful orphan, whose sad fate has taken such hold upon the tender heart of his wife even before the girl's sweet face has ever been seen.

"Father, wake up, wake up! The child has come!" Mira was emphatically the "child" yet to both parents.

Mr. Walworth roused himself, and rose with alacrity to greet the child. Hastening to the front-door, he was just in time to open the carriage, and receive in his arms the laughing girl who bounded into them, kissed him a dozen times in half as many seconds, then, turning imperatively toward the vehicle, exclaimed, "Father, kiss my dearest

friend, Essie Brandon, and tell her you are going to love her too."

With a benevolent smile and stately courtesy Mr. Walworth held out his hand to assist that young lady to alight. As she raised her beautiful eyes in shy greeting to his face, he started, and turned pale. "God of heaven, how like!" he murmured almost audibly. In a moment, however, he recovered himself, and bade his daughter's guest welcome with sincerity and *empressement*.

CHAPTER III.

A TRIPLE CELEBRATION.

"LISTEN, everybody! I have an idea!" And Miss Mira Walworth glanced round the breakfast-table as if so unwanted a possession on her part should be noted as an era in the family annals.

"In consideration of your well-known deficiency in that line, sis, take a brother's advice, and hold on to it," said Mr. Alfred Walworth jestingly, pinching one of Mira's pretty ears as he spoke.

"Couldn't think of such a thing, brother mine, when so much good to mankind in general, and womanhood in particular, might be effected by its promulgation."

"Oh! it is a philanthropical idea, is it? The marvel increases."

"Of course it is a philanthropical idea. When was I ever known to entertain any other kind?"

"True. But, before you give us your idea, let us have your definition of the word 'philanthropy.'"

"The greatest good to the greatest number is my platform. Isn't that sound philanthropy? I appeal to father."

Her appeal met with the usual fate of her appeals to that source. Philip Walworth smiled loving acquiescence in the soundness of her exposition.

"Now, then, that you have made good your position, we will listen to your idea."

"Very well. It involves a little family chronology."

"Taste for chronology and philanthropy both developing

in that small head with startling suddenness. — Miss Brandon, I am afraid you are responsible for this remarkable change in my harum-scarum sister;" and Alfred Walworth turned his fine brown eyes full upon Esther, who sat opposite him.

They were the very best of friends, — this handsome heir to Philip Walworth's hoarded wealth, and the poor orphan, the beautiful stranger that was within their gates. They had enjoyed free and delightful intercourse on terms of perfect equality for the three happy weeks that had flown by since Mira and she had come home from school. In fact, the whole family were her friends now. Mr. Walworth treated her with almost parental kindness; Mrs. Walworth was tenderly considerate of her at all times; and Alfred — well, Alfred, who spent two-thirds of his time with the young girls, was delightfully entertaining and unvaryingly kind, — too kind, maybe. Essie began to doubt the wisdom of having come home with Mira. Could she go suddenly away from this delightful home, out of this atmosphere of love and kindness and refined luxury, into her own bleak existence, without unwholesome repining? Would these two months of perfect happiness strengthen, or enervate her? She did not know. She would not ask these questions of herself until forced to do so.

Pardon the digression. Mira's idea is in abeyance all this time.

"Mira's philanthropy is all her own," she answered brightly, "and has been one of her chief characteristics ever since I have known her. As for her new-found taste for chronology, let us hear what it will amount to before we pass judgment."

"Thank you, Essie! If you did not once in a while come to the rescue with a gentle little 'snub,' Al would have me completely under cover pretty soon. Well, then, my chronological search will terminate with the answers to two inquiries.

"Mamma, weren't you and father married just twenty-five years ago this coming Thursday week?"

"Just twenty-five years ago this coming Thursday week," answered Mrs. Walworth, repeating the words softly; while a pretty pink flush rose to her cheeks at the remembrance of that night of nights.

"And doesn't this dear old thing, with the big brown eyes and curly pate, come of age on that very same night?"

"He does, indeed. And the coincidence never struck me before."

"Of course not!" said Mira with a little consequential air. "Is it likely that such a romantic coincidence should strike anybody but a 'sentimental goose,' as Al is so fond of calling me? But I do adore sentiment. It is the flower-garden of prosy life, where one may linger amid fragrance and blooming beauty, forgetting the heat and the dust of the toilsome highways."

"Bravo, little sister! I am lost in admiration of your sudden mental development. Chronology, philanthropy, and sentiment, all within the space of half an hour! The last thing I remember of you before I left for college was seeing you crying on the front-steps because the cat had pulled your canary cage down and crippled Dick."

"Poor old Dick! And I'd cry again if he were hurt. But I've never promulgated my one idea yet. We are as digressive as two old ladies over their tea. — Mamma, my idea is that it will be grand, glorious, and peculiar to celebrate your silver wedding, brother's majority, and my entrance into the *beau monde*, by one magnificent *coup de théâtre*. What do you all think of it? Isn't it a beautiful idea?"

The uniqueness of the idea was cordially acceded to by the rest of the circle. So it was decided it should be. Esther, of all the family, had a slight sinking of the heart at the alarming prospect of being thus thrown suddenly into contact with fashionable Chester. But she would not mar her friend's delight by showing this feeling, and entered cheerfully into the details which afforded Mira such unqualified pleasure.

"I am sure of kindly treatment," she argued with herself; "and, as I am in mourning, my plain apparel will attract no attention. Mira's loving heart shall not be hurt by any lack of interest on my part."

The night of the triple celebration came. Mira was radiant in her bright young beauty. Mrs. Walworth was lovely with the placid beauty of a maturity that had been reached through a long succession of painless days, and years of calm content. Alfred, the heir of the house, and

sole representative of the spotless name of Walworth, was the impersonation of buoyant, hopeful, eager manhood. With his magnificent head poised proudly upon his neck, as if conscious of its own ability to do something great, should the "unspiritual god Circumstance" but offer the occasion; with his flashing brown eyes and arched brows; with his beautiful mouth, indicative of power and indomitable will; with his sinewy form, and small feet and hands, — he was physically a very handsome man: of the mental and moral Alfred Walworth, time will inform you. To complete the family group, there was Philip Walworth, bland, dignified, handsome, the suave and courteous gentleman to all, the Chevalier Bayard of Chester, — a man without reproach and without fear. And their guest, Esther Brandon?

She had conceded one point to Mira's loving importunities. She had laid aside her heavy black dress, and wore white, with black ribbons. The rich coronet of brown braids, that had won for her at school the admiring sobriquet of Queen Zenobia, by reason of the queenly air they lent her, was studded with Marguerites; these flowers constituting her sole attempt at ornamentation. Exquisitely lovely she looked with her soft white dress falling in graceful folds about her slender figure, — the plainest dress in all that gorgeous crowd, yet, thanks to the stately bearing of the penniless orphan, one of the most noticeable.

A revelation came to Alfred Walworth as he bent over her soon after her entrance on his father's arm, listening to her prettily-worded congratulations on the occasion. He was in love with his sister's friend! He knew it by token that all the fashion and beauty and intellect of Chester were assembled there that night, partially to do him honor; and that, by contrast with that same fashion and beauty and intellect, Esther Brandon rose triumphantly superior. None of the elaborate and wordy congratulations of the many that had been poured into his ears had touched his heart as had her simply spoken words. He knew it, because, of all the bright eyes that flashed encouragement at the heir of the house, in her beautiful eyes alone he longed to find favor. The ever-recurring desire he felt to wander over to the quiet corner where she sat talking easily and gracefully with some of their guests (who, like herself, did not dance) convinced him that the world, of which that

ball-room was but an epitome, held but one woman for him.

A revelation came to Esther Brandon that night also. It was conveyed through the media of disconnected scraps of conversation, that floated into her quiet corner very intensively. But the piano, behind which she had half way screened herself, did not give less token of being stabbed than did her coldly impassive face. She possessed the happy faculty of appearing to be deaf, dumb, and blind, when occasion called for. She chose to appear all three this night, for the sake of others more than for her own.

With the easy grace of a woman of the world, she sustained the part of absorbed listener to a prosy old gentleman, who declared boldly that "he'd taken a monstrous fancy to her," while her heart-strings quivered under the stinging innuendoes that floated to her.

"She is as beautiful as a dream," said the poetically-inclined Mr. Mortimer to his partner. "Can you tell me who she is?"

"I can give you her name, which, I fancy, is as much as any one can do. It is 'Brandon.' Mira Walworth brought her home from school with her. Heaven only knows what for!"

"Possibly Mr. Alfred Walworth is better informed than heaven."

"You mean that he would marry her!"

"I mean that he is very devoted this evening."

"True; but playing the devoted to a pretty girl who takes no pains to hide from you that she is dead in love with you, and marrying her, are two different things."

Here Mr. Mortimer and his pretty partner swung corners, and whirled on in the dance, noting nothing of the darts they had flung into a fresh young heart.

"Can any one tell me who that beautiful girl is that Alfred Walworth took down to supper? She's perfectly exquisite. I never saw such eyes in my life!" And the possessor of the finest pair of eyes in the room glanced inquiringly up to her partner's face.

"Then you must be a stranger to looking-glasses," was the gallant reply. "That is a Miss Brandon, on a visit to Miss Walworth."

"Yes; but *who* is she? I want to know. It is always

desirable to know whom one is thrown in contact with, where they came from, and all about them."

"I fancy I have told you as much as any one else can. She is a Miss Brandon. She's undeniably a handsome woman. She is — nobody knows who."

"Just like the Walworths! They are the greatest people for picking up nobodies. Come, that is our waltz."

And they waltzed out of the ken of the poor young nobody, who crouched there in the friendly protection of the piano, conning over this new page in the great book of life sadly and drearily, feeling somewhat crushed, and heartily ashamed to think that she had no fitting explanation of herself, no apology for her being, ready to offer these severe but perfectly correct social judges, but outwardly as calm and collected as if she carried her pedigree stamped upon her pure white brow, so that he who ran might read. They were right. Who was she, that she should come into the august presence of these social magnates with no dowry but her own beautiful self, no letters-patent of nobility but her lofty soul and fearless rectitude? The only mistake she had made was in ever leaving Madame Celestine's dingy academy to come, for ever so short a time, into the bright glare of this other world, — Mira's world, not hers. Poor moth! she would go fluttering back into her native obscurity sadly scorched. She was growing very miserable, but trying to be very philosophical, when a kingly head bent low over the ottoman where she was sitting, and a hand was held out to assist her to rise.

"Come with me: you will not dance; so you must give me a good long promenade. I believe that I have danced all my duty dances; and I have come to you for my reward." And, with a little imperative gesture, Alfred Walworth brought her to her feet: then he slipped her hand through his arm; and, before her lips had been able to utter the remonstrance in her heart, they were slowly making the circuit of the long rooms with a score or two of other promenaders.

"You are not yourself to-night," began the young man, glancing anxiously at the moody brow of his fair companion.

"Yes: I am myself now. The trouble is, I have not been myself before to-night."

"You speak enigmatically."

"I will do so no longer, my dear, kind friend. I have just found out what I half suspected before this evening."

"And that is?"

"That I should not have come here with Mira, kind as was her invitation, and happy as I have been."

"And why?"

"The fashionable world wants an explanation of me; and I have none to give. How can I explain myself? Who and what am I? Aristocratic Chester asks the question, and I have no satisfactory reply ready."

"And you let such stinging insects annoy you? I had thought you braver."

"I am only a woman," answered Essie in tones of meek apology.

"Let me answer aristocratic Chester for you, dear one. Give me the right to shield you from pain and sorrow, Essie; for I love you beyond the power of my poor clumsy tongue to make you understand."

It was quietly spoken; but Alfred Walworth's rich voice quivered with its burden of strong emotion.

He felt the small hand that rested on his arm tremble with answering emotion; but no words came from the girl's pale lips. She could not speak. Without another word, he led her into a small room adjoining the drawing-rooms; then, seating her in an arm-chair, he folded his arms, and stood looking down upon her with an air of calm determination, as does one who can afford to be patient.

"Alfred Walworth," she said at last, "you do not know what you are talking about. Aristocratic Chester would turn its back upon you in scorn should you ally yourself with a nobody."

"Confound aristocratic Chester!"

"And your father?"

"Has always told me to marry a woman of worth, and he would gladly receive her as his daughter."

"Your mother?"

"Is but a wifely echo. Moreover, she already loves you second only to my sister."

"And that sister?"

"Essie, you are a beautiful hypocrite. You know Mira would hail our marriage with delight."

Then all the bitterness and distrust and gloom went out of Esther Brandon's face, and left it bright with the light of love and happiness. With eyes humid with feeling, she held out both hands to her lover.

"You love me, then!" he cried, clasping them eagerly between his own.

"With all my heart and soul and strength," was the fearless reply. "Come, take me back to the parlors. Your absence will be noted."

Another clasp of the hand, and once more she placed her hand within his arm.

"And how about the stinging insects now, my own?"

"I think I can stand them. You have furnished me with a coat of mail."

As the plighted couple retraced their steps to the crowded drawing-rooms, they passed close to where Mr. Walworth, senior, sat on a divan, coxily hob-nobbing with an old-time friend. Their acquaintance, indeed, dated from their college-days.

One end of Esther's long sash curled itself affectionately around the gold head of the old gentleman's cane. With a sweet look of apology she stooped and disengaged it, then passed on with her escort.

There was a queer look of puzzled wonder on the stranger's face as he turned to Mr. Philip Walworth with the inquiry, —

"Who is she, Phil?"

"A Miss Brandon, a schoolmate of my daughter Mira."

"Gad! but it's a wonderful likeness."

"To whom?" asked Philip Walworth recklessly.

"To Amy Wharton, your old flame. Can't you see it yourself, old fellow?"

Mr. Walworth's face turned visibly paler; but twenty-five years is surely long enough for the weakest of us to acquire self-possession: so he answered very quietly and very falsely, —

"No: I see no resemblance. It exists in your imagination alone."

"You are the first man that ever accredited me with any. But, as there is a heaven above us, that is Amy Wharton's rejuvenated self, or something very close of kin to her."

"Nonsense," said Philip Walworth with a nervous laugh.

CHAPTER IV.

MORNING REFLECTIONS.

"You made a goose of yourself last night, Esther Brandon, and I am ashamed of you;" and the young lady in question cast a deeply-reproachful glance at her mirrored self, as she combed out her long beautiful braids the morning after the Walworth celebration.

"You were undignified enough to complain of speeches that were never intended for your ears; and you were unwise enough to listen to words of love from the son of this house, when your own good judgment might have told you, that, naturally, parental pride will have made Mr. and Mrs. Walworth form some ambitious schemes for their boy. A poor return you are making for the kindness showered upon you by these dear people. I will release him this morning. I will tell him we did not know what we were saying or doing last night: we were both carried away by the light and the music and the dangerous solitude of the crowd. He is too young to think of marriage. I will not hamper him. I love you too dearly to burden you, Alfred mine." She warmed into apostrophe. "You shall go out into the world unshackled, and taste of its delights until they pall upon you. And then — ah! if then the old love, ay, if my very existence, be not forgotten, and you come back to me faithful and true, and tell me that you have not ceased to love, then I can put my hand into yours without one twinge of self-reproach, and repeat the words I spoke in my haste last night, — 'I love you with all my heart and soul and strength.' I do love him dearly and

unselfishly, — so dearly, that I will not hamper him with a wife on the very threshold of life. We are both young enough to wait. I can afford to teach a year or two with such a blessed hope in the future to buoy me up. And he — why, he is a mere boy. A girl of eighteen is so much older than a man of twenty-one! He hardly knows his own mind yet. We will wait."

Having thus settled her own future and Mr. Alfred Walworth's to her entire satisfaction, this sage of eighteen summers gave a final glance into her mirror, — a glance embracing the whole of her fresh morning toilet, — and left her chamber to join the family in the breakfast-room.

For limpness and general debility, commend me to the givers of a feast on the day after the feast.

Mr. Walworth seemed ready to exclaim with the Preacher, "Vanity, vanity, — all is vanity." Mrs. Walworth's placid face wore a thank-God-it-is-all-over expression. Mira, worn out with excitement and fatigue, sleepily declared it had been perfectly heavenly; but, oh! wasn't she tired? Alfred heroically tried to suppress incipient yawns, which adolescent manhood declared fearfully unromantic, and out of keeping with his newly-acquired position as *fiancé*. But even people in love need a few hours' sleep; and he'd be hanged if he'd had five minutes since the last carriage had been seen off. Essie alone, cool and fresh, was her own dainty self. She was one of those serene-looking beauties whose outward calm could be preserved unruffled, in spite of the liveliest internal commotion.

She felt any thing but calm, however, as she sat down in the midst of the family group, taking care to place her chair where she shouldn't meet Alfred's ardent gaze every time she glanced up. She had an unconscionably guilty feeling, as if she had robbed somebody's treasure-box the night before. Feeling thus, she bravely resolved to make restitution.

"Queer feeling for a poor girl to have who has just been asked in marriage by a rich young man!" Granted, dear scoffer. But Esther Brandon was queer; and she was given to queer feelings, and queer modes of reasoning.

By one of those happy accidents which the guardian sprite of lovers is always bringing about, Mr. Alfred Wal-

worth found himself alone with their fair guest soon after breakfast; his father having retired to the library with his morning papers, and Mira gone off like a dutiful daughter and considerate sister to aid her mother in having the cut-glass and surplus silver put away again. So the two had the long drawing-room all to themselves: upon the strength of which young Mr. Walworth did what every young man would have done in his place, — deserted his chair by a far-away window, and boldly took possession of a portion of the sofa upon which Essie sat, making believe she was crotcheting a tidy for Mrs. Walworth's rocking-chair. A rash attempt on the part of the young man to possess himself of the hand that held the needle met with a decided repulse.

Upon which Mr. Alfred Walworth grew red and indignant, changed his position from the inclined plane to the rigidly perpendicular, and said in a sort of magisterial voice, —

"Essie, look at me."

Which Essie only half way did, flashing a shy glance at him from the corners of her eyes, then bending again over her crotch-work with a very pink face. She began to realize that restitution to Mr. and Mrs. Walworth was easier to theorize about with half a dozen doors and a flight of steps between her and Alfred their treasure than it was to make with the handsome fellow sitting close beside her on the sofa, using his big brown eyes with telling effect.

"Esther Brandon, are you a coquette?"

"I hope not," answered the accused demurely.

"Did you not tell me last night that you loved me with all your heart and soul and strength?"

"Yes."

"Did you mean what you said?"

"I did."

"Then does not the hand that you just now repulsed me with belong to me?"

"Only conditionally."

"Only conditionally," he echoed. "Essie dear, speak more satisfactorily, please; don't torture a fellow this way: for, indeed, the love I offered you last night was honest and true, and deserves more respectful treatment at your hands."

There was a ring of anxiety in his voice that made

sweetest music in Essie's ears. She laid down her crotchet, and faced full round upon him, saying, —

"It shall have it too, Alfred. I will tell you soberly exactly what I mean. I say 'soberly;' for we were both drunken with love last night, dearest, and acted in the proverbially witless fashion of lovers. I lay awake nearly all night, pondering over what had passed between us: and although it is not so easy to reason and calculate now, with you so close to me, I know that my reflections in my own room this morning were dictated by reason; and I know that the conclusions founded upon those reflections are just and true; and, however much you may rebel against them at present, the time will come when you will say, 'She was right.'"

"Quite a neat peroration; but pray come to the gist of the matter, Essie," said Alfred, shifting impatiently to the other end of the sofa; for that white hand that she wouldn't let him take possession of was tantalizingly close.

"I think it would be but a poor return for all the kindness and affection that have been showered upon me by your family that I should entice their one son into a marriage before he has seen any thing of the world, — before he hardly knows his own mind. You know, and so do I, that your father has his plans for you. Shall I frustrate those plans by burdening you with a wife at the very beginning of your career? If you really love me, dear Alfred, can we not afford to wait a while?"

"Esther Brandon, how came you with such an old and calculating head upon your beautiful shoulders? Do you suppose, if you really loved me, you could reason thus? Did Madame Celestine graduate you in social ethics?"

Esther's sweet mouth quivered with wounded feeling as she looked reproachfully up into her lover's angry face.

"I have acquired my social ethics in a harder school than Madame Celestine's, Alfred, — in the school of a bitter experience. But is it utterly beyond your man's power of credence to believe that a woman's love can be so unselfish as to make her desire the good of him she loves before her own?"

Silent and abashed, the young man bowed before the gentle dignity of her reproof. Then she resumed: —

"I think we have both taken too much for granted the

consent of your parents. It would be strange if they should be willing for you to marry me, — I poor, kinless, friendless; you young, admired, wealthy, with all the world beckoning to you. Go out into that world, and test it, my beloved; and then if you can come back to me, and tell me truthfully that you love me yet, — me alone of all woman-kind, — why, then" — She finished the sentence with a rosy flush.

"Essie, it is your pride, and not your love, that has been speaking so bravely; and, before that clock strikes thrice more, I will make you take back every one of your brave words."

Esther looked at him wonderingly; but he vouchsafed no explanation of his boastful declaration. His eyes shone with the light of determination; while will, firm and indomitable, showed in the tight compression of his finely-chiselled mouth.

"Good-by for a little while, my wife that is to be;" and, without asking leave or license, he bent over her with an air of possession, and imprinted a soft little kiss upon her upturned brow: then he went out from her presence, leaving her tremulous with love, and holding him all the dearer for that daring caress and boastful declaration, — leaving her bereft of philosophy, but rosy with hope. And from the bottom of her woman's heart she prayed that the decision of this mighty matter should be taken from her weak hands, and settled for her. For, oh! she was heart-hungry. She yearned for happiness, as only lonely woman souls, who know it but in the lives of others, can yearn: was it to come to her?

The monotonous in and out of the crotchet-needle irritated her highly-strung nerves. She must do something. Mira and her mother were busy. She could not intrude on them. She would try to read until he came back to her. She put her hand out at random to a table laden with books near the sofa on which she sat. It chanced to be a volume of the philosophical writings of Fichte that she took up. At random, also, she opened it, and read, —

"Here below is not the land of happiness: I know it now. It is only the land of toil; and every joy which comes to us is only to strengthen us for some greater labor to succeed."

"It reads like a prophecy," murmured Esther; and the rosy flush that had dyed her brow when Alfred gave her that first kiss of love faded away, and left her paler than usual.

"Will it prove one to me?" She asked the question aloud of the empty room.

"Will what prove what?" asked Alfred Walworth in a cheery voice; and, glancing up at him, Esther knew by the glad light in his eyes that all was well with him, — with them. "More philosophy!" and, taking Fichte out of her hands, he banged the German philosopher irreverently back upon the table. "My father wants to talk with you, dear one; and I fancy he will be able to convince you that love is mightier than logic. Will you let me escort you to the library?"

Mechanically Esther got up, and placed her hand on her lover's arm. This thing of being interviewed by one's future father-in-law struck her as being slightly novel, and decidedly awe-inspiring. What did he want of her? Was he going to "demand her intentions," after the manner of indignant *paterfamilias*? Was he going to reproach her for robbing him of his boy? She smiled at the ridiculousness of her own fears. Would Alfred look so bright if there was any thing very terrible in store for her? She called herself a silly goose half a dozen times mentally, and apparently derived strength and courage therefrom; for by the time Alfred opened the library-door, and sprung it on her like a trap, she found herself able to face his august father with her usual quiet dignity.

Seating her in state in his own easy-chair, Mr. Walworth, senior, opened the interview with that graceful *savoir faire* for which he was so particularly distinguished.

"My boy begs me, Miss Brandon, to plead his cause with our fair guest; and I am ready to do so earnestly and sincerely."

"Mr. Walworth," began Esther, looking him bravely in the face, "your generous magnanimity excites my wonderment and my admiration. It would be but a poor return for all your goodness to me if I was any thing but perfectly candid with you. I love your son; and therefore it would be hard indeed for me to tell him any thing of myself that might lower me, however unjustly, in his estimation. But

to you I will speak very plainly; and, after I have told you all I have to tell you about myself, in your hands I will leave my fate, — mine and Alfred's."

Philip Walworth's handsome face took on a look of eager interest. She was going to do, unasked, what, with all his adroitness, he would have found it difficult to demand of her. She was going to tell him who and what she was.

"I must begin my story," said the brave girl, "by telling you that I do not even know who I am."

A ghastly pallor spread over her listener's face; but she took no note of it. He shrank in dread from her next words.

"In the dim, far-away past, I remember a home that was beautiful and luxurious, though hardly more than a cage. I remember, vaguely, being waited on by a tender-hearted old nurse. I remember the face of my mother, sad and beautiful; and then, ah! then I remember a pictured face that I was made to kiss every night, and say, 'God bless papa!' — grandly beautiful, but oh! so stern, so fearfully stern, that it has always remained stamped on my memory a fitting type of an angry God."

"And he?" Philip Walworth asked eagerly and passionately.

"He was, I believe, my father. I cannot tell you. I can never remember seeing him myself. No fatherly caresses, no loving-kindnesses, are among my childish recollections. Madame tells me that my mother married a Southerner; that is all she knew;" and Queen Zenobia bowed her beautiful head in shame for the misty account she had rendered of herself.

"Go on, my dear young lady: you interest me deeply. Had you no brothers nor sisters?"

"None that I can recall to mind. But I was so young when I was placed under Madame Celestine, that I may have forgotten."

"I could hardly have been more than five years old when my mother took me to Madame Celestine's, and, telling her that it was imperatively necessary she should take a long journey, left me in her charge, leaving also with her a large sum of money to defray my expenses. Madame had educated my mother before me, and has always expressed great love

and admiration for her character. Madame herself told me all that I am telling you now. One letter only ever came from my mother after she had left me. The money left with madame, who is honest and good beyond the ordinary run of human nature, sufficed to educate me. It is nearly gone now; and I am ready to teach for my livelihood. This black garb I assumed a year or two ago, immediately after having extracted from madame the meagre details of my history that I have just given you, out of respect to the mother, who I know must be dead, else she would come back to her lonely child. Now you know all about me that I know myself. I came home from school with your daughter because I loved her. She was very good to me at school, and begged me to come here with her, and take a good long rest before I assumed the duties of a teacher. You have all been very, very good to me; and I thank you from the depths of a very lonely heart. I have spent two happy months here; and now I am ready to go away and buckle on my armor.

"I do not think the mischief I have done is irreparable. It is easy enough for a man, especially so young a man as your son, to forget his first love;" and a bitter smile played for a moment around the girl's sweet mouth.

Mr. Walworth's face wore an expression of relief at the close of her recital. Her story convinced him that the likeness which had so startled him was purely accidental.

"Stop, Miss Brandon: you do both my boy and myself injustice,—him, in holding his love so lightly; me, in thinking I am purely ambitious for my boy. I believe that Alfred's wealth will be a great temptation to designing and unprincipled women. I would not have him fall a prey to any such. I have known genuine happiness in my own home with his mother, who brought me no dowry but her own dear self. I believe you to be a girl of character and principle. The brave manner in which you have told your own sad story convinces me of it. My boy loves you; and I believe you will secure his future happiness. I, his father, ask you to be my daughter." He held out both hands—he, haughty, aristocratic Philip Walworth—with a pleading gesture to the beautiful orphan. Two soft white hands were laid trustingly into his extended palms; and Mr. Wal-

worth, bowing his lofty head, imprinted a father's kiss upon the lips that quivered with hardly suppressed emotion.

"I told you so!" whispered Mira exultingly when the engagement became matter of family consultation, without deigning to explain when or where or what.

CHAPTER V.

A NINE-DAYS' WONDER.

ALL Chester wondered, all Chester exclaimed, all Chester grumbled indignantly, because a pretty nobody, from no place, had come into their midst, and carried off the prize for which all female Chester was preparing to compete.

"Was ever such infatuation heard of before as was exhibited by Alfred Walworth!"

"Was ever such eccentricity, combined with generosity, exhibited, before Philip Walworth extended his cordial welcome to the penniless nobody!"

"Were ever cards more neatly played than had Esther Brandon played hers! Deliberately forced herself upon the Walworth family, and, by some species of sorcery, bewitched the whole family, from the imbecile Alfred up to his cool-headed father!"

All Chester wagged its tongue for nine days, and then grew sullenly quiescent.

The whole affair, in fact, was being managed with total disregard to the proprieties of life, or Mrs. Grundy's frowns.

"The artful creature was so afraid that her quarry might 'scape her, that, in defiance of all decent precedent, she was going to remain at the Walworths up to the day of her marriage, which was to take place at the end of the month."

And, for a wonder, all Chester was right in its statement of facts, if not in its judgment thereupon.

For a pair of motherly arms had been folded around Esther Brandon when she urged the propriety of her return

to Madame Celestine's, and a motherly hand-caressed her beautiful head as Mrs. Walworth gainsaid that resolve.

"You belong to us now, dear child; and why return to that dreary academy for the short interval that is to intervene before your marriage? Gossips will talk, possibly: but I have always had a trick of doing things to suit myself, in spite of the gossips; and I have found the plan work very well. Do as you please, so you don't please to do any thing very bad, and, in nine cases out of ten, you will find the inconsistent world ready to applaud you. Try to please the world, and you will find yourself in the position of the miller and his ass. In marriage-contracts, above every other sort, I hold that it is imperatively desirable the parties should suit themselves. From the time Philip and I were blessed with our boy and girl, we commenced plotting and planning for their future. 'Above all things,' said I, 'let their hearts have full play.' What is life without love? Love was the groundwork of our own union; love has been its soul and strength; love has enabled Philip to overlook my many imperfections; love has enabled me to appreciate his manifold perfections. Ah! Essie, dear child, when a man loves a woman, he is as wax in her hands. My boy loves you, child; and it is because of your own lofty soul and noble principles that I rejoice at the prospect of your becoming his wife. Alfred is a boy of indomitable will and fiery passions: wisely married, he will mature into a fine man, — a man of weight in his sphere. I believe you will help him in the right way. Be a helpmate in the fullest sense of the word to my boy, Esther Brandon, and I will bless the chance that brought you under my roof-tree."

And with solemn earnestness Essie vowed to try to be to Alfred what Alfred's mother had been to his father.

And time rolled on apace, bringing nearer and nearer the wonderful day, until it wanted but three short little ones of the 30th of May, — the one fixed for the ceremony, which was to take place in church.

On the morning of the 27th, Mr. Walworth made his appearance in his wife's room, about an hour after breakfast, with an open letter in his hand: —

"Wife, I have received an urgent call to New-York City.

Shall go up on the half-past-five-o'clock train this evening, and return on the same train to-morrow. Any thing I can do in that quarter for either of you three ladies?" and his glance embraced his wife, his daughter, and Essie.

Mrs. Walworth assumed a thoughtful expression; Mira rattled off a dozen requests in a minute; and Esther told him she should like to trouble him with one small commission. She had in her possession a bracelet that had once belonged to her mother. It was a handsome piece of jewelry, and she would like to wear it soon; but it was very much too large for her wrist. Would Mr. Walworth be kind enough to take it with him to the city, and have it altered? She had tried the Chester jewellers; but none of them were willing to undertake it.

Certainly Mr. Walworth would do that, or any thing else his lovely daughter that was to be chose to ask.

She chose to ask nothing more; and, just before he started that evening, she placed in his hands a small box, carefully tied up, which contained the precious bracelet.

Mr. Walworth's business proved more troublesome than he had at first anticipated. The morning of the 30th, the morning, arrived before he could turn his face homeward. But it did not matter: he would be there plenty of time for the ceremony; and, before that time, his masculine presence could be very well dispensed with. He would call now and get Essie's bracelets; for, thinking to please her, he had ordered a match to the old one, and was going to take her back a pair.

"Bracelets? Yes, sir, ready in half an hour. Have been waiting to see you before altering the old one. There is a curious inscription on the inside, which will have to be cut into in order to reduce the size. Thought possibly the gentleman hadn't noticed it, and would object to having it spoiled." And the goldsmith held the interior of Essie's bracelet toward Mr. Walworth for his inspection.

Placing his gold-rimmed eye-glasses to his eyes, which were not as keen as they had been thirty years before, else he had not needed them to read *that* inscription, Philip Walworth saw the characters $\sqcup \sqcap < \sqcap < \sqcap \wedge \sqcap$ dancing before his bewildered vision in letters of fire. He staggered like a drunken man; and the heavy bracelet fell clinkin-

upon the glass show-case. That bracelet had been her mother's: Esther had told him! She was *her* daughter, then! That startling likeness was, after all, no cheat of his imagination. His son was about to marry her, — marry her that very night! God! for wings to speed him back to Chester! Could steam carry him there fast enough? What should he say to Alfred? What should he say to her, to his wife, to them all? Curse the hour that had seen her enter his doors! Curse his own romantic folly in approving so cordially of this love-match! How was he to extricate them all, without suffering in his wife's estimation? — that pure, good woman, who for twenty-five long years had looked up to him as the embodiment of justice and generosity. How forbid this marriage, and clear himself from the charge of insane caprice? How turn this poor girl from his doors, and yet retain the respect of his boy? And he valued that boy's love and respect above almost every thing else in the world. Ah! if he could only tell Mira all, and let her woman's wit aid him! But he could not; he dared not. There was no help on earth. He must extricate his own miserable self from this miserable slough. He seized the fatal trinket, and walked like a man in a dream out of the jeweller's shop. He was bewildered, utterly dazed. Had not Amy Wharton died long before this girl of eighteen had come into the world? Had she not died in that house on Houston Street on the very night of his own marriage? Had not her disembodied spirit staid with him all that miserable night? How, then, had this bracelet, his own love-token in the bright days of yore, when Amy Wharton was all the world to him, come into this girl's possession? How account for the startling likeness, the lovely violet eyes, whose exact counterparts he had last seen, faded and dim, in the wasted features of that dying woman in No. 44 Houston Street, looking at him so pleadingly, so mournfully? This girl said she remembered her mother! Who *was* Esther Brandon? Where was Amy Wharton? Over and over again, until they almost maddened him, these two questions repeated themselves.

At last, the train was off: he was actually in motion toward Chester. He had lived a century since he left it. How stupidly calm and placidly commonplace every thing looked on board the flying train, and he so wild with mis-

ery! Was this the same world, the same train, the same sort of people, he had come in contact with on his downward trip? — he, Philip Walworth, rich, honored, respected, placidly content with himself and the world. He felt benumbed. He was dizzy. Suppose he should have an apoplectic-fit from all this excitement, and get there too late to stop the wedding! Monstrous possibility! He shuddered to think that it was a possibility. Suppose *any* thing should happen to delay him beyond his time! Thump, whirl, crash! — something *had* happened!

Only the train tumbled over an embankment: nobody hurt. And every face there wore an expression of thankful gratitude at the universal safety, save one miserable, haggard face, that was pitiful to behold in its tortured anxiety.

"A hundred dollars for a vehicle and a fast pair of horses to get me to Chester before eight o'clock to-night!" exclaimed Mr. Walworth, frantically addressing himself to the crowd.

"Purty tight drivin'; but I'll try you, mister. I've got the best team in this ere neighborhood. Make yourself easy for about ten minutes, and I'll be back."

It was a wild-looking spot where the accident had happened. No town near. No chance of telegraphing to Chester. It would probably be four or five hours before the damage to the track could be sufficiently repaired to enable the train to proceed. His one chance to reach Chester was to stage it across country.

The farmer who had taken his offer soon returned with a light spring wagon and a pair of powerful-looking horses.

"If you kill your horses, I pay for them. For God's sake, don't spare them!"

Philip Walworth's voice was hoarse from excitement. He flung himself into the vehicle, and relapsed into gloomy silence.

"Purty desperate case," muttered the owner of the horses as he lashed them into full speed.

Seven o'clock, quarter-past seven, half-past seven, and still no Philip Walworth. The carriages were at the door to convey the bridal party to the church. Anxious and impatient, Alfred Walworth strode up and down the long drawing-room. A ring at the front-door bell made him start nervously. A servant entered, and handed him a tele-

gram. All the doubt and anxiety passed from his face; and he hastened with it to his mother.

"A telegram from father! The cars met with an accident, and he's staging it across country. Despatched this, I suppose, from the first office he passed. Says he's unhurt. Telegraph-man evidently misunderstood one part of his message. Says at the bottom, 'Stop the wedding:' of course father said, 'Don't stop the wedding.' He knows the horror you women-folk have of any hitch in wedding arrangements. Come: it is time we were on our way to church."

Glancing hastily at the telegram, which laid at rest all her wifely fears for the safety of her lord, Mrs. Walworth's hitherto-depressed spirits rose buoyantly; and, crumpling the telegram in her hand, she hastened back to Essie's room, where she sat arrayed for her bridal, looking whiter than her veil at the ill omen of any thing happening on this day of days.

"It is all right, darling. The cars ran off the track. But father is not hurt. He's staging it across country. Was considerate enough to telegraph not to stop the wedding. Dear heart, he knew any postponement would make us foolish women miserable." And, with nervous haste, Mrs. Walworth bundled the bridal party into the two carriages waiting for them at the door.

Solemnly the rich voice of the white-robed priest rang out over the hushed crowd that had been bidden to see Esther Brandon and Alfred Walworth made one, —

"Into this holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. If any man can show just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

A pause, — a decorous pause, for mere form's sake, — a pause that was broken by hasty footsteps advancing up the aisle; and Philip Walworth, pale and travel-stained, stood in their midst.

"*I forbid the marriage!*" Clear and sonorous and unmistakable the words that spread consternation throughout the assembled crowd, and made the stately form of beautiful Esther Brandon sway and quiver as a fragile lily sways before a rude wind, until her unconscious head rested against the white-robed bosom of the startled minister of God.

CHAPTER VI.

STORMY INTERVIEWS.

A STORMY interview it was that occurred between Philip Walworth and his son after their return home.

Bitter reproach, unbridled wrath, and unfilial denunciation, on the part of the younger man; unsatisfactory apologies, stammering explanations, dogged determination, on the part of the elder.

The dignity which springs from conscious rectitude failed the father in this trying time, and left him confused, abashed, sore distressed, in the presence of his angry first-born.

"My son, can you not believe me when I assert that only good and powerful reasons would have made me act as I did? Will you not trust me that it was to save you from a monstrous alliance that I had to bring upon you this public disgrace, as you call it?" And Philip Walworth's voice grew querulous from very helplessness.

With a mighty effort to control his overmastering passion, and speak calmly, Alfred ceased his angry pacing of the library-floor, and stood still before his father's chair.

"Father, all I ask of you is a full and clear explanation of those 'powerful reasons' you hint at so darkly. I think I have a right to know what they are; and I demand them as my right."

"A full and clear explanation I cannot give you, my son."

"Is it any thing respecting Esther's self?" He asked the question slowly and fearfully.

"Nothing. I believe that poor girl to be as good and pure as an angel from heaven."

"Did she not tell you, before she would even listen to my suit, that she knew nothing of her own early life?"

"Yes," — a sullen, reluctant yes. "But I had no reason then to believe that her origin was any thing worse than obscure."

Alfred Walworth trembled visibly; and his hand went up eagerly to loosen his cravat as he gasped for breath.

"Father, spare me! spare her, my pure darling, whom I love so dearly, for whom my heart aches so intolerably." And for a moment the youth's proud head was bowed upon his bosom, — for a moment only; when, raising it again, Alfred Walworth looked his father defiantly in the face, as he exclaimed, —

"Father, I love Esther Brandon, — love her as a man loves but once in a lifetime. With her for a wife, life will be worth something; without her, it will be a blank. I care not who nor what her parents were: she *shall* not suffer for their sins. It is her own pure self I love and covet. Let her dead past bury its dead. I love her so well, that I would esteem it joy to take from her the stained name bequeathed her by those who are dead and gone, and bestow upon her my own spotless one in its stead; and all the reward I ask for what the world will call my sacrifice is to have her always by my side to cheer me with her smile, and bless me with her presence."

"Blind infatuation! mad passion! Boy, I tell you this marriage *cannot* take place."

"And, by Heaven, I swear that it shall!" Then from his father's presence Alfred Walworth passed out, his heart full of parricidal wrath, his mind full of dogged determination to marry Esther Brandon in spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

"There is but one recourse left, — an appeal to the girl herself. It is hard lines; but such is that boy's infatuation and determination, that he will outwit me yet if I do not make consent on her part an impossibility." Lifting his head from his bowed hands, where it had rested for several minutes in gloomy reflection, Mr. Walworth rang the bell, and bade the servant who answered it request Miss Brandon to grant him an interview in her own room.

His wife answered the summons. "Miss Brandon has just succumbed to a succession of powerful opiates I found

it necessary to administer, Philip. Her nervous excitement was fearful. I thought, for an hour or two, convulsions were inevitable. Poor child! she was as docile as a baby. All her cry was to let her go away and die of her shame. She would have left, night as it is; but I quieted her by telling her she should start at daybreak. Our poor Mira is almost as wretched as she is. — And now, husband, what is this mystery? I know, my Philip, your reasons for such extreme measures must have been good and sufficient, else you would not have brought such sorrow on our boy, and such scandal on the whole family. As for the talk, that doesn't amount to much; but our poor boy, and that sweet girl! What is it, husband, that has come between them?"

Strange, that, after having lived a lie for twenty-five years, a spoken one should have cost Philip Walworth such a tremendous pang. But to his credit be it spoken that he suffered.

"Wife, while in New York, chance brought to my knowledge some information respecting this poor girl's parentage, which convinced me that her marriage with our son would be to his everlasting misery. The time will come when he will bless me for that for which he now is ready to curse me. Even to you it is not necessary to go into painful details. I have told you all that it is requisite for you to know. You must assist me in bringing Alfred to his senses. I believe that you can do more with him at this juncture than I can."

Gentle Mira Walworth asked no more. She had sublimest confidence in her husband. It had been enough, when he had said that their boy might marry this beautiful but penniless orphan, to make her consent to it with all her heart. It was enough, now that he said they could not be married, to make her oppose it with equal earnestness. She was what her son had called her, — nothing but "a wifely echo." Her heart ached for her boy and for poor Essie: but she was ready to apply herself heart and soul to the task of convincing the poor young things that their contemplated marriage would have been the starting-point for both on the road to ruin; for Philip had said so, and Philip did all things well.

A sleepless and a miserable night was that to all the Walworth household. The travelling-carriage had been ordered

by daybreak to convey Miss Brandon back to Madame Celestine's. Alfred had purposely been kept in ignorance of her contemplated departure, and was still tossing on his bed in restless slumber, when, ghostlike and wan, poor Esther glided from her own room, and strove to unbar the great front-door noiselessly. She panted to escape from this house, where this great misery had come to her, without having to go through the torture of farewells. But Philip Walworth was watching for her. He dared not let her leave his roof without having first rendered it *impossible* that she should ever again listen to vows of love from his son. He would have spared her if he could; but an infernal necessity commanded the sacrifice of this poor shorn lamb.

Esther started like a guilty thing as his voice, harsh and unnatural from intense excitement, smote upon her ear.

"Miss Brandon, a few words with you I must have before you leave." And, slipping her trembling hand within his arm, he conducted her into the library, where, white and frightened, she sank upon a sofa, and waited for him to speak. He commenced abruptly: —

"For the pain I was compelled to inflict upon you yesterday, I beg your pardon; but, when the Devil drives, needs must."

"Why did you ever consent to this marriage? that is all I ask to know." The voice in which she spoke was drearily cold and calm. She was so benumbed, that she gave no sign of her suffering.

"Because I respected and admired you personally."

"Am I changed personally?"

"You are not. But, after I left you the other day, circumstances brought to my knowledge facts that constitute insuperable obstacles to this union."

"Will you tell me what those facts are?"

"I would spare you if I could. I *will* spare you, if you will promise me, if you will take a solemn oath, that you will not listen to my son, should he try to entice you into a clandestine marriage, as I feel sure that he will."

"I will promise nothing. I love your son, and he loves me. I told you, before I engaged myself to him, all my miserable story. You wooed me for him. I must have something more than your capricious will to deter me from trampling upon a heart honestly and truly mine. God

knows, I have not such a surfeit of affection that I can afford to throw away Alfred's love." And, for the first time since she had entered the room, her supernatural calm broke up in a bitter smile more painful than tears.

"You *will* have the truth!" exclaimed the desperate father.

"The truth, or nothing. Don't be afraid that I cannot stand it: after last night, there is *nothing* I cannot stand."

The man before her was silent, anxiously seeking for words that would help him soften the horrible truth he had to tell this proud young thing.

"Speak! for God's sake, speak! and do not torture me any longer."

"Esther Brandon, from my soul I pity you, poor girl! but, until it is proven to me that you are the legal owner of the name you bear, a union with my son is impossible."

Then Esther Brandon rose majestically. "Mr. Walworth, you have bereft me of my one holy memory; and I curse you for it. I hope that you lie. May God help me to prove it!" And she moved toward the door as white and rigid as a statue endowed with the power of motion.

"Stop! before you go, your promise." And he barred her passage to the door.

"I will give none. It is not likely that your son will ever seek me after you have told him the base tale you have just told to me. But should his love prove mightier than his pride; should he come to me, and tell me that my love is dearer to him than the world's cold smile, — then I will go to him, and be his true and loving wife; ay, as true and as honest and as loyal as though my pedigree were as proud, my name as stainless, as your own, cruel man! I do not covet your gold, Philip Walworth. I do not covet the social position your son's wife would attain. I am heart-hungry. My soul is starved for affection. And should Alfred prove loving and true, as you, his father, *fear* that he may, it would not be in me, ay, it would not be in *any* woman, to say him nay. So I will not perjure myself by swearing promises to you which I *could* not keep in his dear presence."

"She leaves me no recourse. Nothing short of the whole truth will stop this thing."

Going close up to where Esther Brandon stood, Alfred Walworth's father bent over the girl, and, with white lips, whispered a half-dozen words in her ear.

She reeled, and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms. From that touch she recoiled in horror, looking at him with wildly-staring eyes.

"How I loathe you! how I curse you! Cruel Heaven! unjust God! Now, indeed, do I know the meaning of the monstrous decree, that the children shall suffer for the sins of the fathers!"

CHAPTER VII.

A REVERY.

BACK from the gay world of fashion Esther Brandon crept into her dreary little room at Madame Celestine's, wounded, sore, well-nigh crushed.

"Poor little room!" she murmured as she threw her weary body upon one of its hard wooden chairs. "I used to hate you for your ugliness. I used to long for more space, more air, more beauty, in my surroundings. I fancied myself lonely, unhappy. I pitied Esther Brandon two months ago, sitting in yonder chair, because she knew nothing of the great world that her companions were prating of so eagerly and joyously. I pity Esther Brandon now because she was so unwise as to leave this blessed asylum for an eager, unsatisfying glimpse of that same great world. The world has sent her back smarting for her presumption. And now what is there left to live for? I did not repine because I was poor. I did not repine because I had to work. I did not envy other girls their happier lot. I don't believe I thought much about it. I knew that I had to labor, and was ready to do so cheerfully. But then, at least, I was free from haunting memories. Now — ah! just God, is it right that I should have to slink through the world with bowed head and humble mien because of another's sin? Have I not a place in the great human family that I may claim as my rightful heritage? May not spotless virtue and stern integrity blot out the stain that is none of my making? It will be heavy work, up-hill work, single-handed, uneven, — a feeble girl against the world. But if God,

whom in my blind wrath I called a cruel and an unjust God, be not really a blind God of chance, he will pity me and aid me. The wise world looks askance at me now because of my poverty and friendlessness: the wise world would look aghast if it knew me as that man knows me. The wise world *shall* yet offer me the meed of its valuable homage and respect; and then I will show the wise world how I scorn its homage, how I spit upon its wisdom. How hard and cold and resolute I feel! I doubt if any thing could ever make me shed another tear. Shall I grow bitter and caustic, like poor Mademoiselle Caprin down stairs? I expect I shall: what's to hinder? Who knows what shocks her faith in her kind, or how many hard blows her once soft heart may have received before she ossified? Will every one get to disliking me as they do her? Why not? And what if they do? Isn't it a great deal better not to care for any thing in this world? I loved almost everybody before I went to Chester; and what did it profit me? That trick of loving is a foolish, foolish one, that wise women will rid themselves of as quickly as possible. I am wise now, very wise, — grown wise in a single night; and I'll lock all the chambers of my heart up, and forget how to love. Memory, too, must be kept rigidly under. I will have no ghosts of dead loves, no ghastly reminders of what might have been, coming between me and the future I have to make for myself, to weaken my resolves, or taunt me with my wretchedness. My mother is dead: may God have mercy upon her soul! The loving guidance of a father I have never known: therefore I shall not miss it in my hard fight. The love of brother or sister will never bless me. As for that other love, — that great, all-powerful, soul-satisfying love, — I have tasted of that too, and found it to be but Dead-sea fruit. I suppose it is possible for human beings to exist without affection; but it is a dreary possibility for a woman. At any rate, fate has offered me a glorious opportunity of proving if it be a possibility or not. Before I went away from here, I had a silly little trick of talking very philosophically about my duties in life. What did I know of life or duties or philosophy then? I was in the A B C of existence; and now — why, now, I am a time-honored graduate.

"I shall make a splendid teacher now. I have no nerves,

no feelings, to be rasped by indifference and stupidity. Teachers should be all head, and no nerves. I wish I could commence to-morrow. This inaction is maddening. It gives me too much time to think; and I don't want to think. I will not think. Meditation is a placid sort of enjoyment for placid people who jog through life at an even pace, in a smooth, well-trodden path; but with a hideous past, a joyless present, an unfathomable future, why should a woman pause to think? I want to be up and doing. Shall I prove a 'hero in the strife'? or 'be like dumb driven cattle'? Who knows?"

"Unnaturally bitter!"

No, dear reader: naturally bitter. Place a woman in the world, loving, weak, naturally clinging, take out of her life all joy and affection, tell her to fight her own way, taking from her every natural support to which her weak hands stretch out imploringly, leave her unsheltered and alone, and marvel not if for a little while she staggers along at an uneven pace, bitter and unlovely, repaying scorn for scorn, hatred for hatred, holding to the olden dispensation of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, rather than the later and more lovely revelation of the Golden Rule.

More than half a dozen attempts did Alfred Walworth make to see his banished bride, but was always coldly denied. More than a dozen passionate letters, full of ardent protestations of undying love, and fond desire to make her his wife in spite of every thing, were returned to him with unbroken seals, — poor Essie even denying herself the comfort of reading them: after which, with the proverbial justice of manhood, he took refuge in wholesale abuse of the sex; sneering with Pope, that

"Woman's at best a contradiction still;"

ready to indorse Moore's spiteful dictum, —

"Away, away! you're all the same, —
A fluttering, smiling, jilting throng."

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN ON "LE NOIR."

"MA CHÈRE, this is too good a thing for you to throw away;" and Madame Celestine laid her plump white hand on Essie's shoulder caressingly. "I know this Mrs. Golding. As a girl, she was my pupil; and a sweet and winsome one she was, though not one of my brightest. She has little ones of her own now, who need an instructress; and she writes to me, her old preceptress, to secure the services of some one who will be good and kind to her little children, whom she declares are rather unruly, more from lack of proper training than from bad dispositions. You are looking badly, dear child. Your confinement as a teacher in my large school is much more severe than it would be as a private teacher. The Goldings are Southern planters, well to do; and the fresh country air and food will bring back your fading roses."

"Why should I care to bring back my fading roses? Who cares to see them bloom? But I will go to this Mrs. Golding. I like her letter. I know she is amiable and good, which I am not. I cannot do justice to my large classes. There is no life, no *vim*, in me; and I fail to incite them to activity. With two or three little children, between whom there is no competition, I may do better. Yes, I will go to her. You may write her word."

Esther's arguments in favor of acceptance, and her final decision to go, were all delivered in the same cold, hard voice and passionless manner which were the most marked characteristics of the new Esther Brandon. Two years of

quiet monotony had helped her to acquire an icy incrustation wholly foreign to her true nature.

The letter was written; and an answering one came, containing minute directions for Miss Brandon's guidance on her lonely trip. Railroad and steamboat were to convey her to a certain point, at which Mrs. Golding herself would meet her with the carriage.

It was just at the dawn of day when the steamboat upon which Esther had taken passage rounded to at her point of debarkation. The shrill whistle had succeeded in arousing two white men, half a dozen negroes, besides twice that number of hounds, who set up as dismal a yelping as if that steamboat-whistle had been their own death-knell.

One of the sleepy-looking white men boarded the boat as soon as the staging was thrown out, and, making his way toward the clerk's office, inquired if a Miss Brandon was on board. An answer in the affirmative sent him backward to the ladies' cabin, where, shawled and bonneted, Esther sat, very white and cold, shivering a little from the rawness of the morning air, and a little from sheer nervousness; for every thing looked so cold and strange and dreary, and this first decided step out into the unfriendly world was such an uncertain one, that she could not take it without a little womanly shrinking,—a trembling apprehension of she knew not what.

"Miss Brandon, I believe," said the young man, advancing rather sheepishly. "Mrs. Golding requested me to see you ashore, and take charge of you until her arrival, which will be before very long, as she came in from the plantation last night to a neighbor's, just a mile from the landing. We have a comfortable little wareroom on the bank, in which we shall have to entertain you until her arrival."

With a polite inclination of her head, and a cold "Thank you," Miss Brandon got up, and accepted his proffered arm. They were soon on shore. The staging was drawn in; and the boat puffed and wheezed away to her next landing. Dreary enough was the first outlook of Louisiana that greeted Miss Brandon's vision. Dimly visible in the cold gray dawn of a foggy morning in February stretched a flat plateau of land, thickly dotted with native trees, whose bare limbs shivered in their sparse clothing of long gray moss. Slowly and monotonously the great drops of mist

pattered down upon the heaps of dead leaves that had drifted to their roots. Not a sign of civilization met the eye, save the rude wooden building that had been erected on the bank for the protection of freight put off in the night-time. To this shanty her stranger-escort conducted Miss Brandon, and installed her in the one chair it boasted of with the politeness of a Chesterfield. With nothing but sugar-barrels, pork-barrels, and her own dismal thoughts, to keep her company, Esther sat through two of the longest hours she had ever known; at the expiration of which time she was startled by hearing a shrill feminine voice on the exterior of the little wareroom in conversation with her escort, who was smoking on the front-steps.

"My teacher come, Mr. Wesley? Good-morning!"

Mrs. Golding had a trick of arranging her sentences to suit herself, in reckless defiance of custom or rhetoric.

"Mrs. Golding, good-morning! Yes, madam, the young lady is here."

"Young? Very young? Look good-natured? Where is she? Take me to her."

"She looks very young," replied Mr. Wesley. "As for her good nature, I'm not prepared to speak; but an ogress would grow good-natured from daily contact with you."

"You flattering boy, take me to the poor little thing. I know she's tired enough of staring at your boxes and barrels." This interchange of sentences had passed while Mrs. Golding was slowly alighting from her carriage, and mounting the warehouse-steps; for Mrs. Golding boasted of her one hundred and eighty avoirdupois, in consequence of which she moved but slowly.

The "poor little thing" rose to the full majesty of her queenly person as Mrs. Golding brought her ample proportions into her presence; and, advancing with extended hand, she greeted her employer gracefully, but coldly.

"Bless you, child, don't be so offish! I like your looks. You are as handsome as a picture. Kiss me, my dear, and try to look upon me as a mother."

Something of Essie's manufactured ice melted before the good woman's sincere manner; and she stooped and gave the required kiss right cordially.

Then Mr. Wesley helped both ladies into the carriage; and they started for the twenty-mile ride which lay between the landing and Mr. Golding's plantation.

Mrs. Golding was a large woman, as I have before intimated; and, as she filled a carriage-seat comfortably by herself, Miss Brandon took the front-seat. Both ladies were content with this arrangement; for it afforded facilities for taking notes, of which they would have been deprived sitting side by side.

"Too handsome for a teacher," was Mrs. Golding's mental memoranda. "Ought to have plenty of money, so she could take that pretty face around, and break the men's hearts with it. I'm afraid she'll find it stupid enough at Locust Grove: must do all we can for her. Splendid figure! beautiful eyes! hands white and soft as a baby's,—just as useless too, I'll be bound! Hope she's sweet-tempered: don't like sour people.

"Plain but amiable face. Voice painfully clear and loud. I wish she wouldn't take it for granted that my hearing is defective. She will be kind to me: I feel sure of that. How very prominent her eyes are! and such a faded blue! I wonder if she's ever had any trouble in her life. No: look at that placid, good-natured face, the merry eyes, the mouth so ready with its friendly smile. Trouble!—she doesn't even know the sound of the word, I'll engage. I wish she wouldn't plaster her hair with such torturing smoothness over her forehead, which is none too high at the best. I feel a frantic desire to run my fingers through it, and rumple it. But I like her,—I like her in spite of myself. It's troublesome to like anybody; for then, when they deceive you, you have so much heart-work to undo. But I don't think there's much deceit in that plain, sweet face. I know she's good,—just as good as she can be; but I do wish she hadn't made her dress upside down. It's positively painful to see great long trailing vines, that Nature intended should droop, and look graceful, striving so frantically and ineffectually to clamber up to her waistband. How cross I feel! I believe I'm hungry or cold, or something's the matter with me. Where's my philosophy? Philosophers don't have moods: they hunger not, neither do they thirst. Feeling cold is all in my imagination: philosophers don't feel. Oh those vines, those vines! they'll run me crazy yet. I won't look at them: I'll go to sleep." In pursuance of which determination, she settled her head against the cushioned side of the carriage, and closed her eyes.

On through a monotonous stretch of country, where native woods alternated with handsome plantations; across bayou after bayou, spanned by bridges of heavy logs; skirting around small inland lakes; once again plunging into the woods, and finally re-appearing upon the banks of Le Noir,—rolled the carriage, drawn by two fat, sleek carriage-horses, until Locust Grove, the Golding Plantation, was brought to view.

"Here we are at last!" sighed Mrs. Golding, who had put painful constraint upon her tongue for some time past, believing her young companion to be asleep.

Esther opened her eyes, and stared out the carriage-window, with hardly more interest in the gaze than she had bestowed upon the monotonous scenery they had been travelling through.

An old-fashioned house, setting far back in a yard filled with all sorts of shrubbery, was all she could see of her new home from the carriage-windows: but as the gates were thrown open, and they rolled rapidly up to the front-steps, she espied a group awaiting them that she could not help eying with some curiosity and interest; for her young charges helped form it.

On the lower steps, waiting to assist them from the carriage, stood the head of the family, Mr. Golding, a man of a physical type singularly like his wife's. Light brown hair and beard; small kindly blue eyes; while the same pleasant smile played round his mouth that Essie had noticed in his wife. He was dressed in a pair of home-made attakapas pants, an old slouchy woollen coat, a vest which sported two white china buttons in place of the originals; and upon his head was an old black sugar-loaf hat, which he wore slouched over one eye in the most devil-may-care style. At his feet crouched two splendid hunting-dogs, staring with pleading eyes and longing looks up into his face, as if beseeching him not to waste time on such insignificant creatures as two helpless women, when the woods were full of deer to be shot. On the step just above stood the two young Goldings, who had made a sort of outwork of their father's broad shoulders, round which they peeped furtively at the "new school-'ooman," as they denominated Esther, with bated breath, in awe-stricken whispers.

Esther's charges consisted of a Master and Miss Golding,

aged respectively eleven and nine years of age. The family all seemed cut from one pattern, — the same sandy hair, small light blue eyes, and characterless mouths. Each child was attended by its own retinue of small darkies and pet dogs; two darkies and a dog being the special attendants of the heir and heiress of Locust Grove at every turn they made, from the time they left their beds in the morning until they were tucked safely into them again at night. And no Highland chieftain ever was more jealous of the rights of clansman than was each small proprietor of the rights of his own sacred trio.

"Well, old woman! back, are you?" And Mr. Golding held out both hands to assist the partner of his bosom to alight.

"Yes, old man; back, and hungry and stiff as an old foundered horse. — You Sarah Jane, get out of that door, and have breakfast on the table in a jiffy! — Miss Brandon, father. — Children, come here and kiss your teacher. And mind you're good and obedient to her. You just let me hear of your giving her any trouble, and you'll have me to settle accounts with." With this somewhat strident introduction, Mrs. Golding made an ineffectual effort to lay hands upon her offspring by way of bringing them within osculatory distance of their new teacher; but they skilfully eluded her grasp, and took refuge behind a high-backed settee, over whose edge they contemplated their governess with awful solemnity.

"I wonder if she whips," whispered Frank in his sister's ears.

"She don't look like she did," was the answering whisper.

"How do a whippin' woman look?" demanded Frank in a sarcastic undertone.

But Nannie had no answer to this ready: so, true to her feminine instincts, she took refuge in generalities.

Are you glad she's come, Buddy?"

"Glad! No, Jimminy! What's a feller to be glad for?"

"Don't you want to go to school and learn something?"

"No! Huntin's a heap jollier: now a feller can't go, 'sceptin' on Saturday."

"What'll Dinah and Ailsey and Rip do while me is in school?" asked Nannie, thinking anxiously of the pending separation between herself and her three pets.

"I don't know what Dinah and Ailsey and Rip'll do,"

answered Frank; "but I know monstrous well what George and Bob and Sway's going to do."

"What?"

"They're going to school with me."

"I bet you!"

"I bet you again, miss! I'll show her!" And Frank sent a wrathful glance after the retreating form of their new teacher, who was wending her way toward the dining-room, accompanied by their father and mother.

The Goldings were well-to-do planters. Mr. Golding made his five hundred bales of cotton, and owed no man a cent. Their *ménage* was carried on on a plan of the most thriftless expenditure. The wants of the body were bounteously supplied, while the mind and the soul were left in a starving condition.

Esther's æsthetic tastes stood a poor chance of being gratified there. She loved music and flowers and paintings, and the beautiful in any shape or form. They looked upon such things as nonsense, and went in for the creature comforts. Hence, with a house full of every thing that could contribute to the comforts of its inmates, it was perfectly void of any to please the eye or distract the mind.

Esther took all this in during the dreary forenoon of her first day at Locust Grove. After their early dinner, she retired to her own room; and, rolling a large chintz-covered chair close to the window, she flung herself into it, and gave herself up to meditation, — a very unwise and unphilosophical move on her part.

The day which had begun so drearily and grayly had grown darker and darker, until a regular storm seemed brewing. Black clouds began chasing each other across a leaden sky. Rumbling thunder was heard in the distance; then nearer, and nearer still; flash upon flash of lightning following in quick succession; until with a grand crash of heaven's loudest artillery, with the bowing of lofty trees, and whirl of the wind, the storm-king's presence was announced.

Fearlessly before her unblinded window Esther sat facing the flashing lightning, and watching the trees bend before the resistless blasts of the wind.

There were tender young pines, bending and swaying gracefully before the rude winds. There were fruit-trees,

lying prostrate and helpless, crushed forever by the first blow of adversity. There were poplars, that creaked and shivered, and moaned aloud their protest against the storm-king for his ruthless handling. There were sturdy oaks, against which the tempest spent its fury in vain: proudly erect, sturdily defiant, they reared their majestic heads above the swaying, cringing, trembling crowd around them, grandly conscious of their innate power to do and to bear.

"Grand old oaks," exclaimed Esther enthusiastically, "you have taught me a lesson. I will be no swaying pine, no prostrate, rootless sapling, no moaning poplar. I will be an oak, — a proud, defiant oak, against whose sides the storms of adversity may beat fast and furiously without conquering me. Come what may, I will rear my head aloft. I will defy fate. I will wring from an unwilling world the meed of praise and admiration which you in your unconscious indignity have wrung from me this day."

CHAPTER IX.

A HANDSOME ANIMAL.

"I AM heartily tired of this nomadic life, Estella. How soon can you make your preparations to return to America?"

The speaker was a man considerably past the prime of life. Tall, and as straight as an Indian, his height was exaggerated by his extreme erectness, and a certain constitutional meagreness, of which even the caterer for a Parisian *table d'hôte* could not divest him. His features were classical in their perfect symmetry, — a small, straight nose, beautifully curved lips, arched eyebrows, and long silken lashes, — lashes that drooped, alas! over a pair of perfectly sightless eyes. As he lounged in his large arm-chair with listlessly-folded hands, his handsome head resting against the cushions of his chair, a casual observer who did not know him would have supposed him taking his after-dinner siesta, and would have looked for a sudden up-raising of the white lids, and the glance of a haughty eye, in consequence of any sudden noise; for there was no unsightly depression or contraction of the lids, — nothing but a perpetual veiling of the windows of his soul.

The person addressed was Mrs. Somers, the widowed sister of the blind Mr. Etheridge. A devoted sister she was too, tending lovingly and solicitously to all the blind man's wants, — reading to him, writing for him, being eyes and ears and hands for him; in consideration for which, she was amply supplied with the wherewithal to deck her handsome person in gorgeous array, and to educate and

"finish" her one child, a son, now two years beyond his majority, — the one creature on earth whom Estella Somers loved passionately and unselfishly.

It had been many years, now, since a great heart-trouble had come upon her haughty brother, Roger Etheridge, driving him from his home in a passion of wounded pride and grief; hearing which, she, a young widow then, with a bright-eyed boy of eight years of age, had converted her slender jointure into ready cash, had packed up her wardrobe and her boy's, and followed this brother in his wanderings, all unasked. When she came up with him finally, she found him in a critical condition in a small Italian village, dangerously ill of a brain-fever superinduced by mental anguish. Tenderly had she nursed him through this spell; and when by reason of his constant application to study, whereby he hoped to smother bitter memories, the light gradually went out of his glorious brown eyes, Estella put her arms tenderly around the neck of her afflicted brother, and promised to be all things unto him so long as they both should live. And for fifteen years, now, they had lived together, or rather roamed together, in placid content, Estella planning and proposing and executing, Mr. Etheridge passively acquiescent; for all things and all places were alike to him. The light and the joy had gone out of his life one bitter, black day in what seemed a far-away past; and it recked him little what use he made of what he sincerely hoped would be a short remnant of existence. So his money made Estella and her boy happy, he cared little how much of it they spent. For nearly fifteen years, now, Estella had made every proposition for a new move which had been made, to which his invariable answer had been, —

"Just as you please: one place is the same as another to me."

It is no wonder, then, that Mrs. Somers glanced up in unmitigated surprise, with something like a shadow of alarm on her face, when her brother so suddenly declared his intention of returning to America.

"Why, Roger! what can this mean? I thought you were perfectly content in these lovely apartments. Have you heard any thing from America to cause this sudden resolution?" and there was an anxious ring in the lady's voice.

"Content! I am content nowhere," was the bitter rejoinder. "Passive indifference and contentment are two different things; and as for hearing any thing from America, what is there for me to hear? Who is there in America that even remembers my name, but my overseers and slaves and commission-merchants? What should I hear beyond the price of cotton and the chances of an overflow?"

"True," replied his sister soothingly; "but I was surprised by your sudden resolution into improbable conjectures. I will do just as you please, brother. Frederic and I are but grateful pensioners on your bounty, — a fact that we will not lose sight of." Mrs. Somers's contracted brows, and the look of general dissatisfaction on her handsome face, were curiously at variance with her meek words spoken with sweet humility. But the blind man could hear, and he could not see.

"I wish, Estella, you would not speak of yourself and Frederic as beggars. Has my 'bounty,' as you choose to call it, been so churlishly extended as to make you feel your dependence?" And his voice was full of gentle deprecation.

"Nay, dear Roger, you are over-sensitive. I am sure your own wife and child could not have fared more generously at your hands than my boy and myself."

A look of pain contracted the blind man's broad, smooth brow. "My own wife and child!" he echoed mournfully. "Estella, do you know I sometimes fancy that I would have been happier in the long-ago, and now, maybe, if I had been less merciless? Poor girl! poor weak thing! I well-nigh crushed her in my wrath. Tell me, sister, — you are a woman, and should know how to feel for a woman's weakness, — did I deal too harshly by her? Did my implacable wrath kill her? Speak! it haunts me. I would gladly have some voice outside my own conscience tell me that I did right. But I see her poor white face ever before me; I see her pleading eyes; I hear her piteous wails; I feel her clinging arms around my knees; and then I see her, — I see her at my feet, cold, white, motionless, as I left her. Amy, poor, weak Amy! why do you haunt me with your unearthly beauty? why do I hear your beseeching voice, your pleading words, for ever and ever?"

In strong agitation, the blind man had risen from his

chair, and was pacing up and down the familiar space of the long drawing-room.

Laying down her work, Estella Somers rose; and, slipping one of her slender white hands within her brother's arm, she spoke to him in that low, calm, musical voice which added so much weight to her words.

"Roger, my brother, is it possible that you, an Etheridge, should look back with puerile regret upon the course you pursued in that miserable time? You were grossly deceived by a beautiful adventuress: when the deceit she had practised upon you came to light, there was but one course open to you as a gentleman. That one course you pursued. Why should you regret it? If the whole torturing time were to be gone over again, I should hang my head in shame if my brother could so far forget himself as to act in any respect differently from what he then did."

Her words had the desired effect. They hardened Roger Etheridge's heart again. "True, true: why should I regret it? Beautiful adventuress, lovely betrayer! I did right; I did right. Estella, a woman, says so. I would do it over again: of course I would. There was no other course open to a gentleman." And he sank once more into his chair, wiping from his brow the great drops that his unwanted agitation had wrought there.

Mrs. Somers maintained a discreet silence. She was afraid to broach a new subject in her brother's then frame of mind; and she was afraid to continue the old one, hoping, by dropping it, that Mr. Etheridge's suddenly-conceived desire to return to America might die for want of nourishment.

But presently his voice, sharp and querulous to an unwanted degree, again cut the silence. "That is the very reason I want to return to America," he resumed, as if in answer to some mental antagonist. "This thing of running away from a trouble is all wrong. Just show the white feather, and it will master you. If I had staid right at home, and lived it down, and gotten used to the empty house and the silent nursery and the closed piano, it would have been wiser than to have run away and tried to forget that they ever had been. For I can't forget it, Estella: they go with me, they follow me, they haunt me. Work is what I want. It is nothing but idleness that ails me."

"My poor brother," broke in Estella's smooth voice, "what work could you do?"

"Not much, truly," he replied sadly. "But I have a fancy, that if I were on the plantation, hearing daily reports from my managers, ordering, advising, and correcting, life would seem a little more real than it does in this foreign atmosphere, where I have no home, no interests."

"On the plantation!" exclaimed Mrs. Somers in genuine alarm. "Surely, Roger, you don't propose burying yourself down on Le Noir?"

"Where else?" asked her brother sharply. "My home is on Le Noir; and I am tired of staying away from it. If it doesn't suit you and Frederic to live there with me, you can suit yourselves as to a place of residence. I desire no compulsory companionship."

"Roger, how can you?" and Mrs. Somers's voice was tenderly reproachful. "Do you think any thing could induce me to live apart from you, dear brother, my only relative? I confess, after Paris, Le Noir will be something of a trial; but, in comparison with your happiness, every other consideration sinks into insignificance. Why, even Frederic" —

"Who takes my name in vain?" and through the open doorway sauntered Mr. Frederic Somers, a young gentleman of twenty two or three summers. Dressed in the height of the fashion, polished from the crown of his natty hat to the soles of his patent-boots, twirling with dainty grace a small gold-headed cane, while one lilac kidded glove tenderly caressed a silken mustache, Mr. Fred. Somers presented a picture attractive in the extreme to his doting mother.

He had inherited from his Etheridge ancestry his commanding height, to which the coarser Somers blood had contributed weight and *embonpoint*; the two, combined, constituting a body fit for an athlete. His well-shaped head was covered with a thick suit of curly brown hair, presenting a decidedly Byronic appearance. His arched eyebrows, and straight, small nose, were inherited from his uncle. His flashing black eyes were dangerously handsome, albeit lacking the Promethean spark of intellect. The mouth, which the silken mustache half concealed, half revealed, was undeniably sensual in its full red proportions, but won-

drously fascinating with its bright, ready smile, and full complement of white and perfect teeth.

Owing to his uncle's munificent generosity, his educational advantages had been unsurpassed. He had passed four years in one of the best colleges in Europe; since leaving which, he had led a migratory life in company with his mother and his uncle. Nevertheless, just at this time, Mr. Fred. Somers's pursuit of education was limited to a knowledge of the best brand of wines, the most famous racers, the pleasantest places to empty one's purse at, the most desirable theatre to patronize, and like items of useful development.

He declared boldly that his mother was the handsomest woman he'd seen in Europe, and lavished upon her a sort of admiring fondness, which, to her partial eyes, seemed the perfection of filial devotion. He considered his uncle "a trump," and managed to behave with a tolerable show of deference and respect while in his presence, which he took care not to be any too often. Books, and people who read or wrote them, he looked upon as "bores, you know, — doosed bores," — to be avoided on all occasions as one would avoid the cholera or small-pox. In short, Mr. Fred. Somers was scarcely more nor less at this time than a handsome animal; and very handsome he looked as he sauntered into the presence of his mother and uncle, and threw his magnificent length upon a lounge near his mother's work-stand.

"What's that about Frederic?" he repeated, as he began leisurely divesting himself of his lilac kids.

"I was just telling your uncle, my son," and Estella fixed her boy's handsome eyes with a steady gaze, which said plainly, "Don't contradict me!" "that, where his happiness is concerned, both you and I are willing to yield our own wishes."

As his uncle's happiness had never as yet clashed very disagreeably with Mr. Fred. Somers's desires, it required no great moral effort for him to reply readily and gracefully, "I hope that it is not necessary for us to go to work at this late day to convince my dear uncle of that."

"I should think not, truly," rejoined Estella cheerfully.

"Thank you, my boy! I shall soon put your amiability and your sincerity to the test. We return to America as soon

as your mother can make her preparations to leave Paris. I want to settle down permanently on my estates in Louisiana."

"The devil!" exclaimed his astonished nephew unguardedly. But the sudden announcement that he was to leave Paris, and be buried on an obscure plantation in an obscure neighborhood in obscure Louisiana, was too much for his prudence or his careful parental training.

"What, sir!" began his uncle angrily.

"You careless, careless boy, to spill a whole bottle of cologne in my work-box! But even such a mishap can hardly excuse your exceedingly inelegant exclamation." The hastily-manufactured fib was for the blind man's benefit: the savage glare, conveying reproach, admonition, and warning, all in one flashing glance, was for her unruly son's benefit.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," said the handsome cub in a surly voice. "It's all one to me. Dem'd if I care where we live. Suppose I can have my horses and dogs down in the swamp? I'm deused sorry to leave right now, though. Just fell in with some decent Americans to-day. Jolly set. Purty girl, and all that."

"Who are they?" asked Mrs. Somers with that degree of interest which the mere mention of a fellow-countryman's name inspires in a foreign country.

"Walworths. Nice people too. Governor rich, though haven't had much to do with him. Young Walworth's my chap. Going it pretty rapid. Young wife don't seem to fancy it much. Got a sister that's an awful fine girl! smart as a steel-trap, purty as a pink. I'm spooney on her: she's tolerable sweet on me too. Give me two more weeks, and you bet your bottom dollar I make her say Yes." And Mr. Fred. Somers's hand went up tenderly, as was its wont, to his brown mustache, as if he placed his chief reliance upon that hirsute treasure for bringing Miss Mira Walworth to terms.

"Fred., have mercy on me, and try to construct a few of your sentences without the aid of slang. If you only knew how cordially I detested your present style of conversation!"

"Let my communications be 'Yea, yea, Nay, nay,'" laughed Fred. recklessly: "dem'd slow that would be, to be sure."

"You are hardly likely to be accused of slowness," said Mr. Etheridge. "Is he, Estella?"

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated the young man. "But I say, mother, call on Mrs. Walworth, that's a dear, and let's join forces. I'd like to see lots of the little girl before I go hence, to be seen no more."

"How do I know who the Walworths are?" demanded Mrs. Somers haughtily; for pride of birth had grown with the growth, and strengthened with the strength, of Estella Etheridge, until she had come to think that the world held but very few worthy to be called her friends.

"Confound the Etheridge pride!" exclaimed the descendant of the Etheridges undutifully and angrily. "I'm not prepared to say who Miss Mira Walworth is: but I can tell you who she may be, if she sees fit; and that is, Mrs. Frederic Somers." And, without any farewell greeting, Mr. Frederic Somers got up, and stalked from his mother's presence with offended majesty.

"Estella, that boy is becoming overbearing. I think rustication on the plantation may do him good."

"I never knew Frederic to speak so disrespectfully. It all comes from his infatuation with this American girl. I shall see her before I sleep."

"Do," answered her brother bitterly; "for you know it may be another beautiful adventuress."

CHAPTER X.

OUR OLD FRIENDS THE WALWORTHS.

WHILE Mr. Fred. Somers was expatiating on the charms of Miss Mira Walworth, that young lady, the same sweet Mira to whom I introduced you a year or two ago, was establishing her title to be called a child of God: for does not the good book say, "Blessed are the peace-makers; for they shall be called the children of God"?

The Walworths had been for two weeks, now, the occupants of a very handsome suite of apartments in the hotel at which the Etheridge party was sojourning.

The occasion of their coming abroad was the failing health of the elder Mrs. Walworth. Very quietly and gently that good woman seemed to be fading away from the face of the earth. Very tenderly and anxiously her husband, that good man, Philip Walworth, watched and tended her. His face was not so bland and placid as we used to know: it wore an anxious air, a deep-seated look of care, that was easily attributable to the fact that he could no longer blind himself as to his wife's increasing delicacy. What other source of anxiety could Mr. Philip Walworth, that perfectly just and correct man, have? None, of course. Whom had he ever wronged? Nobody, of course. An irreproachable husband, a kind father, an honorable man, a good citizen, the world bowed to him.

Their old family circle had been increased by the addition of a Mrs. Alfred Walworth within the last six months; and the presumption is, they were all very happy.

The bride that Esther's whilom lover had eventually pre-

sented to his family was a pretty little blonde beauty, an heiress in her own right, with no annoying and disreputable mysteries hanging over her name or history. Everybody knew who she was, when and where she was born, who christened her, and all about her: so this time, when Mr. Alfred Walworth had stood before the altar, the ceremony had been gotten through with quietly and respectably. No travel-stained father had stalked theatrically up the aisle, and forbidden the banns in a melodramatic voice; no white-faced bride had bowed her stricken head upon the ministerial robes; no crowd of wondering, half-curious, half-frightened guests had huddled out of the church like a drove of sheep from the presence of canine marauders. The bride's portly father, with a very red face and a very white vest, had stepped forward with pompous self-consciousness, cleared his throat sonorously, and given his daughter away to the son and heir of the rich Mr. Walworth. There had been two fathers and two mothers, and a host of cousins and uncles, to sanction the wedding. Altogether it was quite a different affair from that miserable abortion that had made wreck of poor Essie's faith in her kind, and sent her back to her old home sore and smarting. And was she forgotten?

"I'm never going to speak to him again! — never, if he lives to be a thousand years old, and begs my pardon twice a day every day of that time!" And Mrs. Alfred Walworth applied a very damp pocket-handkerchief to a nose whose symmetrical proportions had been somewhat marred by a long and violent spell of weeping, wiped it energetically, blinked her pretty eyes once or twice by way of making them look unconscious of the tears they had just been so prodigal of, and looked defiance at the dog-irons.

Mira looked as sympathetic as a kind heart, strongly at variance with a laughter-loving mouth, would permit of, as she came over to the sofa where her wrathful little sister-in-law had deposited her five feet three inches of offended womanhood.

"Tell me all about it, Madge, and let me see if that naughty brother of mine is really deserving of so long a term in Coventry."

"He don't love me; he don't love me a bit!" wailed

Madge, growing damp again; "and I don't know what he married me for. I'm sure I didn't ask him to; and I'm sure I wish he hadn't. I wasn't bad off for offers; and I know I couldn't have married anybody that would have treated me crueller;" and the poor, used-up handkerchief was called into active requisition once more.

"Maggie, for mercy's sake stop crying, and state your cause of grievance in plain terms. It pains me to the quick to see you and Alfred at variance. You ought to be happy with him. It is true, he is not the bright, cheery sort of a boy he bade fair to be before — well, before he came of age: but he is a man of very strong feelings; and, if you only manage him rightly, you would make both him and yourself much happier than at present you seem likely to be."

"Manage him! — me manage Alfred!" replied Madge, scornfully repudiating grammar and the idea with a finely-executed sneer. "I might just as well try to manage the Grand Mogul!"

"I don't exactly mean 'manage' as wives generally understand that word, little sister; for I think any display of attempted authority would end most disastrously. But I think you've watered the plant sufficiently now: suppose you try a little sunshine."

Madge wasn't quick at figures of speech: so she just said, with a pout of her full, red lips, "I don't know what you mean, I'm sure."

"I mean," said Mira, "that that man never lived who could be cried into loving his wife. It seems a grave charge for a wife of only six months' standing to bring against her husband, 'that he don't love her a bit;' and you know best upon what it is founded: but speaking from general knowledge of the sex, and especial knowledge of Alfred's nature, the cheerful course is sure to be the best."

"You're not a wife," sighed Mrs. Alfred Walworth; "and it is impossible for you to enter into my feelings."

"No; and, if I see much more of married infelicity, the chances are that I never will be a wife," answered Mira tartly. "Your tears and Alfred's frowns are rapidly making me a convert to the theory, that there is such a thing as single blessedness."

"Anybody could be happy with you, for you're an

angel; but Alfred's a monster!" sobbed Madge rather irrelevantly.

"Still dealing in generalities," said Mira, whose patience was well-nigh exhausted. "I have asked you twice this morning to tell me what it is that poor Al is to beg pardon for twice a day for a thousand years."

"Well, I'll tell you all about it," answered Madge with sudden cheerfulness, superinduced by the comfortable feeling of having a story to tell. And, assuming a sort of once-upon-a-time look, she began:—

"Ever since we have been in this wicked Paris, Alfred has been getting more and more indifferent to my society. You know yourself, Mira, how he keeps on going about with that horrid Mr. Somers."

"Monsters, both of them!" was the jesting interpolation.

"Yes, they are," resumed the plaintiff energetically; "and I think I've put up with it like an angel. I hate that Mr. Somers! yes, I do! He's not content with going into all sorts of dissipation himself, but must come leading other women's husbands into them."

"When it is considered that the accused is neither a husband nor 'other women,' your remarks could hardly be represented as personal," said Mira.

"That's right: laugh at me, of course. I could hardly expect any sympathy from *his* sister. If I were you, I'd wait until he comes in,—which will be some time after midnight, I suppose,—and enjoy your laugh together."

"Hush, Madge! and go on with your story: I am exceedingly interested in it." Mira was resolutely determined to preserve her good humor.

"In the Somers part especially, I suppose."

A rose-tint spread over Mira Walworth's pretty face; but she did not answer in words.

"Well, as I was saying, there's no knowing what those two creatures do do when they get out of my sight, nor where they go."

"Alfred's appearance does not bespeak any great degree of dissipation; and I am sure he has been very kind in taking us sight-seeing. Do you want him tied to your apron-strings all the time?"

"I contend, that, after a man is married, his wife has a perfect right to know exactly how he spends every minute

of his time, and to go with him too. And last night, when I saw Alfred making ready to go somewhere, I asked him where he was going; and he told me he was going out with some gentlemen, (gentlemen! that meant that horrid Somers!) And then I told him that I hadn't asked him whom he was going with; I had asked him *where* he was going; and he said coolly, that he was not sure I would be benefited by the information. Then I began to cry; for you know, Mira, he hadn't any business to answer me that way; and I told him, if he didn't tell me where he was going, I would sit up in the open window all night long, and try to get my death of cold. And then the monster seized his hat, and told me, if it was any satisfaction for me to know it, he was going to— O Mira! I'm almost afraid to repeat the word: he said he was going to—he-hell!"

Mira looked pained, but not quite so shocked as a correct young lady should, as the naughty word came mincingly through Madge's rosy lips.

"That was shockingly rude in Alfred: I am afraid you teased him into it. But I fancy he said *a* hell."

"A hell! I never knew there was but one before," exclaimed innocent Madge; "though I should think these wicked French people might need a dozen."

"A hell, Madge, means a gambling-house. They are magnificently fitted up; and, as Alfred and Mr. Somers are *doing* Paris, we will not be so puritanical as to ostracize them for looking into these places."

"A gambling-house! looking into them!" shrieked the afflicted wife, clasping her small white hands tragically together. "How do I know he only looked into them? How do I know he isn't betting away every cent of his money, and mine too, at this identical moment?"

"Alfred never touched a card for gambling-purposes in his life," answered Miss Walworth haughtily.

"But that horrid Mr. Somers! how do you know he won't *make* him play? He looks as if he were up to every thing bad."

"At least, pay your husband the poor compliment of thinking he can get up his own escapades. I should rather think him an independent scamp of the first water than a humble imitator of other men's follies."

"What shocking sentiments, Almira!" And Mrs. Wal-

worth, junior, bestowed upon her sister-in-law her full complement of syllables by way of accenting her own virtuous indignation.

"I know they're not exactly orthodox," laughed Mira; "but they're genuine, nevertheless."

Then Madge returned, with that persistency which only a certain class of females, best described as adhesive women, are capable of, to her hobby grievance.

"At least, Mira, you will agree with me, that it was very rude of Alfred to answer me so, and that he ought to beg my pardon for it."

"I agree with you cordially as to the rudeness. It was so rude, that I think Alfred must have been exasperated beyond endurance to have so far forgotten himself. Was there no anterior cause for his ill humor to your unwise persistence in knowing where he was going?"

"Nothing that I can think of. Yes, there is, too. But that was so ridiculous! You know that picture of you and an old schoolmate of yours, taken together, that Alfred says he prizes so much, because it is the only picture extant of you in your teens. Well, I was laughing at it, because, you know, the dresses look so funny and old-fashioned now; and I said that the other girl's face looked as solemn as one of those nuns — what do they call them? — that have to dig a spadeful of earth out of a grave every day. And he grew quite tart in defence of the old picture."

"Poor Al!" murmured Mira softly. "Does it rankle yet?"

"But it doesn't matter what *made* him mad. He'll have to beg my pardon before I speak to him again. He came home right penitent last night, and spoke to me very amiably as soon as he got in the room. But I pretended I was sound asleep, and didn't answer him; and this morning I showed him that somebody else had a temper as well as himself."

"O Madge, Madge! it is evident you're bent on working your own domestic ruin."

"I am bent on nothing," answered Mrs. Alfred loftily, "but teaching my husband to treat me with proper respect. I repeat, he will have to beg my pardon before I ever speak to him again."

The door opened, and upon its threshold stood the culprit.

He looked older and graver than two years' interval of time would have led one to expect: there was a hard look about his mouth, and a harshness in his eyes, that did not naturally belong to him. He advanced towards his wife indifferently. No contrition for having offended her, no pleasure at the prospect of a speedy reconciliation, shone in his coldly passive face. He laid a morocco box down on the table before her.

"I believe I was unconscionably rude to you last night, Margaret; but I suppose that will make it all right."

With hands tremulous from eager excitement, Madge undid the fastenings to the box, opened it, and uttered an exclamation of delight as her husband's flashing apology was brought to light.

"Oh, how beautiful! O Alfred! you precious old darling! How could you imagine that I was pining for a set of topaz! — Come here, Mira, and look."

Mira came, smiling a little contemptuously, albeit well pleased that her brother's topaz had effected a speedy peace where her own pearls of wisdom had been thrown away.

"Hold them, sister, while I give the dear old darling a hug! Was ever a woman blessed with such a jewel of a husband?"

Mr. Walworth submitted to the process of being kissed on his lips, eyes, tip of his nose, and both cheeks, with amiable stoicism; and, when his ecstatic wife returned to the contemplation of her flashing jewels, he brought the bow of his neck-tie round to its normal position with a jerk, took out his cigar-case, lighted a weed, gave one or two satisfied puffs, then took it from his mouth to give his sister an item of information.

"Mi, Somers's mother will call on you ladies during the course of the day. I fancy she's coming on a reconnoitring expedition."

"I told you so!" ejaculated Madge with an air of triumph.

"Told me what?" asked Mira, who looked very pink. "That Mr. Somers was a horrid wretch, who was" —

But a small hand was put over her mouth, and an imploring "Hush!" brought her sentence to an abrupt close. And Alfred Walworth resumed his cigar, declaring to himself that the female sex, as a body, was composed of heart-

less, brainless creatures, whose sorest smart could be healed by a timely application of jewels and gewgaws; and any man who was unhappy in his domestic relations had only himself to thank for a miserable blunderer who did not understand the manufacture nor the timely application of topaz-salve.

CHAPTER XI.

TREATS OF BUSINESS-MATTERS.

IF the Walworth ladies were not overawed, when, on the evening of the day in question, Mrs. Somers came in state to make the acquaintance of her country-women, it certainly was not Mrs. Somers's fault.

She had donned her stiffest silk (and manners), paying the minutest attention to all those elegant little details of the toilet that finish off a fashionable woman, as the last faint touches of the painter's brush give tone and richness to a handsome picture.

Mrs. Somers was certainly very fair to look upon. She had the Etheridge height and aristocratic bearing. Her features were a softened reproduction of her brother's, with the addition of a pair of large, lustrous gray eyes, that fascinated you while they froze you. Bold, indeed, must be that mortal who could long sustain Mrs. Somers's inquisitorial stare without flinching. Nothing but a very clear conscience, supported by nerves of steel, could carry one successfully through the ordeal.

She was going, she informed her brother on leaving her own sitting-room, on a tour of inspection, — to see if those Walworths were fitting associates for her son Frederic. She could not have him affiliating with nobodies simply because they chanced to be countrymen.

She had come, she informed the Walworths (after her son had made her acquainted with the three ladies in rather a bungling style), to enjoy the pleasure of intercourse with her fellow country-people, whom Frederic had raved about

so ceaselessly, that he had made her quite anxious to know their party.

The three Walworth ladies, refined, elegant, and easy in their manners, met with her inward approval; and when, during the course of conversation, Mrs. Walworth, junior's, maiden name transpired, Mrs. Somers grew radiant. She knew the Briggses (Maggie's mother was a Briggs); knew all about them, — who they were, and what they sprang from. The Walworths must be all right, else an alliance with a Briggs scion never would have been permitted. With such a sudden illumination thrown upon the subject, Mrs. Somers returned to the investigation of the young lady in whom Fred was so particularly interested. The Briggs alliance proved their respectability. Their present style of living proved the possession of means. The girl was pretty and bright. Fred might do worse; at least, a certain degree of affability could be profitably invested. Having come to which conclusion, Mrs. Somers brought all her fascinations and her magnificent eyes to bear upon Mira individually. Now, as Mira's nerves were not of steel, nor her conscience perfectly clear in the matter of Mr. Fred Somers, she did not bear the scrutiny unflinchingly.

Women are curious creatures; the best and wisest of them given to forming the most unreasoning and unreasonable attachments, — attachments which, once formed, the powers combined of heaven and earth cannot make them relinquish.

Before Alfred Walworth had introduced Mr. Fred Somers into his family-circle, he had satisfied himself of the young man's social standing, and had announced to the ladies of the party that the young gentleman had requested this introduction; adding, by way of comment, "Somers seems to be a gentlemanly fellow, with more money than brains. He's companionable, however, and will make rather a desirable addition to our tolerably slow party."

No one had been particularly excited over the coming man at the time of Alfred's careless mention of him; nor, in fact, was it until he had constituted himself her own especial and devoted cavalier, and had been in constant attendance upon her for more than three weeks, that a slight indisposition, occurring to keep him from her side for two or three days, aroused Mira to the fact that she had allowed this

handsome young Hercules, with nothing but his flashing eyes, his insolent mouth, with its ready smile and dazzling teeth, to beguile her heart from her keeping.

Then, woman-like, she fell to manufacturing an ideal Fred Somers upon the handsome foundation of the real Fred Somers; and so artistically did her loving fancy work up the rather coarse material Nature had furnished, that I doubt if the young man's doting mother could have honestly indorsed the article as genuine.

Mr. Somers, and Messrs. Walworth, senior and junior, had been enjoying their freedom and cigars on the balcony in front of the Walworth's private parlor during Mrs. Somers's visit to the ladies.

A visit, by the way, which promised to be more momentous in its consequences than was wotted of by any of that careless group.

When, by the law of etiquette, Mrs. Somers's visit had reached its proper limits, she signified to her son by a graceful wave of her fan that she had remained as long as fashionable regulations would permit. Through the open French window the three gentlemen stepped, in obedience to her signal.

"Mother," said Mr. Somers, "I've been talking to my friend Walworth here about our Louisiana home, which I think so doosed slow; but he says he has been thinking seriously of purchasing land down South. Seems he dislikes Chester about as bad as I do the Oaks. But I think, if we could get some civilized neighbors down on Le Noir, a fellow could stand it for the few months we'll have to be there every year. What do you say? is there any chance of his buying near uncle's?"

"It is to be hoped, Mr. Walworth," said Mrs. Somers, directing her reply to Alfred, "that your dislike for Chester has a better foundation than my son's for the Oaks. He was only eight years old when we left America; and what little he knows of the old homestead is through business-letters received by my brother. It is true, the neighborhood, like all other neighborhoods in the planting districts, affords but few opportunities for gayety of any description, owing to the slenderness of the white population. I do not think there are a dozen white families within a radius of twenty miles or more. The Oaks, now my brother's estate,

is a grand old place, beautiful in its location, but remote enough from the outside world to make it rather undesirable as a permanent residence. It is the wish of my poor brother, however, to return there, and settle permanently; and no wish of his is ever disregarded by Frederic or myself."

Here Mira made an entry on the balance-sheet of Mr. Fred Somers's perfections.

"Speaking from a business-point of view, Mrs. Somers, would you advise any one wishing to invest in cotton-lands to visit your neighborhood?" It was the elder Mr. Walworth who asked the question.

"There are none better in the South," replied Estella promptly: "and, if you are really in earnest in making the inquiries," she continued, "I am, curiously enough, in receipt of a letter this morning from my brother's agents (you know," she added parenthetically, "that, owing to Mr. Etheridge's blindness, I am his business-woman), informing him that a plantation adjoining the Oaks, known as 'Belton,' is about to be sold under mortgage; and my brother's agent wrote to know if he should buy it in. My brother expects to return to America so immediately, that we have not considered it necessary to reply to the letter."

Then Mr. Walworth made a great many inquiries respecting Belton, its location, its improvements, its price, &c.; concluding with the remark, that, as long as Alfred had grown so sluggishly indifferent to the professional course he had mapped out for him, he knew of no more respectable way of leading a life of perfect uselessness and indolence than by becoming a Southern planter: therefore it was very probable Belton would find in him a purchaser.

Mrs. Walworth, senior, seemed to take this exposition of their family-matters as something of a slur upon her first-born: so she put in hastily, *sotto voce* to Mrs. Somers, who occupied the same sofa with herself, "Our most powerful reason for wishing Alfred to leave his cold Northern home is for Maggie's sake. She is exceedingly delicate; and, although no actual malady has as yet developed itself, physicians have told us that her chances for longevity will be trebled by removing her to a warmer climate."

Mrs. Somers glanced toward the window, where Madge sat, a little apart from the family-group, gazing out on the busy Paris streets with animated abstraction; and noting

the transparent skin, the delicate tracery of the blue veins upon the temples, she remarked, that "Mrs. Walworth did indeed look like a fit subject for consumption: she had never seen any thing quite so fragile. But none of the Briggses ever had had any constitution; at least, the female members of it."

After that, a little more business-talk, a few more commonplaces, and the Somerses took their departure, clasping hands with all the Walworths successively in token of good will and amity for all time to come.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE WHIZZING LOOM OF TIME."

THE dog-days had come. The air quivered with its burden of heat. Not a leaf could muster the energy to stir in the sultry atmosphere, except the ever-tremulous foliage of the cotton-wood, that kept up a deceitful rustling, tantalizingly suggestive of breezes that were not.

Esther Brandon's little wooden schoolhouse presented something of a contrast to the luxurious apartments in which her whilom lover was idling the summer-days away. The sun shone down upon its roof with fervid radiance, blistering its whitewashed exterior, casting burning eyes on the rough floor through great knot-holes in the walls, sending luminous rays through cracks in the roof for the dust and the motes to waltz in, glaring insolently through the unshuttered window, playing derisively around the dusty little stove, that stood its ground summer and winter, as who should say, "What do you think of me as a heating apparatus?" But one idea pervaded the atmosphere, — it was hot! But one observation was made with any degree of feeling, — it was hot!

More than once had Master Frank Golding entered an indignant protest against the enormity of "keepin' a feller diggin' at books when his brains was a-boilin'"; and, as he sat as close to the door as Essie's rather rigid school-discipline would permit, his eyes wandered wistfully from the uncongenial book in his hands out to the river-bank, where congenial Rip, their great black Newfoundland, had just proceeded for the purpose of taking a plunge-bath. A splash

and a flounder; then, after a little while, Rip re-appeared, dripping and refreshed, shook himself once or twice, trotted cheerfully toward the schoolhouse, bounded up the steps with the assurance of a privileged visitor, laid himself down at Frank's feet, and looked compassionately up into his poor little red face, evidently pitying the biped who had to study, and couldn't take plunge-baths.

"I wish I was a dog!" exclaimed Frank fretfully, pushing the damp rings of hair away from his flushed forehead.

Miss Brandon glanced up in dignified surprise from Nannie's copy-book, where "pot-hooks" and "hangers" were staggering about in an astonishing fashion, as if too much debilitated by the heat to maintain their equilibrium, and asked, in tones of grave reproof, —

"Why, Frank?"

"'Cause then I wouldn't have to study in such plaguy hot weather! I wouldn't do nothing but swim, and gnaw bones!"

It was evident that books were at a discount, and bones at a premium, with both Frank and Rip.

Essie read her refractory pupil a clever little moral lecture on the enormity and foolishness of his wish; and then, heaving a sigh of mingled languor and discouragement, she turned her attention once more to Nannie's tipsy calligraphy.

The young Goldings had both grown quite fond of their beautiful teacher in the four months she had now been with them, albeit she kept them somewhat at a distance. She was firm, but just; gentle, but frigid: and used as they were to being half under, half over, their fond, weak parents, they looked up to this stately lady, who never swerved one iota from a declared determination, as an entirely different order of being, and respected her accordingly.

"Miss Essie," said Nannie, looking up timidly, and hushing her voice as if half startled at her own boldness, "don't you never get tired of nothing?"

"Yes, Nannie, I get *very* tired of your villanous grammar."

"I don't mean that, Miss Essie," pursued Nannie, emboldened by the suspicion of a smile that lurked around her teacher's mouth. "I mean tired of every thing, — tired of this old hot schoolroom, and these hard old chairs, and the

old books, and the flies and things. I know I do; oh, so tired!" and Nannie brought a very inky finger across a very shiny nose, substituting ink for perspiration, not with the happiest result.

"If I give you a holiday for a whole week, do you think you would come back to your lessons a little fresher?"

Frank and Nannie both thought that a week's rest would recuperate them so entirely, that Miss Essie would *never* hear another murmur from their lips.

"Well, we'll ask mother and father what they think of it when we have finished to-day's task."

"We know what mother and father will say; don't we, sis?" exclaimed Frank triumphantly.

To which Nannie returned an assured response. Even Rip partook of the sudden cheerfulness, giving Miss Brandon an approving wink, and rapping his tail energetically upon the floor by way of registering his vote in favor of the holiday.

So when the little schoolroom was locked up for that day, and Essie and her two study-worn charges returned to the house, the proposition was made to the heads of the household, and cordially indorsed.

"I think Miss Essie needs a rest twice as much as you do, you lazy little scamps, you! and I'm only too glad to see her taking it." Mrs. Golding was the only comfortable-looking thing about, as she sat in her large wicker rocking-chair, clad in the coolest of linen blouses, waving a huge palmetto-fan.

"Let's have a picnic!" suggested Nannie, who, being of a lawless turn anyhow, looked upon a picnic — where folks sat down on the ground, and got full of bugs, and ate with their fingers, and tumbled over things generally — as the acme of human enjoyment.

"A good chance, mother, to show Miss Essie our show-place," suggested Mr. Golding, who was swinging, in lazy enjoyment of his home-netted hammock, near the spot where the rest of the family were grouped on the veranda.

"That's a fact, Miss Essie! You've never seen the Oaks; have you? We'll have the picnic in Mr. Etheridge's woods, and we'll invite Miss Cally to the picnic: so that will give you a chance to see the house and grounds too; and they're well worth seeing, I tell you!"

As Esther had no interest in the Oaks, the Etheridges, or Miss Cally, she gave a rather languid assent to all the propositions put forward so eagerly by vivacious Mrs. Golding. But her employers were so very good to her, so affectionately interested in her welfare, that Essie was gradually learning to feel an honest affection for them, founded upon respect and gratitude; and could not hurt them by refusing to join their party.

"Who is Miss Cally?" she did muster the energy to inquire.

To explain away the fact, that, at the end of a four-months' residence on Le Noir, Miss Brandon should have been totally ignorant of the fact that a "Miss Cally" lived and breathed, and had her being, within six miles of Locust Grove, will necessitate a rather lengthy description of the state of society in the Le-Noir neighborhood.

Life down on Le Noir could hardly be called life: it was respiratory stagnation. The "Le-Noir Settlement," as it was called, comprised about a dozen plantations, clustered together in one of the most fertile districts of Louisiana, having for a focus a little wooden church, picturesquely situated in a dense grove of live-oaks on the border line of the Etheridge estate, where, on Sundays, the upper-ten and the lower-ten of the parish met together on terms of spiritual equality. For, although they were all subjects of King Cotton, there are planters, and again other planters; Mr. Etheridge, for example, being a "big planter," and Mr. Golding a "small planter." The inky little stream of Le Noir, which formed a connecting link with the outside world, was a river of such limited capacity, that it was only during certain stages of the water it was navigable. During the two-thirds of the year that it was not, the dwellers upon its banks had either to be content to lose sight of the outside world temporarily, or else travel by land in private conveyance to a certain landing on the banks of the Mississippi River, which we already know of as Miss Brandon's point of disembarkation. So you see Nature was disposed to throw all sorts of obstacles in the way of any frivolous Le Noirite who was disposed to "gad" too much. Notwithstanding these natural drawbacks, the Goldings and the Robinsons and the Melvilles lived and thrived and married, and brought young Goldings and Robinsons and Melvilles upon the world's

great stage, placidly content with their surroundings; sublimely unconscious of the fact, that to breathe freely is not to live. The outside world they looked upon simply from a commercial point of view. It was necessary as a place of export and import. They sent their cotton to it; and it sent them all sorts of creature-comforts in exchange. A yearly trip to New Orleans on the part of the master, and, once in a great while, a visit from the mistress, who spent weeks beforehand in profound mental abstraction over her list of wants, was all the outside world saw of the small planters of Le Noir, who looked with bigoted disapproval upon the big planters of the neighborhood, "who couldn't stay at home the whole year through, not if it was to save them." There was actually no general social intercourse. Everybody knew everybody, and was very cordial and pleasant in the event of a funeral or wedding bringing them all together; but so Mrs. Golding saw her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Robinson, once in six months, and Mrs. Melville saw *her* next-door neighbors, the Smiths, during the same space of time, their social cravings were amply satisfied. The husbands said, maliciously enough, that they guessed it was better so; for the less they saw of each other, the smaller their chances of quarrelling, and the better their chances of continued friendship: but then the best of men are prone to sacrifice veracity for the sake of a spiteful fling at us women, you know. Now, as the Etheridges were big planters, and the Goldings were small planters, there was little or no social communication between the two. In fact, for fifteen long years there had been no call for such communication; the family having been away, and the house having been left in charge of Miss Cally, a poor relative of the Etheridge family, who looked upon her instalment as housekeeper in the grand old house at the Oaks as an especial dispensation of Providence in her favor.

For fifteen years, now, Miss Cally had reigned absolute monarch of the yard domains, *her* social cravings meeting with entire satisfaction by intimate association with the wife and sister of the agent for the estate, who resided in a cottage about half a mile from the "big house," and a semi-annual visit to Mrs. Golding to see if she was "beating her" in the matter of garden, dairy, or poultry. She and Mrs. Golding were the very best of friends; always kissed most emphatically when chance brought them together: and what

(better illustration of true affection between two women *could* you have?

As this semi-annual visit had just been paid before Essie's arrival, and the social code of Le Noir had not yet impelled Mrs. Golding to return it, Miss Brandon had not yet come in contact with Miss Cally.

But the Fates were about to bring them together through the instrumentality of a picnic in the woods, — the first break in the absolute monotony of life which had come to Essie.

And thus, while the Walworths and the Etheridges whiled away these same dog-days in that luxurious indolence and æsthetic enjoyment within the reach of those alone who have taken thought of the morrow, and filled their purses plentifully with scrip, Esther Brandon was patiently plying at the whizzing loom of time with her weak, girlish hands, uttering no audible moan against the world that had treated her none so kindly, gradually and unconsciously bringing together in a gray-hued web the tangled threads of more than one life-web.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS CALLY.

A VERBOSE communication, beginning at the beginning, and setting forth all the whys and wherefores of the picnic, dictated by the kindest of hearts, penned by the most unskilled of hands, conveyed to Miss Cally's astonished senses the information that the Goldings were about to make an effort in the social line, in which her co-operation was cordially invited.

She was to come and "bring a basket;" to all of which she returned the cheerfulest of assents. Le Noir boasted of a character, as well as a show-place: Miss Cally was the character, and the Oaks was the show-place.

At the time when Roger Etheridge's great life-trial had come upon him, driving him in tortured haste to seek oblivion in foreign parts, he had written abruptly for his sister, then a new-made widow, to come and take possession of the handsome home he had fitted up in fond anticipation of wedded happiness within its elegant precincts. Mrs. Somers had come. After spending about a year in it, Mrs. Somers had seen cause to follow her brother in his wanderings, as we have already seen, and, in her turn, wrote abruptly for a distant relative of the Etheridge family, Miss Cally Henderson, a maiden lady, whose homeless condition and limited income Estella felt sure would incline her favorably toward the proposition.

She had not been wrong in her conclusions; for Miss Cally had obeyed the summons to come and live at the Oaks with cheerful alacrity; and there she was.

On the morning set apart for the picnic, the spring wagon had been called into requisition to convey Mrs. Golding, Miss Brandon, the two small Goldings, two large darkies, four small ditto, half a dozen mysteriously-covered baskets, that emitted ravishing odors of fried chicken, fresh bread, &c., to the grove selected for the entertainment.

Mr. Golding hoisted the last basket over the side of the wagon, and stepped back with an air of good-natured satisfaction, at the same time giving the order to "drive on."

"You're coming too, father!" and Mrs. Golding's kindly face clouded with disappointment; for, at the expiration of twelve years of married life, Mr. and Mrs. Golding were still lovers.

"I'll be along about dinner-time. Am going to bring the doctor with me. Tell Miss Cally the poor fellow's pining for a sight of her face."

Thus re-assured, Mrs. Golding allowed the wagon to move off with its living cargo of light hearts and smiling faces.

The perpetual sunshine that pervaded the Golding atmosphere was gradually telling upon Esther Brandon. She felt its genial influence, albeit unconsciously. The grove was reached; and, while Mrs. Golding took upon herself all the cares of hospitality, Esther, with a delicious sense of freedom pervading her whole being, wandered off alone into the cool depths of the neighboring woods.

In native grandeur the forest monarchs reared their proud heads, dreading nor time nor man. Fearlessly myriad birds twittered and sang amid their leafy fastnesses, knowing nothing, and fearing less, of cruel huntsmen. Wise-looking squirrels brought their bright black eyes to bear inquisitively upon the graceful intruder gliding through their domain; for it was rarely that any thing more light-footed than the homeward-bound cows, or more graceful than the cow-boy trudging behind them in his red-russets, came under their observation.

The little footpath that Esther fearlessly followed was nothing but a track made by the cattle going to and from an outlying pasture: hence the infrequency of human intrusion. A faint fragrance from the sweet-gum trees pervaded the air, perfecting the young girl's enjoyment as she rambled aimlessly on through the dim aisles of the forest.

Suddenly, and with hardly the forewarning of an inter-

vening rood of ground, she once more found herself within the pale of civilization. A worm-fence of fresh new rails gleamed unexpectedly through the green branches of the trees. Approaching it nearer, Essie discovered that it wriggled in an irregular square round about an acre of land, enclosing and protecting a substantially-built negro-cabin. A small gate of roughly-cut pickets — supported on either side by ponderous posts, whose caps, fantastically carved, and painted a garish green, bespoke artistic tastes on the part of the inmates — led into this enclosure, and, by a grass-grown footpath, up to the cabin-steps, which were composed of two square-hewn blocks of wood, one twice as large as the other. A rough frame-work, supported by two sapling posts, and thatched with dried branches of trees, shaded the rustic doorway, in which sat, busily knitting a coarse yarn sock, an old negress. Very old and very withered she looked, clicking her needles rapidly and mechanically as she kept a sharp lookout over her cabbage-bed and potato-patch to see that the chickens did not molest the one, nor the pigs come marauding in the other.

"Aunty, I'm very thirsty. I believe I've walked farther than I intended to. Will you give me a drink of water?"

Miss Brandon was leaning over the little picket-gate as she sent her voice up the grassy footpath to where Aunt Dinah sat in her hide-bottomed rocking-chair.

Aunt Dinah was old; and her eyesight was that dim, that she could not distinguish features at any distance. But she could see that it was "white folks;" and the sweetly-spoken "Aunty" betokened the lady: so, with the ready flattery of her race, she called out in answer, —

"Lord love yo' purty face, mistris! Come in an' res' yo'-self w'ile I draws some fresh water fo' you."

Nothing loath to rest a while before starting back on her two-mile walk, Esther passed up through the little garden, and entered the cabin, whose humble belongings were as clean and nice as plenty of home-made soap and water could make them. Aunt Dinah had bustled out the back-door as the young lady entered and took possession of the vacated chair near the door. The old woman returned presently with a great, big, creamy-looking gourd, brimming over with water cool as ice, and clear as crystal. It took both of Essie's little bits of hands to hold the rustic vessel

comfortably while she imbibed a long and refreshing draught. Her sun-bonnet had fallen back as she drank, thus fully revealing her beautiful face to view.

"Thank you, aunty; your water is delicious;" and she carefully handed back the gourd, still half full, to its owner.

But Aunt Dinah made no motion to take it from her hands; instead, she was staring her full in the face, in a queer, half-frightened fashion. So they stood for the space of a second. Then the old woman spoke: —

"Little mistris, who brought you back, honey?"

"From where, aunty? Nobody brought me from anywhere. You're mistaking me for somebody else." Essie spoke with the kind precision of voice and manner one uses in talking with the half-demented; for there was such a strange glitter in the old woman's black eyes, that she fancied her "not quite right."

"Ain' this Mars' Roger's daughter?" And the withered black face was brought close to Esther's, which grew a shade whiter than usual, either by contrast, or from alarm.

"Who is Mars' Roger? I'm certainly not his daughter; for I never even heard of him. Here: take your gourd, aunty, and let me go."

Unheeding her request, old Dinah pursued her close scrutiny of Essie's features.

"Ef 'tain't marster's purty wife's child, it's her ghos'! Dar's her own eyes, wat looked like they was always ready for cryin'; thar's her purty white skin and her red mouth. But she's dead; wen' away and died: an' her little un, po' little chick! dead too; and t'other one, Miss 'Stella say it's dead too. All gone, all gone! Po' Mars' Roger!" She had maundered off into soliloquy, standing there before Essie, with her yarn stocking in her left hand, and her palsied hand shading her eyes from the glare that came through the open doorway, as she took her rigid scrutiny of the young lady's fair face.

It was only when Esther rose to her feet, and, flinging the water still in the gourd out on some thirsty-looking cypress-vines, hung it back on the nail just outside the door, that Aunt Dinah aroused herself from her dream of the past.

"Who is you, little mistris, then? I'd like to know

de name of the purty lady that has such a favor of my sweet young mistris, wat's dead and gone."

"My name is Brandon," answered Essie, kindly humoring her.

"And does you live anywhar near this, honey?"

"I live at Mrs. Golding's. I teach her children."

There was an immediate and perceptible change in Aunt Dinah's manner. The Goldings "was small folks;" and she belonged to "big folks:" hence she occupied a higher position in the social ladder than her pretty visitor; for the rung to which she was one of the appurtenances was very far above the Golding rung. The young lady said she was a teacher. A teacher was a school-marm. School-marms were poor white folks, who didn't "own nary nigger." Being white folks, they were entitled to respect, but not to reverence. In consequence of which there was the faintest suspicion of patronage in Aunt Dinah's voice, as she replied, —

"'Twar jus' a chance favor to Mars' Roger's wife, then. She was a purty one, sho's you born. But so is you, chile; so is you, — a rale handsome young lady."

Essie thanked her for the compliment; and, bidding her good-by, she started to retrace her steps to the spot where she had left the picnickers, when Aunt Dinah's voice arrested her steps.

"Young missy, didn' you say you was a school-marm?"

"Yes," was the rather curt rejoinder; for Miss Brandon, to her shame be it recorded, winced at the appellation.

"From up in the free country, whar the niggers' frens live?"

"Yes; from the North."

"Well, missy, would you min', once in a while, comin' to see a ole nigger, an' fetchin' yo' good book along wid you, an' readin' to me? I'se got somethin' on my min', chile, — somethin' that lays monstrous heavy, an' drives the sleep away. I'll tell it to them as ought to know it, honey, ef de Lord'll let me live to set eyes on Mars' Roger 'fore I dies. But I'se gettin' oler and oler every day, missy; an' it skeers me to think of going widout tellin' somebody all about it. An' I thought as how the good book would tell me jes' wat to do. Will you come, chile, an' help a poor sinful nigger wat's fumblin' in de dark, an' don't know the road to de light of Jesus' day?"

More than ever convinced that her withered hostess was demented, Esther hastily gave the required promise, and once more plunged into the depths of the words.

"There comes Miss Essie, at last; and now we can eat dinner," was the first sound that greeted Essie's ears as she neared the spot that Mrs. Golding had selected for the dining-room.

"Miss Cally, Miss Brandon," was Mrs. Golding's polite greeting as she made those two ladies acquainted with each other with a formal little wave of the carving-knife that she held suspended over a turkey for dissecting-purpose. Up from the root of a tree sprang Miss Cally with the agility of a kitten, advancing with frank cordiality to Essie, with both hands extended.

"Howdy do, my dear? glad to make your acquaintance; hope to fall as much in love with you as my friends the Goldings have. Shake hands. I've got another name besides 'Miss Cally;' but I guess Mrs. Golding don't know what it is. Don't make any difference, however. I don't care what they call me, so they call me in time for dinner: that's my philosophy."

With an amused smile, Esther complied with her request to shake hands, and cordially grasped Miss Cally's little bird-claws in token of good will.

"You'll do," said Miss Cally, this ceremony gotten through with; "you'll do! You know how to shake hands. There's more in the shake of a hand than many people know of. When I offer to shake hands with a body, and he or she, as it may chance to be, lays a lifeless lump of flesh into my palm, with no more nerve in it than a gutta-percha doll, and waits for me to shake it, I say to myself, 'You are nothing but a lifeless lump of flesh yourself; not resolution enough about you to crook your five fingers; I've got no use for you;' and I drop the lump as I would a piece of raw liver. Then there's the bear-grip. It don't mean much, either. Innocents like you might mistake it for an indication of tremendous appreciation and friendship. But it's a mere physical contraction of the muscles, peculiar to some hands, which would close with the same spasmodic fierceness of affection around your hand or a pump-handle. There is, again, the insinuating clasp, — a lingering, languishing, feverish sort of clasp, which speaks volumes more

than the truth. The warm fingers insinuate themselves lovingly around your digits, pressing them ever so tenderly; and you think to yourself, 'How very glad he or she (as the case may be) is to see me! I'm afraid I haven't half valued his or her honest friendship:' while, bless your soul, child! all the time, if it's a man, beware! he's fooling thee, he's fooling thee; while, if it's a woman, she is just holding on to you until she's taken stock of all you've got on. But you shake hands just right; you close your fingers responsively, as if willing to meet folks half-way; and you know when to let go, which everybody don't. You'll do, or my name isn't Calliope Henderson."

Thus indorsed, Essie seated herself by this oddity from the Oaks, feeling as if she had known the little lady from time immemorial.

Miss Cally was exceedingly diminutive in stature, and so quick and spry in her movements, that she constantly made one think of a little brown hedge-sparrow, hopping about daintily and briskly, enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air, and the flowering beauties of the lovely earth, as God intended them to be enjoyed by man and birds. When young and fresh, Miss Cally must have been pretty. Her features were good enough; and her bright black eyes beamed upon the world full of the kindest charity. She was bright and sweet-tempered in the extreme; and it was a never-ceasing marvel, to those who knew her sterling worth, that Miss Cally had never married.

For celibacy in a woman, I take it, is looked upon as an indication of some mental, moral, or physical inferiority: for, of course, there's not that woman living who wouldn't have married if she could; voluntary celibacy being peculiarly a masculine prerogative.

Why Miss Cally had never married was a secret, which, with all her sex's communicativeness in full blast within her, she had yet managed to preserve intact.

One bold inquirer she had, once upon a time, extinguished with the pertinent reply, —

"Why I've never married, I take it, is my business, and nobody else's. If I couldn't find anybody to suit me when I was young, and simple enough to believe the men were creatures of superior mould, it's hardly likely I'll find one to my taste now, since I've come to know them for what they

are, — one half tyrants, and the other half slaves. I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for a man that would let me manage him; and, on the other hand, I've no notion of being managed: so I concluded to let well enough alone. 'Better bear the ills we have than fly to those we know not of:' that's my philosophy."

And she had acted faithfully up to her philosophy; and, judging from her sunshiny face, the ills she had were not so very unbearable, after all.

Frank's gross definition of the day's fun was the eating part: so his fun had to be still farther postponed, as it was not until a full half-hour after Essie's return that the male element of the party made its appearance in the persons of Mr. Golding, and Dr. Sparks, the physician of the neighborhood, and hence well known to every Le Noirite.

"Land of liberty!" exclaimed Miss Cally. "There's old Santa Claus! What's brought him out here to-day?"

"An irrepressible longing to see you, Mr. Golding told us, Miss Cally," said Essie, while an amused smile at the aptness of Miss Cally's comparison fitted across her mouth; for, indeed, good old Dr. Sparks, lumbering heavily toward them out of the buggy that had creaked and groaned under his weight all the way from Locust Grove, did look most astonishingly like Santa Claus, relieved, for the summer, of his packs.

"An irrepressible fiddlesticks!" said Miss Cally with a toss of her short front-curls. "Mrs. Golding, if you don't train that husband of yours into treating my name with proper respect, I won't answer for it that I'll not pull his ears for him."

"Why, Miss Cally, the dear old man has his heart set on making a match between you and the doctor. He thinks the world and all of the doctor; and says, almost every time he comes home from that dismal little cottage of his, he wishes some good woman would take pity on him, and marry him. Don't you think you could take him into consideration?" and Mrs. Golding looked in such hard earnest over the unique proposition to marry the doctor off in spite of himself, that Miss Cally burst into the merriest peal of laughter, — such infectious laughter, that even the stately Miss Brandon fell in with it.

"Bless my soul, it does a body good to come up with

such merry souls!" and good Dr. Sparks waddled round, shaking hands with everybody in a may-we-all-be-happy fashion.

"Precious old poultice! he has no notion that he's affording the merriment," whispered Miss Cally confidentially to Essie. "But, 'where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise:' that's my philosophy."

From which you will perceive that Miss Cally was a proverbial philosopher.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OAKS.

"AND now, friends and fellow-citizens, if you've played squirrel long enough to satisfy the most uncivilized among you, I propose that we all adjourn to my house, and finish the day like Christian folks, sitting in chairs, and drinking our coffee with pecans instead of spiders in it." It was Miss Cally, who, scrambling up from the grass at the conclusion of the dinner with the agility of the animal she had likened them all unto, made the above-recorded proposition in a fourth-of-July voice.

There was not a dissentient murmur.

"Shall we walk, or ride?" resumed Miss Cally. "It's but three-quarters of a mile through by the short-cut, if we walk; and it's very nearly two miles round to the big gate. But it's the prettiest through."

"Let us walk, please," said Essie. "I am anxious to see the beauties of the place."

"Which will you do, doctor?" asked Miss Cally briskly of that heaving mountain of flesh, as it slowly, with the aid of a cane and Mr. Golding's stalwart arm, recovered a standing position.

"Well, Miss Cally, as I feel strongly inclined toward a cup of your celebrated coffee this evening, and as I also feel a positive conviction that my own powers of locomotion would not be equal to the walk, I think I shall ride,—if I can get company, that is."

In the end, every one but Miss Cally and Esther concluded to ride around by the long way: so the two ladies

started off by themselves, Miss Cally promising her guests they should find her ready to welcome them. The woods through which the short-cut led them were merely a continuation of the forest through which Miss Brandon had rambled in the morning. As they walked, Essie told Miss Cally of her adventure of the morning with the old negress.

"That's old Dinah," explained Miss Cally, "the stock-minder's wife. She's in her dotage now; and I don't suppose she knows half the time what she's saying. Before I came here, they tell me, she used to be one of the house-servants. I suppose she was dismissed from active service on account of old age. They say she used to be one of Cousin Roger's favorite slaves."

"There's my place! What do you think of it for an old maid's hall?" They had come in sight of the mansion-house by this time; and Miss Cally drew the attention of the young stranger to the stately pile with pardonable pride.

The house set in the centre of a park-like enclosure, surrounded on its four sides by an impenetrable hedge of the glossy-leaved bois d'arc. The grassy lawn that sloped gently away from the mound upon which the building stood was composed of closely-shaven bermuda, not a break occurring in its smooth green surface. Aged oaks, venerable box-elders, spreading mulberries, and stately poplars, covered this space at irregular distances from each other, shading a winding carriage-drive that led up from the big white entrance-gate. The house was surrounded by artificial terraces, three in number, the construction of which had cost time, labor, and money. But Roger Etheridge had never been the man to take those things into consideration when he had an object to gain. He had set out with the determination to make his home beautiful, and had very fully accomplished his object. Three separate flights of stone steps led up to the main door. At the top of each flight stood great white marble vases filled with brilliant-hued verbenas, that ran riot in their own loveliness, and tumbled in bright cascades over the sides of the vases. Parterres of flowers brightened the terraces, and were kept in the most perfect order by faithful Miss Cally, who loved the flowers for their own bright sakes in the first place; and, in the second, declared her determination to keep every thing about the premises in perfect order, so that she should not be ashamed of her stew-

ardship at any moment those "wandering Jews," Roger and Estella, should choose to claim their own.

Miss Cally led her guest up the stone steps, describing, explaining, pointing out particular beauties, calling her attention to this glimpse of the distant river through openings in the trees, then far away again over the snowy cotton-fields to where the little white church-spire peered at them from the grove they had just quitted, with the delighted animation of a person very much in love with her own possessions.

"Isn't it pretty, my dear?" and the little sparrow brought her bird-claws together, put her small head upon one side, and looked at Esther with an air of assured satisfaction, as if there could be but one answer to her question.

"Pretty is not the word!" said Esther enthusiastically. "It is perfectly grand! And to think its owner should be so callously indifferent to its beauties!"

"Not so fast, my dear; not so fast. Poor Roger! He wasn't indifferent, I guess; for you see it was the work of his own hands, as you might say. Nature wears a very monotonous aspect in this good old State of ours: so the æsthetically inclined have to manufacture their own scenery. If Roger had squatted his house flat on the natural ridge, where would have been the grandeur? But he spent a mint of money on this place, and lived in it for four or five pitiful little years. They say it nearly tore his heart-strings to give up his home. That trouble of his — But there's no knowing, at this late day, which was to blame. 'Judge not, lest ye be judged:' that's my philosophy."

"But come into the house, my dear. There's only twenty-two rooms in it for me to drag my poor old bones around and see after." And Miss Cally carried her poor old bones up the front-steps with a spryness that put Miss Brandon's more stately movements to the blush.

A broad veranda, whose roof was supported by numerous massive columns of the Ionic order of architecture, surmounted by a richly-ornamented cornice, surrounded the house, which was long and low and rambling. Branching off from the broad entrance-hall were dark oak doors, leading, on the one hand, into the parlors, richly and tastefully furnished; and, on the other, into the library.

"And now," said Miss Cally as she threw open the door

of this room with a flourish, "I feel sure you can make yourself content here while I go off and order the coffee I've promised those folks in the wagon; which, by the way, I hear creaking 'its slow length along.' Make yourself at home, my dear. I don't doubt you'll find yourself in your natural element in here with the books." And, without any more ado, Miss Cally closed the door on her guest, and trotted away to the supervision of her Christian banquet.

Esther found herself in a long room evidently running the full length of the house. A dark, rich tapestry carpet of green and crimson covered the floor, according well with the green-and-gold papering on the wall, and the heavy green damask curtains, with their richly-gilded cornices. The furniture was all of black walnut and dark green brocatelle. The massive bookcases which lined two sides of the walls were also of walnut, with plate-glass doors. A wealth of literature, both ancient and modern, weighed down their shelves. No dust had been allowed to accumulate, no moth to corrupt: for this had been the master's favorite room, she guessed, from the abundance of man's rubbish littering the tables and mantle-shelves, — such as pipes and cigar-boxes and match-boxes and pistol-cases, &c.; and she'd sunned and dusted it every day herself.

At the end of this long room was an arched alcove, partitioned off from the rest of the library by soft lace curtains caught back by crystal water-lilies. Time had turned the lace yellow; and the folds, that were crisp and starched when Roger Etheridge was fitting up this little alcove for his fair young bride, now hung limp and lifeless.

It was with an indefinable feeling of awe that Esther Brandon parted the yellow lace curtains, and stepped across the entrance to this boudoir. It was a perfect gem; or, rather, it had been. The pale cream-colored paper, with its once pink sprays of flowers, was faded and discolored. The carpet, so delicate in colors and tracery, careful Miss Cally had concealed by a coarse linen covering. All the furniture, too, stood enveloped in ghostly linen coverings, their gilded legs alone peeping out suggestively. A dainty work-stand and miniature writing-desk, costly trifles of *papier-maché* and pearl, stood on either side of the white marble mantle-piece, which in itself was a work of art, so rich and elaborate was the carving all over it. A locked piano occupied

one bare space; and a handsome harp, shrouded in a green baize cover, faced it from another corner. A few well-selected pictures adorned the walls, and two or three handsome vases stood upon the mantle.

Essie had not advanced beyond the threshold. She took all these items in as she stood there; a feeling of depression coming over her as she thought of the sad tale those walls might tell, if they could only speak.

"This was *her* room," she murmured, — "the beautiful wife's, who brought so much misery on her husband! I wonder what she did; or was she to blame? — who knows? The world is so much fonder of blaming a woman than a man! Who knows any thing but what *he* has seen fit to tell? Poor woman! maybe she was the sufferer, after all, though all the pity is accorded him. But, again, that's the way of the world, — the blame for the silent dead, the pity for the complaining quick. Right or wrong, of course she was the sufferer. *Could* he suffer as she could? Of course not! Was she not a woman? was he not a man? Can a man suffer? — really suffer? Bah! no. *He* thought he would suffer; and the papers tell me he's married, — married ever so long ago; while I — Pshaw! maundering into the old, beaten track. I thought that chamber was locked so securely, no ghost of a memory could ever force its way out. Did she, the wife, the beloved wife, ever suffer as I suffered in that far-away time? Poor thing! I wonder why I feel such a tender longing to know her story. Is it to convince myself that others have trod as stony a path as mine? But then they say she was bad, and it was her own hand that wrought all this trouble and desolation. Perhaps. But I pity her; I pity her all the same, because she was a woman, and suffered. I pity her" — She spoke the words audibly.

"Pity who, my dear?" Miss Cally's ringing voice jarred on Esther's overstrung nerves, breaking in as it did upon the solemn stillness of the little alcove, whose outlines were growing dim in the fading light of evening.

"I did not know I was speaking out loud. I believe I've been dreaming in this ghostly little room. I've been trying to imagine the sad story that has converted what was intended for a beautiful home into nothing more than a melancholy tomb for sad memories."

"Bless the child! her imagination has run riot in the space of fifteen minutes. Much obliged to you, I'm sure, for calling my handsome house a tomb! It's rather a lively ghost that inhabits it, at any rate; and the ghost's coffee and pecans are ready, if you'll come back from dream-land and partake of them."

"Dear Miss Cally, I beg a thousand pardons for my unhappy comparison. I believe I am imaginative; and as I stood in that little room, looking at all the dainty feminine arrangements that told so plainly the tale of her refined tastes, I lost sight entirely of you, and the good people out yonder, and myself, and was consumed by an intense longing to hear the true story of her misery."

"Her misery!" said Miss Cally tartly: "poor Roger's, you had better say. It was all her doings: so they tell me. I tell you what, my dear: you stay here to-night, and I'll tell you all I know myself; which isn't a great deal, I acknowledge. But, if a romantic story will be inducement enough to keep you, I promise it to you: for I've taken a fancy to you, I declare I have; and I'd like to keep you with me for a day or two. 'When you find a congenial soul in this tolerably uncongenial world, grapple it to your soul with hooks of steel:' that's my philosophy."

Miss Cally was brimful of quotations, and was wont to say, in extenuation of her constant use of them, "Next best thing to having ideas of your own is to know how to make use of other people's."

Esther's life at the Goldings' was one of such unbroken monotony, and her surroundings in that comfortable but unbeautiful home were so unattractive, that she did not find it difficult to gain her own consent to absenting herself therefrom for a few days.

This Etheridge house charmed her, fascinated her, with a strange fascination, that was hardly to be accounted for on the score of its elegant upholstery and picturesque situation. She was possessed with an unconquerable desire to hear all that Miss Cally could tell her of the sad romance that had settled like a black pall over this lovely spot, scaring away all that was bright and joy-giving in the lives of two people whom she had never seen. So, when the Goldings made ready to leave after their coffee-drinking, Essie staid behind.

CHAPTER XV.

AN EVENING IN DREAMLAND.

I THINK it would be hard for the most imaginative of artists to fancy a prettier picture than the one Miss Cally and Esther Brandon helped form on the terrace, at the Oaks, on this evening.

The sun was sending his last slanting rays of molten gold across the sward of the terrace, tenderly caressing its bright embroidery of zinnias, phlox, and big-eyed heart's-ease, leaving the tops of the tall trees in sombre shade, while their massive trunks gleamed with reflected light. On the top step of the last flight of stone stairs Esther had seated herself, leaning back against the white marble vase, toying with one white hand with the trailing branches of crimson verbena which nestled lovingly in the dark braids that crowned her head, her long black robes forming an effective groundwork for the brighter tints of the picture. Away off down the winding road creaked the red spring wagon under its load of Goldings and goodness, with Rip, fresh from his long rest at the Oaks, trotting contentedly behind. The great yellow moon came placidly up in the blue orient, disputing the sovereignty of the skies with the dying monarch. Just above Esther, in the more dignified enjoyment of a garden-chair, sat Miss Cally, herself a separate picture of bright-eyed contentment.

"Better sit in a chair, my dear. It's all very nice, this youthful defiance of night air and dew; but it amounts, in the long-run, to romance *versus* rheumatism."

"I never catch cold, Miss Cally; and I feel quite sure

that from no other point of the compass could I get just such another view of this lovely scene."

"'Tis pretty, isn't it?" said Miss Cally with an air of supreme satisfaction, as if she were individually entitled to the credit for the surrounding beauties, — the yellow moon, the flecks of sunlight on the grass, the big-eyed Johnny-jump-ups, and all.

A thoughtful silence fell upon the two ladies for a little while.

Esther, a passionate lover of the beautiful in art or nature, seemed content to sit dreamily drinking her fill of the placid loveliness around, feeling, somehow or other, more at home in the refined atmosphere of this elegant abode, which she had known but an hour or two, than she felt, or ever could feel, in her own little familiar bed-room at Locust Grove, that she'd lived in now for more than four months, — lived in until every nail-hole in the roughly-plastered walls, every flower upon the gorgeous calico curtains, were indelibly impressed upon her tortured memory.

Miss Cally, also a lover of the beautiful in her own kitenish fashion, not pining for it in the abstract, but being full of lively appreciation of any thing pretty that was brought immediately under her observation, brought her commendatory glances back from the sunshine, and the zinnias, and the phlox, to the lovelier human blossom, the queenly white-lily, of which Essie's pure beauty seemed so fitting a type.

"The girl is perfectly lovely," was Miss Cally's mental dictum, after having taken a long and comprehensive look at her, as she sat there, with her white hands clasped indolently, in a fashion of her own, upon her black lap, her head resting against the marble vase, her wistful violet eyes fixed abstractedly on the distant horizon, — "perfectly lovely, but too sad and cold for one so young. I wonder what ails her. I wonder if it's a trouble that anybody — that I, for instance — could help her with. Mrs. Golding says she never complains. I wish she would: a little healthy complaining does a world of good sometimes. I don't believe in locking trouble up so closely in one's own breast. A little human sympathy goes a great way towards helping a body bear the heaviest burden. Poor child! no doubt she thinks herself monstrously strong, very self-reliant and independent,

and all that sort of thing; and I doubt not but she thinks that she's hidden her sorrow away from sight, so that nobody even guesses its existence, poor dear, poor dear! while all the time there's a drag in the corners of that pretty mouth of hers, and a far-away look in her sad, sweet eyes, that's enough to bring the tears in a body's own eyes from pure sympathy with a sorrow one don't know any thing about. If I hold my tongue much longer, I'll feel like crying, anyhow; which would be a nice way of mending matters. I'll win her heart first, and then her confidence. How pretty she'd look if she would only put off those heavy black dresses, and come out in the laces and ribbons and toggery that belong to her time of life! But she doesn't need much assistance from millinery to make her as handsome as a picture. And not a marriageable man within fifty miles! What a pity!" And Miss Cally's feminine mind deplored the waste of so much loveliness with genuine regret.

"When am I to have my story?" asked Essie presently, bringing her eyes back from the tree-tops to Miss Cally's friendly face, the sharp scrutiny of whose black eyes she had been feeling for some time, and wincing under.

"Whenever you can make up your mind to come under shelter, and listen to it like a Christian," replied Miss Cally.

"And waste this beautiful evening in-doors?" answered Esther with a voice full of remonstrance.

"Well, my dear, as the moon has a longer lease of life than either you or I, and as I'm already in my third quarter, with no prospect of coming out a rejuvenated crescent next month, I think I'll have to be positive about adjourning to the house."

"Pardon my want of consideration," said the young girl hastily, rising as she spoke. "I am afraid having no one but myself to think of is making me selfish."

"But why should you think of no one but yourself, child?" asked Miss Cally gently; and she laid her small hand upon Essie's arm with a caressing motion.

"Because my life and heart are empty," answered the girl with a force and bitterness out of all keeping with her hardly-acquired stoicism.

"No one's life or heart need be empty, my dear, so long

as one has strength and health; for this big world of ours is full of claimants upon our time and our affections."

The little woman spoke the words hastily and tremulously; for, though she was herself a sincere and consistent follower of Him who went about doing good, she had a holy horror of sermonizing, preferring rather to live her religion than to preach it. It was seldom she ventured upon such little moralizing sentiments as the above; and, when she did, it was in an apologetic mirror, as she begged of you not to think she thought herself the least speck better than yourself.

"You are a Christian," said Essie in the tone of having just made a most astonishing discovery, while she looked down upon the small bit of humanity at her side as might one who unexpectedly comes across a rare plant of foreign extraction in one's cabbage-bed; for in that careless, half-heathen, Le-Noir neighborhood, religion entered very little into the talk, and much less into the lives, of the people.

"I hope so, my dear," was the simple reply.

By this time they had entered the big hall; and Miss Cally led the way into the library.

"I don't often sit in this big old room when I am by myself; but I suppose Preston has lighted the lamps in here in honor of your visit, Miss Essie. Excuse my not calling you Miss Brandon, child; but that sounds so far off, and I want to come near to you. I believe I'm going to be very fond of you: and I propose you shall be fond of me too, miss; do you understand? I say, shall be: I use the imperative mood, you perceive. I'm partial to it. Imperativeness is becoming to women of my size. It overawes folks into losing sight of the lack of majesty in my appearance by the preponderance of it in my manners. 'If you can't be a thing, look it' (provided it's a desirable thing, of course): that's my philosophy. How do you like it?"

"You, or your philosophy?" asked Essie with a smile.

"Both, dear; both."

"I doubt the wisdom of your philosophy. As for yourself, I am afraid I am in danger of liking you only too well."

"My dear, I don't like your selection of an adjective. Couldn't you make use of a more complimentary one than 'afraid'? I don't know that I exactly fancy being spoken

of as one would speak of a dish of cucumbers, or other tempting but indigestible comestible."

Esther laughed outright at the queer conceit, — a genuine merry laugh, entirely unpremeditated on her part, and upon the heels of which her sombre advocacy of the objectionable adjective trod rather awkwardly. But where was the use of acquiring stoicism if one was to be laughed out of it by the first ripple of sunshine fate chose to throw across one's pathway?

"Yes, afraid. Miss Cally, I think it's much wiser and more comfortable to go soberly through life, performing one's duty rigidly, looking neither to the right nor left, not desiring approval, not minding disapproval, neither loving nor hating anybody, being simply and entirely indifferent to everybody."

"Being simply and entirely a goose," interrupted Miss Cally tartly. "Excuse me, my dear, for being so impolite as to call you a goose at this early stage of our acquaintance; but I have no patience with a pretty young thing like you talking cynicism. Why, my dear, don't you know you're nothing more nor less than a woman? and don't you know a woman *can't* stop loving? It's simply an actual necessity of her being. A woman can no more live without real live affection, than the flowers can without sunshine, or the birds without air."

"I am a living refutation of your theory," said Essie bitterly.

"Only temporarily, dear; only a little while. The sun stops shining for days and days together, and the flowers languish, and droop their pretty heads; but he comes back again, and they live again. The good God has seen fit to take the sunshine out of your life for a little while: but he'll send it back again; he'll send it back. I'll dance at your wedding yet, dear; I feel a conviction that I shall; and my convictions are as infallible as Mrs. Winslow's soothing sirup."

But the word "wedding" carried Esther Brandon's heart and memory backward with a fearful bound to that unfinished wedding in which she had played so conspicuous a part, making her sick and white with the hated remembrance.

"Never!" she said in a solemn voice.

Miss Cally looked at her for a moment seriously and anxiously, as she might have regarded a sick man whose case called for careful consideration, but caused no despair. Bad, but curable, she classed Essie's case. But she hushed the jesting retort on her wise little lips, awed by the white agony of the girl's sweet face.

"Come, dear, are you ready to hear the story of Cousin Roger's life-trial?" Thus Miss Cally adroitly turned Esther from retrospection that was neither wise nor wholesome.

"Miss Cally, you are so good, that I don't believe you'll think me very troublesome if I tell you I have a fancy for hearing *her* story yonder in her own little room, with no light but the moonlight coming through the big bay-window behind her piano."

"Certainly, my dear! You may be as romantic as you please, now that I've gotten you inside the house. Romance by the gallon, if you choose; only safe romance. Catarrhal romance is the only kind I oppose violently."

So the two ladies traversed the long library; and, passing under the yellow lace curtains, they opened the sash of the bay-window, and flung back the Venetian blinds, letting in a flood of pallid moonlight upon the white linen cover that was spread upon the floor. Then Esther curled herself up in one corner of the shrouded sofa; and Miss Cally took possession of the ghostly arm-chair, — the one to listen to *her* story, the other to tell *his*.

"My dear," said Miss Cally with a little manufactured shiver, "I hope every thing looks unearthly enough to satisfy your romantic cravings."

"Go on, please," came in a hushed sort of voice from the motionless heap of black curled up on the white sofa.

"Well, then," began the narrator in a once-upon-a-time voice, for which she suddenly and temporarily substituted her every-day one to inform her listener not to expect a thrilling and exhaustive recital of the romance of the Oaks; for, after all, it was only a scrappy and unsatisfactory account of Cousin Roger's trouble she'd ever heard herself.

"I remember my cousin Roger Etheridge as I first saw him, my dear, — a noble-looking youth of hardly more than your own age, which I guess to be about twenty."

Not deeming the guess relevant to the subject in hand, her listener did not choose to satisfy her as to its accuracy.

"My father and his mother were second-cousins; but owing to the fact that we had always lived up North, where the American Hendersons first took their rise (we have English blood of the best sort in our veins, Miss Essie), and his mother having married a Southern planter and moved North, an estrangement naturally sprung up, which was entirely owing to the distance which separated us. Mother and Cousin Maria Etheridge carried on a limping correspondence, however; and one day a letter limped through the post, and astonished us all by stating, that, as the Etheridges were abroad for the summer, they would take us *en route* for some springs, which were their final destination, and renew the old-time intimacy. Great was the commotion in parlor and kitchen; for we were but moderately well to do in this world, and our cousins, the Etheridges, were ever so rich. Well, they came, — four in family, — and staid just that many days. The family consisted of Cousin Roger's father and mother, himself, and Cousin Estella, now the Widow Somers, then a beautiful young girl of eighteen, as handsome as a tragedy-queen, and quite as awe-inspiring. I was afraid of her from the first moment I ever laid eyes on her; and I believe I'll die afraid of her. We haven't one feeling in common. I don't believe Cousin Estella has much heart in that beautiful body of hers. But 'judge not, lest ye be judged:' that's my philosophy. Maybe I wrong her: I hope I do.

"But as for Cousin Roger, my heart went straight out to him. He was so handsome and so bright, and had such a winning way about him, that I was in sore danger, my dear, of falling ridiculously in love with him. He was as tall and slim and straight as a young Indian warrior: his features were classic in their regularity; and his mouth and eyes were ravishing; big, clear gray eyes, with lashes almost black, — dauntless sort of eyes, that looked the whole world fearlessly in the face. His mouth, partially hidden by a callow mustache, was large, but well shaped, and full of the most dazzlingly-white teeth; and, when he smiled, my silly heart would bound quite out of my keeping. I couldn't help it, my dear. I was a foolish, simple country-girl, whose experience of the male sex was confined to dear old father, who was a *plain* farmer in every sense of the word, and our clumsy farm-boys: so you see I couldn't help thinking Cousin Roger a creature of superior mould, and admiring

him accordingly, — admiring, mind, I say, my dear: for I wasn't in love with him, I want you to understand; not a bit of it! I never was in love with any man living five minutes in my life." Miss Cally spoke with the fierce energy of one resolved to convince herself, or somebody else, of a point that was open to controversy.

"They only staid four days with us, as I told you, — four short, white days they were too, — and then they went on their way to fritter the long summer days away at a fashionable watering-place, and I went back to my milk-pans and churning. I won't say that I didn't draw sinful contrasts between my lot and Cousin Estella's, my dear; for I did not see quite clearly why she should have beauty and riches, and all the delights attendant upon those two possessions, and I go plodding through life in plain attire, with nothing bright around me but my tin milk-pans. But I've learned since then, child, to believe that He doeth all things well. I didn't envy Cousin Estella after I heard she married that profligate Somers, who made way with her money in the four years he lived after they were married, and then died, leaving her with a boy on her hands to raise as best she could, and educate, without any money to do it on. I didn't envy; but I am afraid I didn't feel as sorry for her as I would have done if I'd thought she had more heart to break. But she didn't suffer as some women would. But there I go judging again. Each heart knoweth its own bitterness. 'Live and let live' ought to be our philosophy.

"Well, as the novel-writers say, time rolled on, bringing us years, and, it is to be hoped, wisdom too, in small, homely quantities, suited to our small, homely capacities. Father and mother died in the ripeness of age and goodness, and went straight to heaven, I make no manner of doubt, leaving me more unhappy than lonesome; for, a year or two before their summons came, my brother had brought a wife to the old farm, who may have suited him as a wife, but certainly did not give satisfaction either as daughter-in-law or sister. After father's death, the farm passed into John's hands; and naturally, after mother's death, his wife considered herself the mistress of the farm. I tried to play second-fiddle gracefully, but made but poor work of it. So one day, when a letter came from Cousin Estella telling

me that she was in great trouble, and, having heard of father's and mother's death, she supposed I would have nothing very binding to keep me up North, and would I come to her in her trouble, I did not find it hard to write her 'Yes,' nor to pack up my few belongings, and follow my letter down here.

"Well, when I reached this place, I found Cousin Estella in the confusion of packing. We had a long talk before I went to bed that first night, during which she told me all I've ever heard.

"It seems, that, five or six years before that time, Cousin Roger had met, while travelling, a beautiful young widow, whose only encumbrance was a little girl about two years old. This young widow, whose name has slipped my treacherous memory, — if, indeed, Cousin Estella ever told me it, — so completely bewitched my handsome cousin, that he married her, and brought her down here, having just waited long enough to fit this pretty nest up for his bonny bride. According to Estella, for five years or so they lived in a state of beatitude calculated to make them forget that man was born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward: when, one day (Estella says she got this part from Mrs. Etheridge's nurse), Cousin Roger's wife was sick (she was a delicate creature anyhow, they say); and, when the mail-bag was brought in, cousin, who was sitting near his wife's bed, lovingly bathing her head with *eau-de-cologne*, glanced over the letters, and found among them one addressed to his wife. 'Here's one for you, wife,' Estella says the nurse said he said; and then she put up her hand, and took the wet cloth from over her eyes, looked at the handwriting carefully, and gave it back to him, saying feebly, 'It's from one of the old academy girls: you can read it to me, dear, if you choose to waste time on it.' Estella said the nurse said he opened the letter, and began to read; but, instead of reading it out loud, he just kept getting whiter and whiter about the mouth, until his wife, alarmed at his silence, flung the wet cloth from her eyes again, and, turning to see what was the matter, met a gaze that the girl said looked like the set stare of a dying man.

"She says her mistress tore the letter from his hand, gave one glance at it, uttered a piercing shriek, and sank back in a dead faint.

"Then her husband, who had always been so dotingly fond of her that her headaches appeared to hurt him as badly as they did her, got up and went away, without even glancing toward her. The nurse said she worked with her by herself until she brought her round, and that then her moans and sobs were heart-breaking to hear. She sent the girl to beg Cousin Roger to come to her; which he refused to do. Then she got up out of bed, and, going to her desk, sat there for about an hour, writing a letter, which she sent to him by the nurse. But he refused to touch it. After that, they say she lay quite pale and still, never speaking to anybody, refusing to let her little girl come near her; only consenting to take her baby, as she called it (that was her little nearly four-year-old girl she had by Cousin Roger), in her lap, and rocking it, and moaning over it like a stricken thing as she was.

"The nurse says she was putting the oldest of the girls to bed that night in the little room adjoining her mistress's bed-room, when Cousin Roger came in, looking ten years older than he did in the morning; and, going up to where his wife sat with their little one on her lap, he said to her, 'I believe the law allows the mother to keep a child under six years of age. Make the most of it for the little while longer that it is yours.'

"Then she dropped on her knees before him, and put up her hands in supplication; but no word came over her white lips. He turned and went out again, and locked himself once more in the library.

"The girl says the next morning her mistress and both children were gone. Good or bad, I suppose she loved her child; and the fear of having it torn from her maddened her into running away with it.

"She took with her all her jewelry, which, Estella says, would have sold for enough to keep her and the children for several years. She left another letter for cousin; but they say he refused to read that too. They say he made every effort to discover her whereabouts, but in vain; and, maddened with his misery, he went abroad, hoping, I suppose, to find oblivion amid strange scenes and people. He had written for Estella when his trouble first came upon him. They were always more than ordinarily attached to each other. She came on at once, and promised him to stay here, and wait

for any news that might be sent him of the child; but, after staying little less than a year, a letter came, the contents of which Estella never saw fit to tell me. She only said it would render it necessary for her to go on to her brother, and help him bear this last hard blow; for '*the child was dead.*'

"Whatever became of the poor woman who brought all this misery on my cousin, or of her child, I have never heard. Estella wrote me back from Italy that she had gone to her brother none too soon. She found him at death's door with brain-fever. She doesn't write very often. It was more than six months before I heard again; then came another dismal letter, with more bad news of my afflicted cousin. In his convalescence he had persisted in reading constantly, by way of forgetting his misery, I suppose; and had lost his eyesight in consequence. Poor cousin! it's hard to imagine those piercing gray eyes closed and sightless. Estella wrote that she believed he could be cured if he would only try a certain doctor; but he obstinately refuses to have any thing done for himself."

Miss Cally ceased speaking. She had told the whole story of Roger Etheridge's trouble as far as she knew it, setting down nought in malice, but uttering never a word of pity for the frail, unhappy creature who had stolen like a thief in the night away from the beautiful home that adoring love had fitted up for her, taking her children with her as she fled from the wrath, the unappeasable wrath, of an outraged husband. Miss Cally only knew the story as Estella Somers had told it her; and in her pure soul the memory of Roger Etheridge's beautiful wife stood out black and distinctly as an unprincipled adventuress, a bold, bad woman.

Esther Brandon had listened to this story with an absorbing interest she would have found it hard to account for in words. Roger Etheridge was nothing to her, nor was Roger Etheridge's perfidious wife; but, through all her thoughts about the family story just told her, there ran an under-current of tender pity for the wretched woman fleeing from her misery, alone and unpitied: she knew so well how women *could* suffer with heart-wounds!

"I wonder if she is dead." It was Essie's voice that broke the silence that had fallen upon the little moon-lit alcove after Miss Cally had finished her story.

"Who knows?" answered Miss Cally softly. "If she is, let us hope that she has found mercy where 'the wicked cease from troubling.'"

"And the weary are at rest," added Esther Brandon in a tender voice.

From the shrouded harp in the corner, whose strings had last resounded to the touch of those dead fingers, came a low, plaintive murmur, as if the disembodied soul of Roger Etheridge's exiled wife moaned a requiem for their parted lives, their dead happiness; while the pallid moonlight cast ghostly shadows on the floor, that flitted hither and thither like restless spirits.

A nervous start and a hardly-repressed scream from Esther testified to her overwrought imagination.

"A mouse running across the harp-strings," said matter-of-fact Miss Cally; at which her guest felt unreasonably cross because people *would* put themselves to so much pains to explain away every thing.

It was rather trying, just as one had gotten one's self fairly *en rapport* with a sighing spirit from the other world, to be brought back to the consideration of a scampering mouse.

But Miss Cally hated mystery in any shape or form. She considered concealment and mystery and evasion, and all that sort of thing, uncanny and unchristian-like; and it was due to this antipathy that she so candidly answered all manner of inquiry about the Etheridge trouble, persistently refusing to lock the closet that contained the skeleton of the Oaks.

"Speak the truth, and shame the Devil," that's my philosophy," being her triumphant vindication of the course she pursued.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS CALLY ASKS, BUT DOES NOT RECEIVE.

ESTHER slept that night in a grand old chamber, whose heavy four-poster of rosewood, with its fine linen draperies and heavy Marseilles spread, was decidedly in contrast with the narrow little chintz-clad bed at Locust Grove into which she had to climb of nights with many a frantic clutch at the treacherously-yielding covering.

It was with a curious feeling of at-hometiveness (why mayn't I coin words as well as other folks?) that Mrs. Golding's homeless teacher entered into enjoyment of the luxurious comforts of the Oaks. She did not dream, as, by rights, I suppose she should have done on that night, of avenging husbands, exiled wives, sighing ghosts in moonlit alcoves; but, instead, of fat old Dr. Sparks, who was her pupil, and a very stupid one, crying behind his Second Reader because she wouldn't hear to his going swimming with Rip. Such is the perverse tendency of the human mind!

As was her custom, she rose very early the next morning; and, with a freedom she knew clever Miss Cally would not resent, she found her own way back to the long library, which, with its neighboring alcove, possessed such a strange fascination for her. She was deep in examination of the well-filled bookcases when her hostess hunted her up for breakfasting-purposes.

That meal, a plenteous and daintily-served repast, through with, Miss Cally offered her guest the freedom of the house and of the yard.

"I shall be busy, my dear, for two hours now, cutting

out the day's work for my household cabinet. If you choose, you can explore the garden with me; pay a visit to the dairy; go and talk gibberish to the geese, or listen to it from my Guinea cook: or, if none of these intellectual entertainments strike your fastidious fancy, you can return to the library, and make a selection of a book to read out to me by the time I am ready to settle to my sewing. How will that suit you?"

Miss Brandon thought this final suggestion would suit her well.

"I love to hear a body read out loud," said Miss Cally. "I always go to sleep if I try to read to myself."

"How do you know that my voice won't have a soporific effect also?" asked Essie.

"Oh! you read well; I know you do," answered Miss Cally positively. "You have a good voice,—a very good one. It is well modulated. You utter your words clearly and distinctly, without any mouthing: and, in spite of your would-be cynicism, I know, from the way in which you felt the story I was telling you last night about people you have no earthly interest in, that you would feel whatever you were reading; provided, that is, the author had done his work properly. At any rate, I promise to be a candid critic. I feel pretty sure you would make a poor anodyne."

"I hope you will criticise me candidly," said Essie as she turned toward the library to make her selection.

"Well," said Miss Cally, coming into the library an hour or two later, work-basket in hand, "I'm ready." And she settled herself upon a low wicker rocking-chair with an air of immense satisfaction.

Her little black eyes pounced upon a formidable heap of books that Esther had taken from the shelves and placed upon a small table near at hand.

"Are we to read all that this morning, my dear?" And Miss Cally's face and voice were full of mock alarm.

"Of course not, Miss Cally! I wanted you to make the selection; and I've taken down quite a variety for that purpose."

"Well, read out the titles of what you've taken down, and we'll decide," she answered, threading a needle by way of providing occupation for ten of the most restless little fingers that a mortal was ever blessed or cursed with.

"Lucille," said Essie, picking up Owen Meredith.

"Very pretty," said Miss Cally approvingly, "especially that part where he speaks so feelingly about cooks and dining. But I've read that: so we'll try something else."

The idea that the same literary feast could be enjoyed twice over entered as little into Miss Cally's comprehension as the possibility of eating the same dinner over twice.

"How will Goethe's 'Faust' do?" demanded Essie.

"What's it all about?" asked Miss Cally innocently. Esther gave her a rapid synopsis of the plot of the drama, slightly sketching Margaret fair and frail, Faust the victim of ambition, Mephistopheles grim and passionless.

"It sounds nice; we'll have that;" and this time Miss Cally nodded unqualified approval at her literary caterer.

So Essie seated herself, 'Faust' in hand; while Miss Cally started her shining needle upon its never-ending journey, in and out, out and in, one stitch backward for every two forward.

"Don't mind my not looking at you, child: I can listen a great deal better if I sew. This lowells shirt's not nearly so likely to distract my attention as your pretty face would: so read on."

And Esther obeyed her, reading on in the dim, cool library, while the brazen day burned on apace outside, unheeded, forgotten, as the one told, in her rich full voice, the tragic story of two broken lives, and the other listened, carried away by her dramatic rendering of the poem into forgetting that she was plain Miss Cally Henderson sewing on a lowells shirt,—forgetting, in fact, that she was anybody; seeing only a white-faced tragedy-queen before her, who swayed her, by the magic power of a wonderful voice, now into tearful sympathy with the fallen Margaret, then into contemptuous pity for the unhappy Faust, anon into righteous indignation against the cold, scoffing, relentless fiend who had brought all this misery about.

Esther ceased reading. Miss Cally's shirt had fallen unheeded upon the floor, the needle, divorced from the thread, remaining in her upraised hand; while her black eyes, burning with excitement, stared with not a particle of reproach in them at a "dauber" who had just deposited his first instalment of mud on the ledge of the white marble

mantle-piece. Miss Cally Henderson could give no greater illustration of the triumph of mind over matter than thus placidly witnessing the desecration of her pure mantle-shelf.

"Is that all?" She heaved a sigh of exhausted attention, looking the least little bit ashamed of having been so completely carried away by something that hadn't a word of truth in it, after all. "Child, you read magnificently! It was your voice and manner that made me forget how unreal it all was. I don't know that I thank you for having cheated me out of my every-day senses so completely."

"Do I really move you so? or are you only uttering insincere compliments?" There was an anxious ring in Esther's voice, and a look of eager inquiry in her big eyes.

Miss Cally held her lowells shirt aloft by way of illustration. "Do you suppose, if I hadn't forgotten entirely what I was about, it would have taken me two mortal hours to sew that much?" And she pointed contemptuously to the few skimp finger-lengths that marked the limited progress of her seam.

"I am so glad!" exclaimed Esther, clasping her hands enthusiastically.

"Glad that my shirt has been at a stand-still all the morning, miss?"

"My dear Miss Cally," she went on, loftily ignoring that particular shirt, or the necessity for such garments in general, "I have been experimenting on you."

Not exactly understanding the drift of this observation, Miss Cally invited an explanation by a puzzled "How?"

"Your unaffected emotion while I was reading assures me that I was made for something better than the dreary work of teaching the alphabet to stupid children from one year's end to another. As a school-girl, I stood well as a reader; and I feel it in me, that, with proper training, I could make a dramatic reader."

"Go on the stage!" exclaimed horror-stricken Miss Cally, who had but one conception of the word "dramatic."

"You misunderstand," said Esther, drawing back in herself. "I'm sorry I troubled you with my plans. I am sure I had no right to."

Then Miss Cally grew gentle again. "My dear, I'm confident you'll find it hard to discover anybody who takes

a deeper interest in you or your plans than I do. But you are far too young and too handsome to venture before the public gaze with impunity."

"Dramatic readings are the very highest order of entertainment. I feel the elements of success as a reader within me. If I thought I should have to lead my present life for five more years, I could fearlessly walk into the river in front of Mr. Golding's house." Her voice and manner were full of quiet resolution.

Miss Cally looked at her uneasily. She was afraid of people who had "feelings" that drove them to try risky experiments. Alphabetical readings might be monotonous; but they were safe: and she wasn't quite sure she could say as much for dramatic readings. Stupid children were, no doubt, trying enough; but would a capricious public be any less so? Dramatic readings! "Readings" sounded respectable enough; but there was a smack of the stage about that word "dramatic" that was alarming in the extreme. "Dramatic" suggested the stage; the stage suggested visions of painted Jezebels in short dresses, bespangled, beflounced, bedizened, — out of all likeness to Christian females.

Imagination here took the bit between its teeth, and ran clear away with dear, simple Miss Cally, bringing up finally before a hideous picture of queenly Esther Brandon in silk tights and a cloud of spangled tarlatan. Not that Essie was to begin her dramatic readings in silk tights and spangled tarlatan: that was to be the end of the beginning. She was to begin soberly enough, — with reading on a stage; reading on a stage would beget a liking for the stage; acting on a stage would beget a thirst for admiration; a thirst for admiration was to beget the desire to do that which would most surely superinduce that admiration. And here came in the grand climacteric question, "What style of performance upon the stage excited most universal admiration?" Why, the ballet, of course! It never once entered Miss Cally's head that there could possibly be any physical impediments to this horrible *finale* on Miss Brandon's part, — such as lack of agility, superfluous height, or any thing of that sort. The stage was the broad and open road that led to destruction; and Esther was complacently fixing her lovely eyes thereupon. Monstrous! What between Swedenborg as Scylla, and Goethe's Faust as Charybdis, the

little woman was in a sad way. But, little as she was, Miss Cally was wise in her generation. She would lead this restless young soul back to wholesome contemplation of the blessings in her lot, which she seemed in danger of forgetting.

"Miss Essie, it isn't often that a young girl who has to fight her own way in the world happens up with such good friends as you have in the Goldings."

"I know that; and I fully appreciate their goodness to me, striving earnestly to show my appreciation of it by doing my duty by their children honestly and conscientiously."

"Then you are perfectly comfortable in your surroundings?" It was an assertion made in an interrogative tone.

"Perfectly comfortable," coldly and laconically.

"And the children might be stupider."

"Possibly."

"Or harder to keep well in hand," still looking on the bright side of things.

"Miss Cally, have I said any thing calculated to make you think I am dissatisfied with the *Goldings*, old or young? If I have, it is due them that I should retract immediately."

"Not a whisper against the Goldings, my dear, but just at outs with your lot generally."

"I am at outs with my lot generally, if you choose to put it in that way; nor is it such a sunshiny one, that any thing with more vitality than a mole would be likely to be at ins with it."

In her limited experience of human nature, Miss Cally had never before come in contact with an original, — a woman so daring as to do her own thinking, and do it in her own fashion too. Contented submission in that sphere of life to which it had pleased God to call her was the fundamental rule of life to Miss Cally, — the rule, in fact, by which she had grooved existence, and trimmed her actions, until they dove-tailed with her desires in the neatest manner possible. But here was a right young thing, too soft and unformed to be so set in her own way of thinking, obstinately refusing to be grooved at all, and running a-muck at all Miss Cally's cut-and-dried principles in the most dangerous and alarming fashion.

She began to think Swedenborg was not the only torpedo endangering the placidity of her quiet existence at the Oaks. This pretty, white-faced thing, with her solemn eyes and sweet mouth, was evidently made of explosive material, and needed delicate handling.

"Discontent" this little soul-doctor looked upon as a painful but not over-dangerous mental rash, apt to break out upon bodies that were not fully supplied with healthful occupation, rendering the sufferer irritable and restless beyond the powers of finite endurance. It was evident her young guest had it in an aggravated form. If Essie had suddenly developed physical nettle-rash, Miss Cally could have coped successfully with it with the aid of bacon-rind, cooling drinks, and exhortations to quiet and patience. But this case defied bacon-rind and the rest of the regimen. She would try external applications in the way of soothing aphorisms.

"Dear heart, do try and have faith in the superior wisdom of Him who has had the ordering of your lot. Try and say from your heart, 'He doeth all things well.'"

"But I don't think He does," was the rebellious answer.

Miss Cally looked scared, and then sneakily changed her base. Who knew what secret sorrows this lonely girl bore shut up in her heart, corroding its freshness, eating out all goodly impulses, curdling the milk of human kindness, making her so feverishly restless, so hard to manage, so reckless? What right had she to judge by her dim lights? How could she treat this sick soul without going back from consequence to cause? "I have been reasoning deductively long enough: I'm going to ask her for her confidence right out."

"My dear, have I impressed you with the idea of being a prying, meddlesome old maid?"

Essie looked at her in genuine astonishment as she returned a sincere negative.

"Are you in the habit of calculating your feeling for people by the almanac, or by heart-beats?"

"By heart-beats," said the young girl in a slow, sad fashion, as she thought, with the dreariness of desolation, of the few white months into which all her *life* had been crowded.

"Then you'll not find it hard to understand that I feel the very deepest interest in you; will you?"

Grateful tears welled into Esther's beautiful eyes as she replied, "I do believe you care something for me; and I thank you for it."

"Show your thankfulness."

"How?"

"By giving me something I want very much, and you can give very easily."

"And that is" —

"Your confidence."

Esther started visibly; then enveloped herself once more in her habitual reserve, replying coldly, —

"You are mistaken. I cannot give it easily."

"I want to do you good, my dear child," persisted well-meaning Miss Cally; "and how can I, without knowing where the trouble lies? I know by that mournful black dress (which I do wish you'd consent to lay aside this sultry weather) that you've buried those that are near and dear to you. But troubles like that are sent to all of us; and the good God who sent them never meant us to grieve forever."

Esther was silent. How could she tell this would-be friend, who, with the very best intentions, was probing her painfully, that she was in mourning for herself; that her black garb was only an outward and visible sign of the inward and unspiritual life that was bereaved of all joy, empty of the loves and blessings, and glints of sunlight, that make life to all woman? Bright colors and bright lines, brilliant prospects and gay ornaments, went happily together: empty lines of ceaseless toil, one eternal gray-hued day of sorrow, would seem but hideously mocked by their adoption. Black was her only fitting wear. But she doubted if simple Miss Cally could follow her through the grim ratiocination that constituted her advocacy of leaving gay colors and bright ribbons, and all manner of feminine bravery, to others who were not as she was.

One thing she felt she must do. She must give Miss Cally clearly to understand that neither now nor at any future time of their intercourse could she expect any thing like reciprocity in the matter of confidence. So, looking her bravely in the face, she said, not without a pitiful tremulousness in her sweet voice, —

"Miss Cally, I hope you won't think it indicates any

lack of confidence for me to say it; but, if we are to be friends, please don't ever ask me any questions about myself. If you do not want to cause me actual suffering, you never will."

"Dear child, of course I don't; and I heartily beg your pardon for the pain I see I've already given you. It only distressed me to see a young thing like you kicking against the pricks in such a helpless fashion; and I thought to speak a timely word of warning in the true spirit of love and kindness. I'll say nothing more, except this, — do not wear your young life out by taking unavailing thought of the morrow. 'Consider the lilies.'"

"He who clothed the lilies has forgotten me; has left me to fight the hard fight all alone."

Miss Cally came close up to where her guest sat; and, lifting the young head from its drooping posture, she stooped, and pressed a kiss of honest affection upon the tightly-compressed lips.

"Not alone, dear heart; not alone, nor forgotten. 'Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.' Try to bear that in mind. It is my philosophy: I wish you would make it yours."

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE HERESY.

NIGHT settled down once more on the home deserted by Roger Etheridge; and once more did prudent Miss Cally insist that the terraces and the flowers should be granted a monopoly of the damp night-air and the dew; and once more did our two philosophers, or would-be philosophers (feminine half-and-half), respectively adherents of Democritus and Zeno, take possession of the alcove with its shadows and its ghostly belongings.

Said the disciple of Zeno with a sigh, "This is my last evening in this weird little room. I feel as if I'd lived here all my life. I am conscious of a sense of appropriateness, as if I were a part of the old house, and the old house a part of me. I wonder if the soul of some one-time inhabitant of the spot animates my body at present. I shall miss it all sadly, — the grand old library; this nook, with its shrouded furniture, its silent instruments, its flitting shadows."

Said the disciple of Democritus with a laugh, "Thank you, my dear, for complimenting my chairs and tables, with never a word of myself. I will return good for evil. It is you that I shall miss, — your own restless, naughty, charming self. But why should you speak as if I were never to have you back again? Do you suppose, now that I've found you out, I intend to lose sight of you again? Not a bit of it! I am aware of no impassable gulf between the Oaks and Locust Grove: so, almost any bright Friday, you may look down the river-road, and you will see a Noah's

ark on wheels, swaying and rocking its slow length along, with the assistance of one sad-faced, flea-bitten white horse, and old knock-kneed Jinny, as my handsomest animal is irreverently called; and you may know that it is me, coming in state for you. And woe betide you if you greet me with any flimsy excuse! for neither I nor my animals are as young as we were once upon a time; and, when we ride twelve miles, we mean business."

"I shall hardly be likely to find any excuse for denying myself the one source of pleasure that I have in my possession. You've been so very, very good to me, I hardly know how to thank you."

"By not being lugubrious, my dear. 'It is better to laugh than to cry:' that's my philosophy. What do you say to some music? Of course you play on the piano: all young ladies do now-a-days."

"I am ashamed to acknowledge, then, that I'm not as other young ladies are. My limited means only allowed of tuition on one instrument; and I gave the harp my preference."

"Sensible girl! There's no instrument to compare with it. We can still have music then; that is, if the mice haven't nibbled all the melody out of this old thing." And Miss Cally, who hadn't an ounce of romantic superstition in the whole of her diminutive body, bustled briskly up to the muffled harp, and, relieving it of its green baize wrapper, brought to view a most magnificently carved and gilded harp, apparently in a remarkable state of preservation.

With the delight of an artist Esther approached the handsome instrument, and, without a great deal of difficulty, wound its loose strings into harmony. She was a finished performer on the harp, and held her solitary listener entranced for the next half-hour while she sent rich chords and volumes of melody rolling and swelling through the alcove, out from under the yellow lace curtains, to fill the long library, awakening echoes that had last resounded to the touch of one hardly older, and none the less fair, than beautiful Esther Brandon, — Roger Etheridge's unhappy wife, then a loved and loving consort, pouring out her whole happy soul in sweet melodies; singing pæans of praise to the good God who had brought her into such pleasant places, and crowned her life with the wonderful blessing of Roger's love.

"What a pity!" was Miss Cally's remarkable comment as the last faint chords died away, and Essie's white hand fell idle on her lap.

"What a pity!" echoed puzzled Esther.

"Yes, dear. Not a marriageable man within fifty miles of Le Noir."

Miss Cally persisted in regarding Esther — young, handsome, and accomplished — as a sheer waste of sweetness on the desert air of Le Noir, yet fiercely resented any indication of restlessness on the young girl's part. According to Miss Cally's way of thinking, it was a pity she should be immured at Le Noir; but the immuring had been the work of an overruling Providence, and hence must be submitted to with the slight mitigation of a little gently-expressed regret. Miss Cally Henderson, like a great many other good folks I wot of, was the tiniest bit in the world inconsistent, not having as yet succeeded in being perfect as was her Father in heaven.

Noah's ark was brought into requisition early the next morning to convey Esther Brandon back to Locust Grove.

Miss Cally followed her right down to the carriage-door, and gave her two resonant and impressive kisses by way of leave-taking.

"Good-by, dear child! Don't go home and fret. Remember that 'what can't be cured must be endured:' that's my philosophy."

"Home!" echoed Essie bitterly as she sank back on the musty cushions of the old carriage, and thought drearily of the cramped little bedroom waiting for her, and the white-washed schoolroom, with its rough, bare floor, and its sun-blistered walls, and every thing else that was painful and disagreeable in her lot, as female philosophers are wont to do when they sink their ideal philosophy in their real womanhood.

O Essie, Essie! where is your ancient resolve to be "a hero in the strife"? I am afraid — as you recline in solitary stateliness in Miss Cally's ark, your beautiful head drooped in sombre meditation, your violet eyes dark with gloom and despondency, the tell-tale drag in the corners of your mouth standing out in bold relief — you look and feel very much more like "dumb, driven cattle."

The six miles that intervened between Locust Grove and the Oaks were not an unknown quantity to the sad-faced, flea-bitten white horse, and his lively companion, knock-kneed Jinny; and they trotted along with a cheerful contentedness that was a lesson to bipeds, switching the flies off with their tails, and taking surreptitious bites from Mr. Golding's corn as they travelled through his field, until they brought up with unexpected speed before the house-gate.

Then Essie's return to what she, in her ungrateful heart, called her prison-house, was heralded by a whooping announcement from Frank, with a yelping accompaniment from the pack of hounds, who yelped mournfully, on principle, at every thing and every body that wasn't a gun or a huntsman.

It was nearly noon when Essie reached home. Her heart smote her in that she could in no manner reciprocate the cordial warmth of her reception. The good man of the house scrambled up from the hammock, in which he spent two-thirds of the summer-time, lazily swinging, and staring contentedly up at the tree-tops, and came to meet her, pulling on his brown linen coat as he walked. And what if his hair was standing up like "quills upon the fretful porcupine," and one side of his rubicund face was indented like a neatly-baked waffle with the diamond net-work of the hammock, and the expansive bow of his muslin neck-tie had gayly cocked itself behind his right ear? — did all that mar the honest pleasure in his honest blue eyes, or the cordial clasp of his great hard hand?

And close behind him waddled ample Mrs. Golding in long, loose linen blouse, her good-natured face shining with the warmth of summer and real affection, armed with a big palmetto-fan, which she hoisted around Queen Zenobia's stately neck with inconsiderate haste, as she carried two plump arms up, not without considerable exertion, to testify to her heartfelt gladness at having Miss Essie home again. Miss Cally would have thought only of the affection it indicated. Essie did think of the affection; but she resented the bristles of the fan that went along with it.

And what if they did all talk at once? — Mr. Golding asking insane questions about the crops at the Oaks (as if she even knew the Oaks had such a thing), Mrs. Golding beg-

ging to know how Miss Cally kept her butter from turning to oil this boiling weather, Frank informing her that Rip had killed a coon the night before, and Nannie begging her to come out and look at Speckle's new calf. What if they did, I say? They were just treating her like one of the family. They didn't all expect to be answered at once: there was some comfort in that, if Essie had been in a frame of mind to take comfort in any thing; but I am afraid she wasn't.

The summons to dinner came by the time she had laid aside her bonnet, shaken the dust from her heavy black dress, bathed her face, and brushed the soft brown hair away from her heated forehead.

"If you had let me know what day you were coming home, Miss Essie, I'd have tried to get up something extra for you; but I hope you'll be able to make your dinner out." And Mrs. Golding glanced over her well-filled table with that deceitful appearance of anxiety that notable housewives are fond of assuming.

"You are all so good to me, that I am not likely to suffer for any thing," said Essie, making her lips, which were more tractable than her stubborn heart, offer a response to these kind-hearted employers of hers.

But, oh, the square dining-room, with its dingy-brown papering, and its blue calico fan (waving monotonously over their heads by intermittent jerks, that came with the precision of clock-work, as the small son of Ham, who worked the machinery, nodded at his post, or started into unnecessary and unnatural vitality, by way of convincing everybody that sleep was the desire farthest from his heart or eyes), did present such a contrast to the cool, airy octagon, in which, for the past two or three days, Miss Brandon had feasted from the rare old china and massive plate of the Etheridges! And the cabbage and pork which Mr. Golding was dispensing with such oleaginous complacency was so gross! And why couldn't that wretched fly, if it was bent on committing suicide, have selected some better time and place than the vinegar cruet? How much wiser and happier was that other fly, tripping "the light fantastic toe" on the yielding surface of the pat of butter, in a floundering fashion to be sure, but with ultimate prospects of being rescued from a greasy grave! And what an aggravation of all her trials

it was to have that stupid Ailsey persistently and repeatedly stick the sweet-potato pone close up under her nose, as if trying to tempt her palate through the medium of her olfactories! it being hard for Ailsey to grasp the possible existence of a pair of olfactories so perverse as to remain impervious to "sweet-tater pone;" when, if Ailsey had been endowed with a pig's power of observation, she must have known Miss Brandon never touched sweet-potato pone. Then it was so hot! She had never yet mastered the art of fanning with one hand, and dissecting her food with a single utensil, as had Mrs. Golding: so she either had to eat, and not fan; or fan, and not eat. In her then reckless frame of mind, eating was a carnal occupation with which she could readily and permanently dispense: so she was not sorry when Mr. Golding, his face wearing that "child-like and bland" smile that only visits the male physiognomy at the close of a satisfactory meal, pushing back his chair with the air of having dined, moved for an adjournment.

Esther pleaded fatigue; and, retiring to her own room, she flung herself into her big, chintz-covered easy-chair, and took herself roundly to task; but either the spirit was unwilling, or the flesh was too weak; for, try as she would, she did not succeed in working herself up into a remorseful frame of mind.

Was it her fault, her rebellious heart kept asking, that she wasn't mild and amiable and contented and easy-going like these people? Hadn't the God that had made her tall, and Mrs. Golding short, Mrs. Golding fat, and her thin, given her dark eyes, and Mrs. Golding light, given Mrs. Golding her placid content, and herself her restless soul? Would she be so wretched and restless, if she had all her heart's desires as had these easy souls? Had they a wish that money could not satisfy? Had they any cravings after the beautiful that they were compelled by stern necessity to repress? Not one. They were perfectly satisfied with themselves and their belongings: so why shouldn't they be smiling and good-tempered? Their children were fat and healthy. Did it trouble them that they were not beautiful nor brilliant? No. Then they were not to be pitied because their children weren't brilliant nor beautiful. The surroundings of the Oaks were all elegance and refinement;

those at Locust Grove, bounteous and comfortable. Did a pang of envy ever ruffle the placid current of Mrs. Golding's life? Not one. She had no aspirations for the beautiful: therefore she was not to be pitied in that she possessed it not. Hadn't she, Esther Brandon, once upon a time, been sweet-tempered and light-hearted and unenvious, when the future was rosy with hope? Was she so much worse than other people because she could not be sweet-tempered and light-hearted and unenvious, now that it was black with troubles not of her own manufacturing?

It was not without several praiseworthy struggles in a contrary direction that Essie finally allowed herself to drift away upon this stream of gloomy introspection. Reason uttered more than one faint protest against its folly and futility; but her voice was drowned in the clamorous outcries of a young and ardent spirit, sore and smarting beneath a burden that was almost too heavy for her weak shoulders. Conscience took her soundly to task for her cold acceptance of the honest affection within her grasp, — the respect and esteem of the good people with whom she had cast in her lot.

Honest affection, respect, and esteem! — husks, husks, husks, dried and withered, affording no sustenance to the passionate cravings of her bereaved soul! Honest affection, esteem, respect! — stones, when she asked for bread!

Could she wipe Alfred Walworth's image from the tablets of her loving memory? Could she open the sacred chamber wherein she had once enthroned him king of her soul, sweep and garnish it, set it in order, and invite Mr. and Mrs. Golding to enter in and take possession, and promise to be entirely content with the sorry substitute? Was it her fault that she could not kill memory? Who would not forget if he could? Was it her fault that the flowers of faith and trust and hope, that Philip Walworth had so mercilessly trampled under foot, refused to bloom again at her bidding. Ah, God of pity! had she not tried to bow submissively? — to be quiet and patient? Was it her fault that nature was stronger than will? Had she not tried to suppress every moan as she struggled on single-handed against the world? Was it her fault that she had stumbled so of late? Whose fault was it? Miss Cally's, she believed. She had come into her life with her little caressing ways,

and tender pity, and winning sympathy, touching the icy bridge that Essie had built over her heart, and to which she had intrusted the safe keeping of her stoical resolves, with the warm touch of human love and sympathy; and the treacherous ice had melted beneath that touch, leaving the girl stranded on a bleak shore, conscious only of her own weakness and misery and helplessness, unconscious yet a while that that same human love was to build for her a stronger and better bridge, uniting her indissolubly with her kind.

With sudden resolution, Esther sprang up from her chair. "I ought to be ashamed of myself, shutting myself up in this selfish fashion on the first day of my return; and they so glad to see me! I'll go straight out, and be as agreeable as I can be for the rest of the day."

But alas for human resolves!

When Esther, brimful of good intentions, emerged from her room into the family sitting-room, she found its various members therein assembled. Sound asleep on his face upon the floor lay Frank; while in undesirable proximity to his were a pair of case-hardened, coal-black feet, belonging and appertaining unto his own particular pet, — a diminutive black urchin, whose ostensible occupation was fanning his sleeping friend and master with a twin-fan to the one Mrs. Golding never relaxed her hold of; whose real occupation was empirical efforts to discover how close one nodding head may be brought into juxtaposition with another head without danger of a collision. Nannie was trying, with the assistance of her "black familiar," to convince Rip that one of Mrs. Golding's best ruffled night-caps was the most desirable summer head-wear for dogs of his age and position. But Rip seemed to have views of his own on the subject, and sleepily refused to be night-capped. Mr. and Mrs. Golding were killing the long summer evening by playing backgammon. I really think it was the sight of that backgammon-board that put to flight the last remnant of complacency in Esther's breast for that day. That species of the human family that could sit quietly and patiently in the close proximity necessary to preserve the equilibrium of the board upon two pairs of knees on such an evening as this, rattling a dice-box with one hand, while the other was kept in active pursuit of flies on the nose, and

mosquitoes on the ankles; calling out the throws patiently and monotonously; monotonously and patiently being put "on the fence," and getting off the fence; uttering stale, placid jokes in a placidly stale fashion upon the ever-recurring catastrophes of the game, — a mild "Now, father! how could you? a milder, "Look out, deary! I'll catch you!" constituting the most exciting efforts in the conversational line, — that species of the human family, I repeat, that could voluntarily engage in such puerile amusement, was a foreign species to the dark-eyed girl who had just heroically determined to make the *amende honorable*.

"With them, but not of them," muttered Essie. "I hate contented people! Contentment is inimical to all sorts of improvement: contentment makes people stupid."

"Esther, Esther! I think you want a dose of Dover's powder to calm your nervous excitement." She turned, and went back to her room, altogether at outs with herself and the world.

Altogether, my heroine was in a bad way. If you can conceive of a dumb, driven hero, a weeping oak, or a pouting philosopher, you can reconcile poor Essie as she wanted to be, and Essie as she was.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IS A RAMBLING ONE.

RUSKIN says "that men's proper business in this world falls mainly into three divisions: —

"First, to know themselves and the existing state of things they have to do with.

"Secondly, to be happy in themselves and the existing state of things.

"Thirdly, to mend themselves and the existing state of things as far as either are marred or mendable.

"These, I say, are the three plain divisions of proper human business on this earth."

For these three the following are usually substituted and adopted by human creatures: —

First, to be totally ignorant of themselves and the existing state of things.

Secondly, to be miserable in themselves and the existing state of things.

Thirdly, to let themselves and the existing state of things alone (at least, in the way of correction).

And, as Alfred Walworth had never leaned kindly toward the "proper study of mankind," he did not know himself.

A fortunate thing, on the whole, I am inclined to think; for his *amour propre* would inevitably have suffered by a more intimate acquaintanceship.

He had entered upon the threshold of life brimful of noble ambition and the daring insolence of youth. He spent no anxious thoughts upon what he could do, but boldly asserted what he would do. The world had treated him like

a doting mother, — weakly indulgent to his short-comings, fondly granting his every desire: hence he patted the world upon the back, and pronounced it the best sort of a world. He respected mankind through his father, to him the typical man, — upright, honorable, gentlemanly. He revered womankind because of the saintly mother, whose exalted virtues inclined him to apotheosize the whole sex.

When, lo! a fair-faced, queenly girl comes into his life, takes full possession of his ardent soul, gives vow for vow, and makes the earth a paradise for a short, blest awhile. Then a foul, black mystery settles like a pall over the sunlight of his existence. That upright, honorable, gentlemanly father, the typical man, turns unjust, harsh, mysterious; and the fair-faced queen of his heart flies from his proffered love like a thief in the night, taking with her all his bright faith, his noble ambitions, his proud resolves to do and dare. And "he said in his haste, All men are liars."

But as, at the early age of twenty-one, a man does not cease plotting and planning for the future, baser ambitions, lower resolves, supplied the place of those that had been torn from him so ruthlessly along with his faith in the honor of men and the truth of women.

So he nobly resolved to marry for money, the demon of avarice having come in to take possession of his disordered soul. Hardly six months had elapsed after his *affaire* with Esther Brandon before he had engaged himself to Miss Maggie Vincent, the richest girl in all the country round.

Before taking the irrevocable leap, however, he had interviewed his father, standing before him with folded arms, looking very sullen and very stern, as had been his wont of late when compelled to hold any communication with this inconsistent parent, who had first helped to win Essie for him, and then turned round in savage resistance to their union, without even deigning to give good and sufficient reasons therefor. And Philip Walworth submitted to this sullen disrespect on the part of the son he loved so well with a strange meekness; wincing under it, but never resenting it; acting as a conscience-stricken soul might under well-merited punishment; which is but a clumsy guess at the reason why Mr. Walworth was so unaccountably patient under the frequent display of distrust to which his boy treated him.

"Father," began the young man in this interview, "I am thinking of getting married."

A look of pleasure, not unmixed with surprise, came into Philip Walworth's still handsome face.

"My dear boy, to whom? You don't know how much satisfaction your words cause me."

"To Miss Vincent" was the laconic reply, without any lighting-up of the eye, or gentler intonation in the voice, to indicate that the name touched a tender chord.

"Miss Maggie Vincent, the daughter of Vincent and Crump?" — bestowing upon his proposed daughter-in-law a plurality of fathers in his glad eagerness.

"Yes."

"A most unexceptionable match, my dear boy! She is a charming girl; so gentle and sweet, with her mild blue eyes and golden curls!"

"And coffers," put in Miss Vincent's suitor with a most unlover-like sneer.

"My son, I hope you do not consider me mercenary?" And there was honest resentment in the father's tone and manner; for, whatever else he was, the man was not mercenary.

"I do not know what to consider you of late, sir," was the coolly disrespectful reply. "Time was when I would gladly have throttled any man daring enough to hint at the possibility of your ever proving recreant to the calls of truth or honor. I could not do as much now."

Philip Walworth clinched his fist in impotent wrath, while a crimson flush of shame dyed his broad forehead.

"Boy, did you come here this morning merely to insult me?"

"No, father! I came here to utter one more plea for the only true love of my life; to ask you, for the last time, to tell me what it is that came so suddenly and mysteriously between me and the one woman I can ever love fully, and entirely."

"And I tell you, for the last time, you have heard all that you will ever hear from me on that subject."

"Is the obstacle which separates us an insuperable one?"

"Yes, boy; by Heaven it is!" was the emphatic rejoinder.

"Will it last through life?"

"And into eternity."

"Do not think," exclaimed Alfred with sudden fierceness, "that I would plead with you thus if it were not for this hopeless little note that I finally extracted from Esther Brandon, who is either the most consummate hypocrite that ever disgraced the name of woman, or else the victim of some hellish machinations in which I am compelled to believe you have a hand." And he read aloud from a crumpled letter he took from his pocket:—

"Do not send any more letters to Madame Celestine's: you may only be baring your soul to vulgar curiosity. I leave here to-morrow, to go where you are never likely to hear of me again. One word for myself, Alfred: I never wronged you in word, thought, or deed. I am innocent of this monstrous thing that has come between us. But your father is right. Unless, indeed, the father of lies has invented a hideous one to keep us asunder, there exist obstacles to our union, so fearful, so insuperable, that to write even this faint hint of them has caused me greater agony than God grant you may ever experience in your whole life."

"What is 'the possible hideous lie' she hints at so darkly?" demanded the reader of his father.

"She is not the victim of hellish machinations," was the irrelevant reply.

"Then she is a consummate hypocrite!"

The author of all this woe maintained a dumb silence. Why should he turn champion, in the abstract, for this poor girl, upon whom the burden of this thing fell heaviest? How could it hurt her now for Alfred to think her a hypocrite? He was about to marry another woman, anyhow; and would soon forget her, thank Heaven! And, if he defended her against the charge of hypocrisy, it would just start Alfred off on a fresh tack; and he was heart-sick and weary of the whole thing. On the other hand, he was conscious of a strangely resentful feeling against this girl, who had come with her innocent beauty and winning ways into his placid life, and stirred the stream to its muddiest depths. Why could she not have remained away in her obscurity, or else chosen to steer her frail little bark toward clearer streams and calmer seas? It was a spiteful trick that Fate

and Esther Brandon had played him; and in proportion to his helplessness was his wrath.

He did not come out with the boldness of his great exemplar Adam, and lay the blame at the woman's door in so many words; but he maintained a pregnant silence, and let the conviction that Esther Brandon was a consummate hypocrite sink deep down into the heart that had loved her passionately, but not loyally, where it was to strike root, thrive like a noxious weed, grow and spread, until, like the deadly upas-tree, it should shed its poisonous breath over the man's whole soul.

So, with no decrease of the distrust he felt for his father, but a strong increase of contempt for Esther and the perfidious sex to which she belonged, Alfred Walworth went out from his father's presence straightway into that of Miss Maggie Vincent, and wooed her with a reckless savagery, that said very plainly, "I'll marry you if you say 'Yes'; but I won't heave a sigh if you say 'No.'"

But Miss Vincent had no notion of saying "No." So they were married, as we've seen long ago, and went abroad, *en famille*, as we've also seen, and came back—not just as they went; for in a foreign graveyard, under a linden, they had stood beside an open grave, and seen a rosewood coffin lowered into its depths, as all that was mortal of Philip Walworth's beloved wife was put away out of sight.

The last words her fond lips had framed were words of tender invocation, calling on the Comforter to be with the beloved consort, who, during a long life of wedded happiness, had never once forgotten his bridal promise, "to love, honor, and protect."

And as the caressing arms, whose last motion had been to twine themselves lovingly around the bowed neck of "Philip her king," fell heavy and rigid upon the white bed-covering, and he knew that the golden bowl was broken, the silver cord was loosed, he rose from his kneeling posture; and, bending to imprint a kiss upon each pure eyelid, he murmured half audibly, "Thank God! *she* will never know."

Will she not? Does she not already, Philip Walworth? And, if the angels of light could grieve, would she not

mourn to find that the man she had bowed down to and worshipped, when, here below, she saw through a glass darkly, now that he stands revealed in the light of truth eternal, is no longer "Philip her king," but a sin-stained soul, over whom she yearns with angelic pity, praying before the great white throne that he may be brought to see the error of his ways before he be called hence and be no more seen.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH A PROPOSITION IS MADE GOOD.

THIS your servant pleads guilty, dear reader, to having inflicted upon you a most rambling chapter, erratic in its meanderings, unsatisfactory in its conclusion, in that it failed to make good the proposition with which it started out. Let your servant make the *amende*.

If any one had been so daring as to tell Alfred Walworth in so many words, that for urbane courteousness of manners he had substituted a *brusquerie* amounting almost to rudeness, that knightly obeisance to females he had exchanged for a contemptuous sort of deference that was almost a sneer, in consequence of all which he was rapidly losing his reputation as a *preux chevalier*, he would, most likely, have doubled up a formidable fist, and have promptly punished the offender for his daring insinuation, that he, Alfred Walworth, ever had been or ever could be lacking in gentlemanly attributes; whereby he would have vindicated his bravery and my "firstly" by giving irrefragable proof that he was totally ignorant of himself and of the existing state of things.

Again: Fortune, with one or two frowning exceptions, had smiled on Alfred Walworth from chubby babyhood up to restless manhood. Health, good looks, fine talents, unbounded means, all were his. But Fortune had chosen to rob him of Esther Brandon, his beautiful but obscure love, and had offered him as a substitute Maggie Vincent, beautiful, and not obscure, bringing with her riches to multiply his riches: all of which he accepted sullenly, closing his

eyes to the brightness left in his lot; fretting, after the manner of puny man, for the one good denied him; visiting his spleen not seldom on those around him, in his obstinate determination to prove that Mr. Ruskin's second division of man's proper business was all a mistake; taking a grim satisfaction in being miserable in himself and the existing state of things,

Lastly: how triumphantly my thirdly is established by his growing indifference to the infelicity of his married life! Margaret had every thing she wanted. Did he ever deny her any thing? Did he rail at her, or fume over her incompetency as a housekeeper, as many another man would have done? Didn't he let her alone? And what more could she ask? What more could any reasonable woman ask?

My lord, she didn't want to be let alone. No sure-enough woman ever does (a sure-enough woman is a thing two-thirds heart, and one-third head). She would greatly have preferred that you should rail at her, and fume over her short-comings in the morning, and kiss and make up in the evening, begging her pardon for your bearishness, calling yourself a brute candidly and truthfully, by way of giving her a shadowy excuse for throwing two white weak arms around your lordly neck, and vowing foolishly that you're not a bear nor a brute, nor any thing but what is splendid and manly and lovable, and herself a naughty ne'er-do-weel, who loves you, and will try to do better next time. After which, a holy calm! Little thundery gusts like that do more good than harm, clearing the matrimonial atmosphere in a healthy fashion. But kind Heaven pity the woman who marries a man that believes in letting his wife alone!

There is a homely old proverb which says, "There are more ways of killing a dog than by hanging him;" and what reflective dog, if he is given his choice, would not prefer being knocked promptly in the head, or hung by the neck until he was dead, dead, dead, to being shut up in a dismal garret and let alone? Letting alone, in the long-run, amounts to "death by starvation;" which is the only true verdict for dogs, or women's hearts.

The Walworths continued to live in one house after Mrs. Walworth's death; Mira assuming the charge of the house-

keeping to save her sister-in-law, whose increasing delicacy alarmed her womanly heart some time before it pierced the obtuse male intelligence of her father or brother that any thing ailed Maggie. Of her own accord, she invited the attention of their family physician to her sister's condition.

"Don't let her know that you are observing her, doctor; for she grows defiant in a moment if she thinks you consider her delicate."

So, quietly, the wise physician took note of Maggie's symptoms; the result of which was a conversation between himself and Mr. Alfred Walworth. He spoke to the young man with the freedom of a father; as who had a better right, having assisted at his advent into this troublesome world?

"Alfred, my boy, are you quite sure, that, now you've taken unto yourself a wife, you're not somewhat in the position of the man who drew the elephant?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, you know the man didn't know exactly what to do with the elephant after he'd drawn it."

"I fail to see the simile."

"You do? Well, then, in plain words, are you right sure, now that you have entered into absolute ownership and mastership of a creature frail as glass, 'fearfully and wonderfully made,' that you know how to treat her?"

"Does Mrs. Walworth complain of my treatment?" asked her husband, flushing angrily.

"Bless her pretty face! Tut, boy! of course she doesn't complain of your treatment, which, for all I know to the contrary, may be a model for the guidance of all other spouses or would-be spouses."

"What then? I don't follow you."

"I merely want to give you a piece of friendly advice, which, of course, you are at liberty to act upon, or not, just as you see fit. I am aware of no good reason why you should cling like a lichen to the walls of this old house simply because you were born in it. You have plenty of money to warrant you in a costly experiment. This climate is too bleak for your wife's delicate frame. I will not answer for her living five years longer if kept here. Try a softer and milder atmosphere, — Cuba, the south of France,

Florida, or any other of the Southern States that may suit your fancy. They say the sugar-regions of Louisiana are highly beneficial to persons consumptively inclined. Now I've had my say: a hint to the wise," &c. And the good old doctor got up, and went away, totally unconscious that he had been acting deputy to Fate.

Mira was the only person to whom Alfred ever turned in consultation, or for advice, now that his mother was dead, and his heart was hardened against his father: so he told his sister all that the doctor had said.

And Mira, whose memory was better than his relative to their happy sojourn with the Somerses, reminded him of that plantation near the Oaks which was to be sold under mortgage.

"But how do we know that it is not sold by this time?"

"We don't know. But Mr. Somers gave you the address of the agent in New Orleans; and you can easily find out by writing to him."

Which he did, and heard, in due course of time, that Belton was still in the market; and after a tremendous deal of writing and travelling backwards and forwards on the part of a trustworthy agent of his own, who went in person to be judge of the land (a position which Alfred knew himself utterly incapable of filling), Belton passed from its ancient ownership into that of Mr. Alfred Walworth, who was to take possession of it in the early fall, being fearful of moving down during the heated term into the Dismal Swamp, where agues do prevail, and mosquitoes "most do congregate."

As, in a small country neighborhood like that of Le Noir, every thing is grist for the social news-mill, it was not long before it came to be known at Locust Grove that the fine plantation, just three miles below them on the river, had been purchased by a Mr. Abner Walruss, who was to move on it in the fall.

"What a ridiculous name!" commented Miss Brandon; with which she dismissed from mind and memory the fact that there was a Belton or a Walruss in the wide, wide world.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BAR OF CONSCIENCE.

IF it really be true that Satan busies himself to find work for idle hands, I think it is doubly true that he finds occupation for idle minds with the most officious alacrity; and I think he must have felicitated himself upon the frame of mind into which he had worked Esther Brandon on the first evening of her return from the Oaks.

She lay awake a long time that night, thinking, — thinking of a great many things soberly and sensibly.

In the calmness of reflection she reviewed the past few days. Conscience arraigned her under three separate indictments, — to wit, envious repinings after the elegance and luxury of the Oaks, to which she had fitted herself in too readily; lack of wisdom in comparing her lot as it was with her lot as it might have been; want of appreciation of the real blessings in her situation: to all of which her heart answered, "Guilty," but pleaded "Extenuating circumstances" with the readiness of that readiest of all special pleaders, — a woman's heart.

What was envy? Was it not to look upon the possessions of another with grudging or invidious eyes? And did she desire that Roger Etheridge, or his beautiful sister Estella, should be deprived of one luxury, one atom of the beauty of the Oaks, one blessing from among their plenty, for her sake? No: she did not envy them. She only gave idle vent to tastes that were born in her, and had burst into sudden bloom in their native atmosphere of beauty and refinement. Was it her fault that she could not turn away from

things that afforded her starved nature such exquisite aliment, without sending a plaintive sigh of regret after them? — a foolish sigh, maybe, foolish and vain, but none the less natural. If it was born in her to give the preference to lofty architecture, grand old libraries, flowery terraces, and rich-toned harps in moonlit alcoves, over slip-shod comfort, blue calico fans, and chintz-covered eyries, was she to be morally ostracized for wishing they were hers? Wherein lay the crime? In the possession of those tastes, or in the knowledge of the possession? She did not envy others: she only pitied her own poverty-stricken life.

Then conscience brought in her second indictment, — lack of wisdom in drawing these vain comparisons; against which charge the prisoner at the bar found it hard to defend herself satisfactorily, — so hard, in fact, that, with true feminine tact, she covered the whole ground by a meek admission, that she knew it wasn't wise: but she didn't lay claim to the least bit of wisdom; and then — she just couldn't help it. Finally, was that indictment about want of appreciation of the real blessings in her lot, — was it, after all, a substantial charge? Did she not know that very few governesses were treated as she was by the Goldings? — more like an honored guest than a salaried employee. And did she not appreciate it by liking them as well as she could? Did she not think her employers just the honestest and kindest-hearted people that ever lived? *Could* she think them the most refined and interesting? Wasn't she, as a general rule, quiet and good-tempered, trying to keep her own private trials out of sight? Was she so very much to blame, that, once in a while, her burden pressed so sore that her tortured spirit groaned aloud?

So conscience brought in a verdict of "Guilty," with recommendations to mercy.

These midnight reflections upon the short-comings of that one day carried Essie back, by a natural sequence, to a consideration of the causes for her irritation, which led back to the Oaks; which brought back Faust and the cool, dim, library; which reproduced Miss Cally, as she sat spell-bound under her reading; which begat the desire to try her powers upon a more critical audience; which re-awakened her determination to become a dramatic reader: and so, "while the trailing garments of the night swept through

her marble halls" toward the bright portals of another day, Essie's resolve took shape and substance, and sprang into hardy existence with the marvellous rapidity of Jack's beanstalk of yore.

"I will go to good Miss Cally's every Friday. She will give me the freedom of the magnificent collection of books in her grand old library. I will read hard for the rest of this year and the next. Thanks to madame's thorough course in elocution, I think I know what I am undertaking; and then — and then — *I will make a name!*" In her eager enthusiasm, uprose Essie in her bed, hurling her defiance at fate, aloud, through the haunted chambers of the night. Then peacefully she sank to sleep.

And presently upon the solemn stillness clanged the brazen tongue of the huge plantation-bell, "Clang-lang, clang-lang!" and still another clashed in, and another swelled the chorus; and a faint horn sent its mellow voice across the gray mist that enveloped the sleeping world; and a thousand jubilant voices piped their songs of praise; and the hounds chanted their banshee-wail beneath the window; and a myriad feathered pensioners gave voice to vain desire; and, far and wide, ambitious roosters sent friendly greetings, all joining in one grand, clashing discord, to announce the wonderful tidings that a woman had made up her mind, and that a new day was born unto time. And, rending the gray garments of the misty morning with rosy fingers, the king of day peeped through the girl's latticed blinds with a bright, glad smile, that fell about her like a benediction.

"So you are resolved, dear?" And Miss Cally's voice was anxious; her face was clouded; and she nodded her short black front-curls mournfully to and fro, — a sure signal of distress with their little bright-faced owner.

Esther Brandon had just been baring her resolution, to become a dramatic reader, to Miss Cally, asking for the use of her library and her books.

"*I am resolved.*" Queen Zenobia's voice rang out clearly and firmly, her face shone with the light of indomitable resolve, her full red lips were tightly compressed, and her lissome white hands she clasped resolutely together, as she flashed her beautiful eyes full upon her anxious questioner.

"Then, dear child, I see nothing for it but to help you all

I can; for, 'when a woman will, she will, you may depend on't.' And, just so you promise me never to turn covetous eyes toward those horrid wretches that whirl about in such disgracefully short clothes, I'll promise you to help you all I can," was Miss Cally's unconditional surrender.

Essie laughed scornfully as she gave a promise that it required no great exertion to give, relieving Miss Cally forever of the horrible anticipation of spangled tarlatan and silk tights.

And, now that Esther had found work for her hands to do, she fell to with a will, leaving her satanic patron disconsolate, as plan after plan, among his very best laid ones, went aglee, because she had no time to listen to him.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and the forenoon of Friday, dragged a little; although Essie filled them faithfully with duties cheerfully and conscientiously performed. But when Friday's dinner was hastily despatched, and she donned her riding-habit, and black Bess (the gentle pacer that Mr. Golding had put exclusively at her disposal) was brought up to the horse-block, and she mounted her, and cantered away alone to the Oaks (for, in that secluded country neighborhood, grooms were an unheard-of affectation) by the prettily-wooded bridle-path, then, indeed, did the hours fly by on winged feet; and the short, bright interval that elapsed between her arrival at the Oaks and her return to Locust Grove, on Sunday evening, was filled to the brim with ardent application, and placid enjoyment of Miss Cally with her proverbs, and of sweet music extracted from the long-silent harp belonging to Roger Etheridge's exiled wife.

And the fateful days of this long, hot summer sped on, bringing nearer and nearer the time when Essie was to turn her back upon the little white-washed, sun-blistered schoolroom, with its patiently-endured trials and annoyances; when she was to leave the homely shelter of Locust Grove, with its warm-hearted inmates; when she was to bid adieu to tender-hearted Miss Cally, so full of sympathy and bigotry, to go out in the world, and test the wisdom of that resolve made in the wee small hours of that night when her soul had been harassed with vain longings after what might have been.

Bringing nearer and nearer the time when Roger Ether-

idge, footsore and weary from his long and vain search after oblivion, was to turn him once more toward his deserted home, going back to it with a heart void of the old masterful bitterness that had made him so cruelly merciless in the bygone time to the creature he had loved better than his life: for, in the eternal darkness in which his physical sight was veiled, his spiritual vision had grown clearer and stronger; and now, when it was too late, alas! to bind up the bruised reed, he was ready to lean to mercy's side, holding that "to err is human; to forgive, divine."

How gladly—ah! how gladly, only the God who made him knew—would he now have lifted up that frail figure crouching in helpless woe at his feet, have kissed the anguish-stricken face with the kiss of divine forgiveness, have placed the strong arms of protecting love around the bowed penitent, repeating the tender words taught by Jesus of Nazareth, "Thy sins are forgiven thee: go, and sin no more"!

But, in his wrath, he had been more just than his Maker; and now what avail these passionate regrets, these tender longings to return to the old home that had once been made bright by her fresh young beauty?

Of what avail? Surely it was not the blind God of chance that turned Roger Etheridge's tired soul homeward, but the God of love, that directs the most insignificant movement of his most insignificant creature.

Bringing nearer and nearer the time when Alfred Walworth was to break loose from the old home, and move his household goods into the land of the orange and myrtle, leaving behind him every thing that could remind him of the one passionate love of his boyhood; for away from his father, against whom he hugged his sullen resentment, perchance he would forget the motive-power for that resentment. Come what might, he longed to get out of the old ruts, as much or more from selfish motives as because it had been ordered for Maggie's sake.

Bringing nearer and nearer the melancholy days when the blighted verdure of the fields fled in dismay before the chill breath of autumn winds; when dismal white shreds of damp cotton clung desperately to the bare brown bole, while Summer, with bedraggled skirts, slunk sullenly away before her grim successor, sighing mournfully to leave her

dead offspring lying in neglected heaps under the rose-trees in the old-fashioned garden at Locust Grove, on the flowery terraces at the Oaks, under the piles of wet, fallen leaves that rustled under the heavy tread of black Bess's feet as she carried Essie to and from her life-work.

Bringing nearer and nearer the time when Estella Somers was to learn that it is not wise to trample upon life's holiest affections for the selfish gratification of one's own desires; when she was to learn by bitter experience what it is to ask for bread, and receive a stone.

CHAPTER XXI.

ESTHER IS REMINDED OF A PROMISE.

THE carriage-road that communicated between the Oaks and Locust Grove skirted along the banks of the little river upon which both plantations fronted. The bridle-path which Esther followed in her weekly trips plunged into the woods bordering Mr. Golding's land, and led in a bee-line through that gentleman's property into the rear of the buildings at the Oaks, skirting by the grove in which the combined forces of the two families had held their picnic in the hot June days; so that Esther often caught glimpses of the bright new rail-fence that surrounded Aunt Dinah's cabin.

More than once had she mentally resolved, as the gleaming rails caught her eye through the interstices of the trees, to start earlier next Friday, and stop a half-hour with the old woman on her way to the Oaks. But as Friday after Friday came, laden with more eager anxiety to get to her beloved study, she would canter by with an apologetic glance at the rail-fence, and a half-registered promise to stop as she came back. But as Sunday after Sunday, on black Bess's back, she pursued the same path on her return, the re-action from the exciting application of the past two days, together with a natural diminution of spirits, found her in a less willing and a less apologetic frame of mind. So Aunt Dinah was in a fair way of being forgotten, when she was suddenly and startlingly brought once more into contact with the young lady whose "chance favor" to her dead mistress had so startled her.

It was Friday; and Esther had reached that point of the woods that touched most nearly on the stock-minder's enclosure, when her attention was attracted by loud and piercing cries in a childish voice. Applying the whip to Bess's flanks, the young lady cantered briskly toward the spot from whence the doleful sounds appeared to come.

Leaning over the small wicket-gate was a small girl, just high enough to reach her head well over its top; and from her capacious throat came the howls of despair that had attracted Esther's attention.

"Hush screaming, and tell me what the matter is," Miss Brandon demanded imperatively as she reined up at the gate.

"Gr'marmy's got a fit, an' gr'parpy's gone wid de cattle," sobbed Aunt Dinah's frightened grand-daughter, who was always left at home to wait on the feeble old woman when the rest of the family were away at work.

Esther sprang lightly from her saddle; and, hitching black Bess securely to a ring in the gate-post, she told the sobbing child to run hunt for her grandfather, promising to stay with old Dinah until her return. Nothing loath to leave the dread proximity of "fits," "Dumps," as the sable mourner was euphoniously named, stared at the beautiful white lady for a moment, wondering vaguely if "de good Lord" had sent one of his angels in person to minister to her gr'marmy, and then took briskly to her heels, shouting "Gr'parpy" at every leap.

Gathering up her long riding-skirt, Esther speeded into the cabin; and there, to her immense relief, she found Aunt Dinah clothed and in her right mind, the fit having passed off before help came, and left her weak and panting from exhaustion. She was sitting in her clumsy rocking-chair when the attack came on; and there Essie found her.

"What can I do for you, aunty?" and she bent kindly over the old crone's chair.

With a feeble gesture, old Dinah pointed to a little wooden closet nailed against the wall, over the rough mantle-shelf. Following the direction of the finger, Esther opened the closet, and saw in a prominent position a flask of whiskey, near which sat a bowl of coarse brown sugar. Seizing a tin cup, and pouring some hot water into it from a tea-kettle that was bubbling and singing on the wood-fire with the

most heartlessly cheerful indifference to the extremity of its owner, Essie soon had a hot whiskey-punch concocted, with which she proceeded to feed Aunt Dinah with the help of a clumsy iron spoon that she extracted from the depths of the wooden closet.

More than a dozen spoonfuls of the invigorating mixture had gone gurgling down the withered black throat before Aunt Dinah found the strength necessary for articulation.

And, when her opening remark did come, it smacked somewhat of sullenness and ingratitude:—

"You've come at last, have you, mistris?"

"I've been very busy, Aunt Dinah; but I am sorry I neglected my promise to visit you." And Essie's sweet voice was meekly apologetic.

A few moments more of silence, during which Esther industriously plied the iron spoon. Then Aunt Dinah spoke again, half to her visitor, half to herself,—

"I'll never see Mars' Roger agin!"

"Oh, yes, you will! Don't talk so dolefully. You have a good long time to live yet, I hope."

"Dis nigger knows more 'bout life an' death than you does, chile. De angel Gabriel done soundid his trumpit already, calling dis darky home. Didn' I done hear it wen de fit was on me?"

As Essie couldn't gainsay this assertion, she was wisely silent on that point; only asking,—

"Have you been sick before this spasm seized you, Aunt Dinah?"

"Nothin' to speak of, chile."

"Have you ever had one before?"

Aunt Dinah gave vent to a grunt of superior scorn as she answered, "Off 'n' on ever sence I kin 'member like."

"Then why should this one alarm you so?"

"Who say I'se skeered?" asked the sufferer briskly.

"No one; but you spoke of never seeing your master again, and talked of dying."

"No more will I see Mars' Roger, 'cause I'se jus' breakin' up, natural like, day by day. But I'se ready, chile: de Lamb of God knows I'se ready an' willin' to go. But it's the innard trouble that weighs so heavy on me, till I can't git de good of my vittles, seems like."

"What is this trouble, Aunt Dinah? Is it one that I can help you with?"

"Whar's de use of yo' bein' wite folks, an' knowin' all about book-larnin', ef you can't help a nigger out of de miry slough?"

This was a view of the benefits accruing from education, so novel, that Essie could hardly repress a smile. But she pitied this old negress, who was evidently troubled by some secret too heavy for her simple soul to bear quietly.

"I will help you if I can, aunty: so let me hear what it is."

"It is all about Mars' Roger's trouble, chile. Thar's a thing or two I doubt ef he's ever heard yit; an' I 'lowed to tell him myself, ef I ever seed him agin. But my warnin' ben sent me, an' I know I'll never see marster agin."

"But if it is about Mr. Etheridge, Aunt Dinah, why not send for Miss Cally, and tell her? She is certainly the proper one for you to go to."

Aunt Dinah turned her head slowly around, and fixed her piercing black eyes upon Esther's face, studying it in silence for full a minute.

"Chile, you don' look like you was afraid of folks. Miss Cally do: she's 'fraid of Miss Stella. Ef I was to tell Miss Cally wat I'se gwine to tell you, she'd go to Miss Stella wid it fus'; an' that would be a po' way of rightin' them that's ben wronged."

Esther was completely mystified. But she hesitated before becoming the voluntary recipient of this mystery that was weighing so heavily upon Dinah's ignorant soul. She would make sure first that the old woman's motive in wishing to divulge it was a good one.

"Why do you wish to tell your secret to any one, Aunt Dinah?"

"So as they can tell Mars' Roger the straight of things."

"How do you know he doesn't know the straight of things already?"

"'Cause I axed Miss Cally, not more'n las' Christmas ago, ef marster's daughter was a-travellin' about wid 'em all; an' she looked at me like I was crazy like, an' tole me marster didn' have no daughter: she was dead years an' years ago."

"And how do you know Miss Cally wasn't right?"

"She may be, mistris; but my heart misgives me: all she knows she got from Miss Stella."

"And why should Mrs. Somers say that her niece was dead, if she really was not?"

"Taint right, I s'pose, for niggers to pass judgment on white folks. But Miss Stella's son'll get all that belonged by rights to Mars' Roger's daughter. An' this nigger's ben watchin' things mighty close, chile: she couldn' help seein' wid her eyes, an' hearin' wid her ears; an' she couldn' help puttin' two an' two togedder, an' makin' four."

"Do you think any good can come of your telling me this thing?"

"Ef you'll tell it to Mars' Roger for me, missy."

"But I may never see him: in all probability, I never shall. I can write it to him, though."

"No, no, chile! no writin'!"

"Why?"

"Marster's gone blind, Miss Cally say."

"Well; but his sister will read the letter to him."

"*I knows Miss Stella*," was the significant reply.

"What must I do, then, after I have heard your story?"

"Lock it up in your own heart till you can tell it to Mars' Roger face to face."

"But suppose I never see him."

"But you will see him; you will. De good Lord ain' goin' to let de innocents suffer forever. This nigger *knows* you'll see him." Aunt Dinah spoke as one having authority, albeit her logic was rather muddled.

Esther reflected for a moment. If the old woman's assertion was correct, a foul wrong was being done both Roger Etheridge and the rightful heir to the Oaks. She would hear the story first, and then make what use of it her judgment dictated. If it wore an air of probability sufficient to warrant investigation, she would relate it to those who were most interested in it, should the opportunity ever offer. If, on the contrary, it bore about it the air of a malicious fabrication, invented to injure Mrs. Somers with her brother, she would let the story moulder into oblivion in her own breast. After all, it was hardly possible Mr. Etheridge would ever return to the Oaks; and, if he did, in all probability Dinah would be alive to tell the story herself.

So, as some good might come of listening to it, and the harm that could come was such a remote contingency, Esther finally gave her consent for the old woman to tell it.

"But you are too weak to tell a long story this evening, Aunt Dinah. I will come back for it Sunday evening."

"But you won't come: you'll do me like you done me before." And the old woman clutched at Essie's riding-habit in her eagerness.

"Indeed I will. I promise you solemnly to stop on my way home, day after to-morrow."

"Swear 'fore God you'll come."

Her profound earnestness struck Esther forcibly. Would she be so eagerly anxious for this thing to go back to the master of the Oaks if the truth were not in it? Could her eyes beam with such fiery determination over a mere make-up?

There is a rare earnestness about truth that falsehood can never counterfeit. It wields a potent influence, that even the most callous must bow before. Goethe calls it "a torch, but a most terrific one;" and, waved aloft in the work-hardened hand of old Dinah the negress, it may prove all-potent in illuminating the dark mystery that enveloped Roger Etheridge's married life.

When Esther Brandon remounted her horse, it was with the full conviction that what Dinah was going to tell her on the coming Sunday was to prove an important link in the chain of evidence for or against the unhappy lady in whose sad lot she had become so strangely entangled.

But the Etheridges and their troubles were mere interesting abstractions so far, that were to be held in abeyance while she gave herself up to study for the rest of that day and the next. When she did cast a thought upon them, curiously enough Estella Somers always stood out darkly as the beautiful, soulless schemer who had brought all this trouble about.

CHAPTER XXII.

AUNT DINAH'S STORY.

"You mus' know den, chile, to begin at the startin'-pint, that the lady marster married had ben married oncet before. She were a widder, an' a mighty purty one she were. She had a little chile wen Mars' Roger married her, — a purty little thing it were too, but mighty sickly like. Her big black eyes looked like a ghotsis, an' her skin were like yaller beeswax. Well, Mars' Roger fotch 'em both down here; an' no own daddy could 'a' ben kinder'n he were to dat little one. Three happier folks 'twould 'a' ben hard to find then them three, — Mars' Roger, mistris, an' her little gal. 'Peared like them above couldn' sen' 'em too much happiness like; for, after a while, yere come along anodder little gal, jes' the very cut of her mammy. Marster he growled a little 'cause 'twarn't a boy; but he soon got mightily wropped up in the little gal, an' 't 'peared like they was all happier'n ever. I was choose fur the little gal's nuss. So I seed every thin' that were goin' on.

"One day, mistris had one ov her bad headaches (she were mighty subjec' to 'em, honey); and I were sittin' thar, rocking the baby might' sof' like to keep the cheer from creakin', an' marster was a-rubbin' ov her head wid kelone mighty lovin' like, wen dey brought him his letters. 'Yere's one fur you, darlin', he say, mighty tender like (he always talk to her jes' like she were a little chile): upon which she ris up feeble like, fur de misery in her head 'peared powerful bad, an' she look at the back of it, an' handid it back, sayin', 'You read it to me, dearest.' He always called her darlin',

an' she always called him deares', jes' like a pair of turkle-doves."

"Go on, please." Essie was a little impatient; for all this part she had heard from Miss Cally.

"Well, chile, not till we all stan' before de throne ov de Lam', wen de secret hearts of man shill be made known, will you an' me know wat were in that letter. But it brought all the trouble upon poor Mars' Roger an' his sweet, purty wife.

"'Cause wen he done readin' it, he jes' got up like a big thunder-cloud, an' look at mistris sort ov savage, an' flinged de letter at her, an' stalked out ov de room.

"Backards and forards did this nigger trot from de libray to her bed-room, from her bed-room to de libray, wid little scraps of paper wid somethin' writ on 'em; but nary one would he tech.

"Then jes' about bedtime, wen her little one were snug an' soun' 'sleep, and the poor pale-faced creetur were sittin' thar sobbin', and rockin' the baby, — which were a baby at the bres' then, honey, — in he comed; and, walkin' up to mistris, he looked down mighty grum-like on her an' de baby, sayin' sort savage like, 'Make de mos' of her' (meanin' de baby, you see); 'fur, wen she's six years ole, I'll take her away from you. 'As fur you' —

"But she never let him get no more out; for, wid a wild sort o' scream, she fell in a heap on de floor at his feet, holdin' up her baby, like she wanted it to beg for her.

"Wid that he turned on his heel an' went back to de library, whar he locked hisself in.

"I worried with her all by myself, 'cause you see, honey, I didn' want every jawin' nigger to be pokin' roun' the poor thing; an' presently I fotch her to.

"'Dinah,' she say to me, lookin' so pitiful like, 'will you go wid me?'

"'Whar to, mistris?' says I to her.

"'Never mind where to. Will you go with me to-night, and help me with the little ones?'

"Honey, ef de angels wid de flamin' swords had 'er tole me to say 'No,' I'd 'er had to say 'Yes:' so say it I did.

"An' that night we stole away like we was run-away niggers; my ole man, who were de carriage-driver den, takin' us way down de river to a landin', an' leavin' us

thar at the man-house, wile he driv' back like mad. Marster could 'a' caught us mighty easy ef he hadn't kep' hisself shut up in that libray for all the res' of the day, an' wouldn' ax no questions, only ringin' for a cup of coffee wen he were mos' starved out like; 'cause 'twere late the nex' mornin' 'fore a little ole stern-weel boat comed along an' took us aboard.

"Well, chile, mistris she made right for Miss Stella's home, thinkin', I reckon, as how she might help her with Mars' Roger, 'cause Miss Stella always could do more wid him than anybody goin', by reason that marster thought a sight of her, for one thing; an' then she had a monstrous commandin' way wid her.

"Well, 'twere early one drizzly sort of mornin', wen't looked like them above was rainin' sorrowful tears for the poor forlorn creetur, that we reached Miss Stella's; an' mighty 'stonished were she to see us, honey.

"Mistris didn' more'n wait to git her bonnit off 'fore she bust out weepin' an' wailin', an' tellin' her tale to Miss Stella, not mindin' me bein' thar, 'cause white folks don' seem to think niggers is got any sense, or ears nuther.

"I couldn' quite make head nor tail ov it: but 'twere plain that somethin' in that letter were a lie; an', as marster wouldn' listen to her, she begged Miss Stella on her knees to make de peace between 'em. I remember her words like it was yesterday. She say, —

"'Go to him, O Estella! if you have a woman's heart in your breast, and implore him only to hear me. Tell him I am not the guilty thing he thinks me.'

"Then Miss Stella she looked down on her mighty hard an' cold like, an' say to her, —

"'I shall certainly not interfere in the matter. My brother is the best judge of his own private affairs. From your own confession, you have given him just and good cause for putting you away.'

"Then mistris she got up, looked cold an' white like a walkin' corpse, an' stood before her, sayin', —

"'For his child's sake, I implore you once more to intercede with him.'

"'For no one's sake,' Miss Stella said in her mos' commandin' way.

"Then mistris turned to me: 'Come, Dinah, my one

friend, let us go.' An' she almost flew like to get away from that house. Jes' as we got to de fron'-door, she turned to me sudden like: 'I've dropped my purse in that room: go back for it.' An' back I wen' for it. The carpets was so soft like, that I reckon Miss Stella never heard me comin' back; for, jes' as I stooped to pick de purse up, she laughed a sorter scornful laugh, an' say out loud, 'For *her* child's sake, indeed! For *my* child's sake, I'll hold my tongue!'

"I slipped back wid the purse; but, tho' them words kep' ringin' in my ears day an' night, it took a long time for me, a nigger, to piece things togedder, 'cause you know, chile, black folks ain' overly piert at studyin' of things out. But wat could it mean, 'cept wat it's come to mean sence?—Mars' Frederic ready to heir every thing that belonged to the little gal.

"Well, after leavin' Miss Stella's, we travelled a good long while,—fust in boats, then in steam-kyars, which, wid ther whizzin' and spinnin', come mighty near turnin' this nigger's head, until we reached a little town whar't seemed like mistris had a frien'; for she wen' straight to a house whar a ole lady lived all by herself, an' thar was a deal of cryin' an' huggin' an' kissin' betwixt 'em. An' the ole lady say, 'Chile, dis is yo' home as long as I lives.'

"Then every thing settled down sort ov calm like; an' we lived wid the ole lady for nigh on to six months, wen a new trouble comed on poor mistris. But seemed as how she were so stunned like by the blow that had parted her an' Mars' Roger, that she couldn' be hurt much more by nothin'. But one day her little chile—not the baby, but the one she had 'fore marster married her—took sick sorter sudden like; an' in less'n a week, missy, it were dead an' buried. Mistris didn' carry on nothin' like I 'lowed she would. She cried, ov course; but, wen she took her las' look into de little coffin, she say mighty quiet like, 'Better so, poor little one!—better so.'

"Then we settled down agin; an' nothin' more didn' happen till the baby that was lef' turned five; wen all of a sudden, one day, mistris started up sort of wile like, sayin' to the ole lady, 'She'll soon be six! she'll soon be six! It will kill me if he takes my baby from me. The time is coming; it is coming!'

"Then the ole lady say soothin' like, 'Foolish chile! he don't even know where you are.'

"'Yes, he does; yes, he does. I wrote to Estella, who went to live with him when *my* poor little one died, hoping that, now *she* was gone, he might turn merciful; and I told her where to write to me. But he wouldn't be merciful. He's waiting for her sixth birthday to rob me of her.'

"We tried to quiet her down; but seemed like she got franticker an' franticker. She'd walk the floor day an' night. Then all of a sudden, one day, 'peared like she made up her mind to somethin' desperate; for I packed up oncet more by her orders: an' her an' the ole lady hugged an' kissed, an' cried over each other agin; an' away we started. We travelled one day an' a night; an' then we come to a town, which weren't no great shakes, 'cept fur a great big handsome house whar they kept a school for gals. Straight to this house mistris went; and, wen she'd tole the lady of the house howdy do, she went wid her into a room by herself, an' staid a long time.

"Wen they come back, the ole lady, wat was a fat ole lady wid a kind-hearted look about her, was a-blowin' her nose very hard on a 'broidered hankerchif; an' mistris looked like she'd ben buried an' dug up. Comin' straight up to me, she took the little one by the hand, and, leadin' her up to the fat ole lady with the 'broidered hankerchief, she put de little one's hand in the ole lady's, and say in a trembly voice, 'Mother's darling is going to stay with this good lady for a little while.' Wid that she seized me by the arm, and say in a choked voice, 'Come, Dinah!' an', 'fore I well knowed wat it all meant, she was almost runnin' down the brick walk, holdin' tight on to my arm, while behind us come the pitiful wailin' ov the poor little lamb seemed like we was desertin'. 'She'll be good to her, she'll be good to her,' mistress kep' sayin', sort of fierce like; 'an' now let him find her, find her, if he can.'

"'Twarn't often I ventured to question her; for you know, chile, black folks can't make free wid thar tongues like white folks: but this time I did make bold to say, 'Mistris, wat you goin' to do now?'

"'I'm goin' to find him!' she say sort resolute like. Po' chile! she didn't know how soon her summons was to come. Fust she wen' back to the ole lady, and borried some money from her; an' then she started for to come back here

to the plantation. But, wen we wasn't more'n half way home, I suppose she broke down under her misery: for one mornin' she couldn't get up for weakness; an' she called me to her bedside, and say, 'Dinah, maybe I'll never reach home: I feel as if I never should. I am going to write a letter, a long letter, to your master. Swear to me that you will put it into his hands *yourself*. Swear that you will not give it to Estella Somers. Swear it, and I will die easier.'

"How I goin' to give it to marster, mistris? how I goin' to find him?"

"Go back to the plantation, and wait. If he is not there now, he will come back. Wait, and be faithful. Swear it to me, I say. Swear that you *will* give it to my husband, and that you will *not* give it to my sister-in-law."

"I swore 'fore God that I would do jes' as she tole me; an' then she turned her mind to the letter. For three mortal days did she write, off an' on, on that letter, restin' from weakness, an' seemin' to die off like, widout hardly breathin' for twenty minutes or so."

"Wen the letter was done written, she put it in a little wallet whar she kept her money, and say, 'If I die before I reach him, take this, and get home with it as best you can. Guard the letter with your life; for my baby's fate depends on it.'"

"After that, by fits and starts we travelled on toward home; but, honey, her heart were jist broken, an' she couldn' hole out no longer. She died in my arms, lookin' up in my face wid wild eyes as she said with her last breath, 'The letter, Dinah: guard it with your life; give it to him, — *never* to her!' Then the death-rattle gurgled in her poor throat, an' my sweet mistris was dead."

"I took the wallit an' the letter; an' I found my way home, chile, as bes' I could. Wen I got back to the ole house, lonesome and strange like every thing looked. My ole man was the only soul, 'cept our ole gray cat, that looked homelike to me. Marster was gone; Miss Estella had followed him; an' Miss Cally was mistris."

"I went straight to the house wen I got here, an' started to tell my story to Miss Cally, thinkin' as how she might help me about lettin' marster know the straight of things. But, wen I got to the part of it whar mistris's little gal died, she stopped me: —

"'You're mistaken, ole woman' (you see, Miss Cally an' me hadn't never seen one anudder before): 'it was the youngest child that died, — my cousin's own daughter.'"

"'No, mistris,' I say: 'twere the other little one.'"

"Then she seemed to get riled like 'cause I contradict her so pat; and she say, 'Mrs. Etheridge wrote to Mrs. Somers when the child died, and told her that it was her youngest; and my cousin left immediately to break the news to the child's father.'"

"'Who tole you all that, mistris?' axed I."

"'Mrs Somers herself, before she left,' says she."

"Well, honey, I seed jus' how it was: so whar was the use of my tellin' any thing more? What chance did me, a poor nigger, stan' of makin' my word good in place of Miss Stella's?"

"'Keep quiet, Dinah,' says I to myself: 'your only chance to help the baby is to wait for marster to come home.' So I sewed the letter and the wallit up in my flannin petticoat; an' I come here to live wid my ole man, who'd ben made stock-minder while I was gone. Oncet or twice I made bold to try an' talk to Miss Cally; an' oncet I axed her ef marster's daughter was a-travellin' wid him; for I 'lowed that, as it had ben so long, maybe he'd tracked her up of his own accord, and took her wid 'em: but Miss Cally jus' looked at me hard, an' say, 'Dinah, your memory is failing you. Cousin's daughter is *dead*. Estella says so.'"

"Now, missy, I darsn' make so bold as to say the chile ain't dead, for de Lord works in mos' mysterious ways; an' it may 'a' died before I got home; an' the fat ole lady may 'a' sent them word, though it puzzles my poor thick brain to know how she could 'a' done that. But I want marster to git the letter 'fore he dies. An' I'se 'fraid to give it to Miss Cally; for she's more'n apt to give it to Miss Stella, 'special-ly now that Mars' Roger's blind. An' I'se 'fraid to trust it to my ole man, 'cause he nothin' but a poor blunderin' block-head of a nigger, that can tend cattle fus'-rate, but ain't got a idea above a cow. So, ef you will only take charge ov the package for me, I'll make bold to give it over to you; for I feel it in my insides, chile, that I ain't long for this world.'"

Most reluctantly Esther Brandon consented to receive into her keeping the leather wallet which old Dinah ripped out of the tattered red flannel skirt she had on.

But when, in less than two weeks, she heard that old Dinah had died suddenly in one of her fits, she could not avoid a superstitious feeling that the hand of Fate was in it.

The more she pondered over it, the more inexplicable did it seem to her, that she, a perfect stranger and an alien, should have been selected for this mission. Passive wonder was the only sensation she experienced, unless it may have been some sympathy with the little deserted daughter of Roger Etheridge.

For she knew of another child who had been left forlornly alone in the world; but that child was wise, and knew its own father, — alas for the knowledge!

CHAPTER XXIII.

ESTELLA SOMERS RUMINATES.

LEAVE Paris, — dear, delightful Paris, where life was one prolonged holiday, one long, glad jubilee! Was ever poor, weak human flesh called upon before to make such monstrous sacrifice?

And beautiful Estella Somers heaved a regretful sigh as she glanced around the luxurious apartments that had come to feel so homelike.

Frederic had gone driving with his uncle; Mrs. Somers having declared rather fretfully, that, if she *had* to pack up, their room would be more acceptable than their company.

So, with the proverbial meekness of the male sex under like circumstances, they had wisely promised that the pretty apartments should know them no more until night.

So Estella had the day and the suite of rooms all to herself; but, instead of making the best of her opportunities, she sank idly down upon a soft shell-shape brocatelle arm-chair, a great heap of rich cashmere, dainty lace, handsome womanhood, and mental perplexity.

One long, slender white hand supported her handsome head, whose dark crown of glory was just beginning to be threaded with silver. Her large gray eyes, bright and splendid, but with a chill sort of splendor, were fastened in gloomy meditation upon the tapestry carpet, whose gay colors and graceful tracery appealed to an unappreciative eye this morning. For Estella Somers was only bodily present: her soul and brain had gone travelling into the gray regions of the past.

The astonishing and suddenly-conceived desire of her brother to return to his estates in Louisiana had startled her, and set her to ruminating.

She had got to feel quite at home in Paris. Her life there suited her: she could be gay or quiet, just as she chose. She had formed a delightful little *coterie* of her own, over whom she queened it right regally; for she was a born leader, this handsome Widow Somers, with her stately beauty and haughty manners, aided by the potent charm of unlimited wealth. So her subjects were loyal and true.

More than one among those subjects would gladly have aspired to consort with her queenship; but with a gentle, though, I trow, not over-sincere sigh, the stately widow would declare that all of her heart that was not buried in the grave of her husband was divided between her darling boy and precious brother.

Perhaps! But no cumbersome weight would it have proven to any one; though I do think that all the loving capacity of her soul centred on her handsome son Frederic.

It is only the idea that one could not marry, if one would, that constitutes the sting of celibacy. So, as Mrs. Somers knew she could, if she would, she did not cast one thought in the direction matrimonial. She had been a coldly ambitious woman, never a loving one; and all of her ambitions had been gratified.

Her boy had grown up handsome and engaging enough to satisfy the most dotting mother's heart. His education was completed up to the last notch of his educational capacity. Travel had polished him to a certain degree (it could not polish all the Somers out of him); and now he was heir-apparent to all that her brother would leave, with a princely allowance in the mean time. So what more could she ask? She asked nothing more: she only desired that things should go on just as they were; when here, all of a sudden, Roger turns restive, and wants to go back to America. It had been her policy, when the idea had first been broached, to seem quietly acquiescent; for Roger's troubles had soured his once equable disposition, so that violent opposition invariably provoked him to obstinate determination: but she had fully intended to undermine this sudden resolve of his by a skilful and gradual introduction of obstacle after obstacle.

She could have succeeded with her brother, whose blind-

ness, and consequent dependence upon her, had brought him very much under her influence; but here, all of a sudden, Frederic goes and falls so violently in love with that pretty Mira Walworth, that, after her return to America, he became wildly eager to follow in her wake. The mother's anxious heart was torn and perplexed. Now that he missed the society of the young girl he so dearly loved, he was seeking all manner of dangerous distractions: the tainted Somers blood might soon lead him into debauchery. Paris was a dangerous place for a young man in Fred's then frame of mind. What might he not lose by staying? for her brother had once declared fiercely, — when the young man had come so near his chair that his wine-heated breath touched his cheek, betraying his condition to his blind uncle through the medium of his olfactories, — that, before he would leave his property to a drunkard, he would dispose of it in public charities. For Roger Etheridge remembered bitterly how his debauched brother-in-law had made way with old family heirlooms to satisfy his mad thirst, and vowed that his own share of his father's hoard should not meet a like fate.

So what might Frederic not lose by staying in Paris? And what might he not lose by returning to Louisiana? What danger lurked in the peaceful shadows of the Oaks, that Estella Somers should shiver, and clasp her white and jewelled hand nervously together?

"What danger can there be?" she half murmured. "*She* is dead, — dead beyond the shadow of a doubt. Cally wrote that old Dinah had come home, and that she said her mistress was dead; but that, as other of her statements were false, probably this was. Dinah would never have left her unless she were dead: where, then, lies any danger? Old Dinah? Pshaw! could the half-crazed statements of an old negress in her dotage harm me or mine? Nor is it likely that the old woman herself is alive at this late day. There is no danger in returning to the Oaks. No danger? Then why do I so loathe the idea? Was it my fault that Roger put her from him? Did he not pursue the only course open to him as a gentleman? Did she not confess that appearances were against her? and should not the wife of an Etheridge, like that of Cæsar, be above reproach? Would he have listened to me in his wild fury if I had tried to intercede for her? Of course not. Then why reproach myself

for not trying? I acted in the only way I could: I forbore blaming her, and let nature take her course. But I wish he had not chosen to return to the Oaks, — anywhere, anywhere, but back to that dismal place, where her white face and pleading eyes will haunt my every step!

"Frederic, Frederic, my son! for your dear sake have I burdened my soul with this heavy load; and yet now, even now, on the very threshold of life, you are ready to turn from the heart that has yearned over you with a love so exceeding all loves that it has sinned for you, and pour out the love I thirst for at this strange girl's feet. Yes, boy, sinned for you. Why try to cheat myself? It was only a sin of omission; but it was a sin. She is dead, and suffers no more; but her child? Did not the old woman say it was left in good hands? But its rights clash with Frederic's interests. Would I do it over again? I doubt it. Then why not undo it? Too late, too late! It is never too late to do good. It is. I do not even know where the child is. To undo things would be but to make myself an object of contumely in Roger's eyes, and would benefit no one. He might find his child. Hardly possible. His heart yearns so over his blighted life! Did I blight it? But the love of a daughter would be balm to his wounded soul. And Frederic give up the Oaks? Why not at least clear his wife's memory in his eyes? Because he is quixotic enough to hunt up *her* child, whom he believes to be the survivor. And should he find her — what then? Disgrace, ruin, and desolation. What would Frederic do should he ever discover this fraud? If he were a woman, he would forgive the deed for the sake of the love that prompted it. As he is a man, he would harden his heart against me, and, in his pride of manhood, scorn, but not pity, my guilty weakness. Could I survive the contempt of my boy? — my boy, who bows to me now as the impersonation of womanly dignity and virtue. Never, never, never! Come death, welcome death, before my boy's dear eyes ever turn upon me with contempt in their honest depths!"

Thus the powers of good and evil did battle within Estella Somers's torn and guilty breast.

Fifteen years ago, for the sake of her son, she had committed a fraud upon her helpless brother by giving him to

understand that his own child was dead, but that his step-daughter, the unhappy cause of all his woe, still lived. For fifteen years, now, she had quietly enjoyed the fruits of that fraud. There was but one soul living who could bring the truth to light. That one soul was old Dinah. The danger in that quarter was so slight and so remote as hardly to deserve the name. Why, then, all this disquietude at the idea of returning to the Oaks to live? Was it that the hydra Remorse, slain, but not cauterized, had sprung into fresh existence to sting her guilty soul anew?

Perhaps.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN ALARM AND A SURPRISE.

THE softly seductive evenings, when Miss Cally's authority had to be asserted before Essie could be made to desert the terrace for the alcove, had gone by for a season; and the regular re-unions of the two ladies, who had become fast and firm friends with true feminine rapidity, were held in the library, where a bright wood-fire, rendered necessary by fall dampness, took the place of the ghostly moonlight, casting flitting shadows and fantastic shapes through the length and breadth of the stately old library.

Thither the harp had been removed; and, from a small music-stand that stood by the locked piano, Esther had exhumed the music-books belonging to the dead owner of all these feminine belongings: so it was *her* old favorites, played upon *her* harp, that this young stranger sent out in such rich volumes of sound upon the air that she made vocal in the olden time.

It was Esther's first visit to the Oaks after old Dinah's death; and she had in the capacious pocket of her riding-habit the package delivered to her by the old woman during their last interview.

Essie had brought it with her, determined to find out, by a cross-examination of Miss Cally, if the ends of justice would not be as fully accomplished by that lady's having possession of the letter and wallet as by her own retention of them.

She had purposely forbore speaking on the subject until she had gone through with her own weekly reading, and

until Miss Cally's household interruptions were over for the day.

So it was just about the gloaming when they two settled themselves in their usual positions near the library fire-place; Miss Cally curled up in a great morocco easy-chair, that entirely hid her from every point of observation save immediately in front of her; Essie, her profile turned toward the entrance-door, seated by the harp, a music-stand in front of her, upon which she had placed the music with she was going to regale Miss Cally presently. But not yet. She wanted to talk a while first,—talk about the Etheridge trouble and old Dinah, and, if possible, contrive some way of foisting her troublesome burden upon more willing and appropriate shoulders than her own. She felt something very much like resentment, certainly annoyance, at being mixed up, in spite of herself, with this Oaks trouble. Had she not enough worries of her own to think about, without having to devise ways and means for conveying this letter into this strange man's hands? Moreover, she should not be in the neighborhood very much longer: and she would have to leave the package with Miss Cally eventually; why not at once?

She was meditating how to find out, cautiously, whether or not Miss Cally shared with old Dinah any suspicions of Mrs. Somers, when Miss Cally led up to the subject on her mind in the most unexpected fashion.

"Well, child, now that we've settled for our talk, I can venture to tell you my great piece of news. I wouldn't tell you when you first got here, for fear you'd be silly enough to be upset by it. And 'sufficient unto the hour is the evil thereof:' that's my philosophy."

"And what piece of news can you have received that would affect me?" asked Miss Brandon, suspending the tuning of the harp.

"Why, nothing more nor less than a letter from Estella, saying that Cousin Roger has suddenly conceived the determination to return here to live, and that I may look for them any time from this out."

Esther started violently.

"There, now, you foolish child! I knew you were going to let it disturb you; and it's only the fear that this home-

coming may make some difference in our pleasant relations that keeps me from being genuinely glad."

"I was not thinking of myself, Miss Cally," replied the young girl truthfully, but absently.

She was thinking what a pity old Dinah could not have lived a little while longer, and have saved her all this anxious thought.

"What, then, dear? Don't be afraid to speak out. It's very evident to me that you have had something on your mind this whole day. I wish, child, you'd try and break yourself of that trick of brooding over every new idea that presents itself to you. Thinking is all very well in its way; but 'enough's as good as a feast:' that's my philosophy.

"What's the use of my trying to be your friend," went on the energetic little woman with her usual crisp utterance, and rapidity of articulation, "unless you will consent to make me a receptacle? I don't like to see a young girl so self-sustained: it isn't wholesome. I'd much rather you should talk more, and think less. Somebody — and who he was I can't for the life of me just now recall; only I know he was smart enough to express my own opinions better than I could do it myself — calls 'reflection a flower of the mind, giving out wholesome fragrance; but says that revery is the same flower when rank, and running to seed.' And, child, you're cultivating that rank weed; and I don't like to see it."

Here Essie did as she invariably did when Miss Cally's remarks took a personal turn. She quietly introduced a fresh subject, and pursued it with a pertinacity that never failed to remind the little woman that she was treading on forbidden grounds.

"What a pity old Aunt Dinah could not have lived until Mr. Etheridge's return!"

"Why, child?"

"She seemed very anxious to see him once more."

"Poor old dazed thing! I don't think she knew very clearly what she did want."

"Do you really think she was imbecile, Miss Cally?"

"No doubt of it in the world, child. She was very old. She was quite old when she went away from here with Cousin Roger's wife: and I suppose she was pretty well whirled about by her; for there's no doubt about it that

she wasn't quite right in her mind when she first came home."

"What did you judge from?" asked Esther eagerly.

"Why, the ridiculous mixture she made when she tried to tell about her mistress."

"If my curiosity does not seem impertinent, Miss Cally, will you tell me what she did say when she came home?"

"Well, it wasn't so much what she said as the way she acted. You know, of course, she'd never even heard of my existence before she came back and found me here. I remember the river was at its highest: so she landed only a short way below here, and walked up to the house. I was fixing some mangoes for pickles when she got here; and she seemed to resent my looking and feeling so much at home. You know the old family servants down here do get outrageously spoiled sometimes: so I wasn't much surprised when she looked at me sourly, and said 'Good-morning, ma'am! May a ole family servan' make so bol' as to ax who you mout be?'

"I am Miss Cally Henderson, temporary mistress of this place. And who are you?"

"What sort ov mistris, may I make so bold as to ax?" And I assure you, Miss Essie, that never before nor since have I had to face such scornful glances.

"Enough of a mistress," I answered very tartly, "to have you put off the place if you don't tell me very quickly who you are, and what you want."

"I want Mars' Roger."

"He is in Europe."

"Whar's Europe?"

"It is where you are never likely to be."

"I want Miss Stella, den."

"Miss Stella is with Mars' Roger."

"All gone! All my white folks gone! Her dead, and him gone, — worse'n dead!"

"And her withered old black face was so full of pathetic sorrow, that I grew sorry for her, and spoke more kindly than I had yet done."

"Who is dead, aunty? And who are you, that you want to see my cousins so much?"

"You' cousins?" she echoed.

"Yes, my cousins."

"'Den you ain' mistris' frien'. Poor, purty little mistris! Dey done killed you, 'tween 'em all!'

"Then it flashed on me who she was. It was the nurse that cousin's wife had taken with her.

"And she brought with her the first news we had heard since her flight.

"'Is my cousin's wife dead?' I asked eagerly.

"It was evident the old woman had conceived a sudden and violent prejudice to me for several reasons: one was, that she looked on me as a usurper; the other was, that, being the cousin of the husband, I suppose she thought I must necessarily be the enemy of the wife. Of course she did not put any of all this into words; but it was apparent enough in the sullenness of her answers.

"'Yes'm: she's dead. Only wonder she didn' die long afore this, po' shorned lam'!'

"'Tell me all about it, aunty.'

"'Will you write Mars' Roger de straight ov things fur me, mistris?' and she brightened up considerably.

"'I will write it to Miss Stella,' I told her.

"'Miss Stella! What for not Mars' Roger?'

"'Because he has gone blind, and Miss Stella has to read every thing for him.'

"At this she seemed strangely shocked and agitated.

"'Mars' Roger gone blind! All the light gone out ov them big, handsome eyes of his'n! Couldn' read *nobody's* letter for himself! Can't he see a speck, jes' a little speck, mistris?'

"'He is entirely blind; but that need not affect your story,' I said to her.

"'I wish he'd come back!—come back whar he belongs.'

"I was getting tired of her: so I told her briskly, if she had any thing to tell me that she wanted me to write to her master, I wished she would do it promptly, as I had something to attend to.

"Her next words convinced me that she was not quite in her right mind.

"'Which ov 'em does you side wid, — mistris, or master?'

"'I side with my cousin, of course. I feel sorry for them both, though.'

"'Does you like Miss Stella too?'

"'Yes, I like her; of course I like her.' For you know, my dear, I was not going to analyze my feelings for my own flesh and blood for the benefit of a negress. I don't love Estella to distraction; 'but blood's thicker than water:' that's my philosophy. So I just said, 'Of course I like her.'

"'Then I don't give it to you,' she said with grim determination, as if I'd been trying to take something from her by force.

"'Don't give what to me?' I asked in astonishment.

"'Never min': dat's for me to know, an' fo' you t' fin' out.'

"Then I got peppery again. 'If you have any message to send to your master, give it to me, or keep it to yourself, just as you think best; but I'm getting very tired of you.' Then at last she told all she had to tell. She told me when and how her mistress had died, and when and how the little child had died: and when she said that it was the oldest girl that was dead, and the Etheridge child at a school somewhere up North, I knew she was crazy; for Estella had told me that cousin's daughter was dead, and the oldest girl at school with relatives of her mother."

"But," broke in Esther anxiously, "might Mrs. Somers not have been mistaken?"

"Hardly, my dear. Cousin's daughter was only five years old at that time. Is it likely such a baby would have been put at a boarding-school?"

Esther saw, as plainly as old Dinah had seen before her, that Miss Cally's mind was fully made up on the subject, and whatever revelations should be made to her would go straight to Mrs. Somers. "I will think on it a while longer before I conclude to give her the package. I wonder how long before they will be here."

Miss Cally seemed to answer her thoughts.

"Estella is so provokingly careless about dates! There's none at all of her writing in the letter; and that on the post-mark is so badly stamped, that I can't make it out. Not that it will incommode me in any way; for the house and myself are like cold souse, — always ready. But a body does get the fidgets so when they're looking long before-hand for any one."

"I am selfishly sorry they are coming back, Miss Cally."

"Why, child?"

"Because there is an end now to my happy two days at the close of every week; an end to my delicious freedom in this dear old library; an end to my stolen books and my opportunities for study."

"Not at all, dear heart. If you only knew my cousin Roger as I used to know him, you would understand how glad he would be to have you continue the use of his books. I am going to tell him all about you, — tell him what you are studying for, and how good and sweet and dear a girl you are; and I know he will not rest until he has made you feel just as welcome to the old library and his books as you know you are at present."

"Ignorant little woman! You are drawing your conclusions from dead premises, describing the Roger Etheridge you knew for a little while in the long-ago, and have preserved enshrined in your loyal heart, half unconsciously to yourself, for twoscore years," said Essie.

"And Mrs. Somers?" she continued interrogatively.

Miss Cally's bright face clouded with perplexity.

"Estella — well, dear — Stella — I hope she will be good and kind to you too."

"Dear Miss Cally, don't try and deceive yourself. You know as well as I do that the days of my happy freedom in this refuge of quiet luxury are numbered."

"Don't get lugubrious, my dear; please don't get lugubrious. They're not yet here; and who knows that they won't change their minds yet? I want to see him — them, I mean; I sha'n't deny it — right badly. But I can't give you up, dear: we'll fix it somehow. Now give me my song: we won't think of the future just now. 'Never go half way to meet trouble:' that's my philosophy."

"What will you have to-night?" and Esther ran her long, slender fingers over the waiting harp-strings.

"Farewell! but whenever you think of the hour," answered Miss Cally, curling herself into a more compact knot in the great leather chair, and shading her eyes from the firelight with one little bit of a hand.

Then Esther, after a few preliminary chords, began that sweetest of old ballads in the sweetest of young voices.

And, while she sang, a travelling-carriage rolled noiselessly over the grass-grown carriage-drive; halted in front

of the first flight of steps of the terraces; and from it issued Roger Etheridge, his sister, and her son.

"Give your uncle your arm, Frederic; and let me precede you, and see if I can't arouse some one in this dead-looking old house. Cally could not have received my last letter, or she would have certainly given us a more cheerful welcome." Mrs. Somers tried to talk briskly and naturally as she led the way up the wet stone steps of the terraces, on by the gravel-walk, familiar even in the darkness, and after the lapse of many years. But all the while she felt as if she trod among tombstones, and shivered as if fearful of encountering some wandering spirits. Shaken by natural and uncontrollable agitation, the blind master of the Oaks leaned heavily on his nephew's arm, and lagged slowly behind his sister's rapidly-moving figure.

So she stood upon the veranda before they had reached its steps; and she turned the door-knob of the unlocked door (for a locked door was an undreamed-of necessity on a Southern plantation in those peaceful days); and, by the time her brother placed his foot upon the veranda-steps, she had reached the heavy oaken door of the library, guided thither by a stream of light that poured across its threshold through a liberal crack at the bottom, and by strange sounds for that house, — the sound of music.

"Is Cally a musician?" was her surprised thought as she turned the door-knob gently, proposing to give the lonely musician a fright.

But the fright was hers, not the musician's. There by the library-fire, at home as she was in the days gone by, with her own harp by her side, her own music before her, her own graceful, beautiful self, sat Roger's wife, — Roger's wife, or the ghost of her.

Speechless from emotion and fright, Estella Somers stood motionless; and, with the rapidity of lightning, the thought flashed through her brain, "The story of her death was all a lie. Cally has conspired with her against me. She has come back here to await his return. I am ruined! I am ruined!"

A nervous hand clutched her arm. It was Roger's. "Who is it that sings in this house? It is *her* voice, *her* song!" His voice, tremulous and passion-laden, startled the fair harpist and Miss Cally.

Springing to her feet with a nervous little squeak of surprise, Miss Cally darted toward the door to meet her unlooked-for guests, dispelling with her first words Estella's fright and Roger Etheridge's delusion.

"Why, bless my soul, Miss Essie, here the dear creatures are now! 'Speak of the angels, you know,'" &c.

Esther rose to her feet, flushed from embarrassment, and wishing this arrival could have been postponed by twenty-four hours.

Mrs. Somers bestowed but a hasty greeting on Miss Cally. It was not that dead woman, then! Of course it was not. What a crazed fancy that had been of hers! Did ghosts wear black bombazine, with white ruches round the neck? Did ghosts braid long silky hair in queenly coronets above their heads? Why could she not have seen that this beautiful singer was a mere girl, — too young by years for Roger's wife, too young by far? Could old Dinah have heard of their home-coming, and brought *that child* here to beard her on this first night? Could that be Roger Etheridge's daughter sitting there in peaceful possession of her own home, playing upon her mother's harp? If Cally would only speak, and mention the girl's name! Would she never have done fussing over Roger? Was the girl only waiting for some signal from her confederate to open and tell who she was? Was Cally just waiting until the bustle of arrival was over to declare the creature's identity? Was old Dinah watching and listening, ready to step forward at the right moment, and swear to the truth of it all?

"Conscience makes cowards of us all." And, in the few seconds that Miss Cally was bustling round to see them all comfortably seated, Estella Somers's heated imagination had wrought out the whole drama in which Roger Etheridge's daughter was to be righted at last, and herself brought to utter confusion.

"And now, dear people, let me introduce to you my sweet young friend, Miss Esther Brandon, a lady who comes here every little while, and relieves a lonely old woman by her bright presence and charming music. Cousins, I hope you will come to love her as dearly as I do."

Mrs. Somers heaved a sigh of infinite relief; and, placing an icy-cold hand cordially within Esther's, she remarked,

with an effusive warmth that was in direct ratio to the secret relief she experienced, that any friend of Miss Cally's would always be welcome at the Oaks.

Mr. Somers's mental comment as he acknowledged the pleasure of Miss Brandon's acquaintance was to the effect that it would have been dangerously easy to fall in love with her, if a fellow's heart had not been pre-engaged.

Silent and abstracted, Roger Etheridge sat bowed in the old leather chair.

It was *not* she: so it mattered not who it was. For one wild, glad moment, he had thought, when the old familiar sounds had floated out in greeting to him, that she had come back to him, — how nor why nor whence he did not ask; he did not care to know. Maybe she had been waiting there for him all these long, weary years. But the wild, glad moment, with its wild, glad joy, sped by, and left him where it had found him, — a stricken and joyless man, remorseful for the past, hopeless for the future.

Miss Cally bustled out of the room to have beds prepared for the travellers, leaving Esther alone with the strangers.

With the polished ease of a woman of the world, Estella entered into conversation with her. Every moment she was more and more impressed and frightened by the startling likeness to her brother's wife in face, voice, and gesture. If this strange likeness was any thing more than accident, it was evident that neither Miss Cally nor the girl herself was aware of it. They were too entirely at their ease to be acting a part. Suppose this should, by some wild chance, be Roger's daughter? If the girl did not know it (as 'twas evident she did not), who was there to enlighten her? — who but old Dinah? Did she live yet? Estella Somers hoped not. Conscience was making a murderess of her in heart.

Miss Cally came back presently, and Mrs. Somers turned from Esther to her cousin; and Essie seized the opportunity to study her handsome face. She was a devout believer in physiognomy. She would try to decide if old Dinah had truthfully described this sister of her master's, who had turned so ruthlessly away from her crushed and heart-sore sister-in-law.

"Tell me, Cally, is old Dinah alive yet?" Mrs. Somers

asked the question as she would have inquired after any other of the old family servants.

"She died only two weeks ago," was Miss Cally's answer.

Then Esther Brandon knew by the strange flash of pleasure that gleamed in those cold gray eyes that Mrs. Somers had cause to be glad. And, if glad, why? Old Dinah was right; and Essie was glad she had not given that package to Miss Cally.

Turning suddenly, Mrs. Somers encountered the young girl's earnest gaze. She started and trembled. *Could* those eyes, so wonderfully like, belong to any other than *her* daughter? It must be! What foul chance had brought her here, only to torture, not to endanger? for danger had died with old Dinah.

And Estella Somers laid her head upon her pillow that night firmly convinced that Roger Etheridge's daughter was sleeping under the same roof.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHAPTER OF ITEMS.

VERY early indeed did Esther rise the next morning, determined to order her horse, and leave the Oaks before breakfast.

Every thing had been changed by the coming of these intrusive strangers. She no longer felt at home as she had come to feel when Miss Cally reigned supreme. And then she was curiously agitated by the observations she had made the previous evening. She wanted time to ponder over Mrs. Somers's eager anxiety to know if old Dinah still lived; and the strange, eager look of satisfaction that had undeniably come into her face on hearing of her death. She would weigh these bits of circumstantial evidence very carefully before deciding to sow the seeds of that baleful plant, distrust, within this little family-circle. She must ponder well whether a solemn obligation to carry out the behest of the old nurse would be sufficient excuse for breeding discord between the blind master of the Oaks and the sister upon whom his infirmity made him so dependent. There was too much at stake to admit of hasty action: so Essie resolved to give herself the widest possible margin of time in which to act. "I will watch and wait," was her mental determination, "until I am ready to leave the neighborhood; in which interval something may occur to assist me to a decision. I am afraid to act now." Her mind being fully made up, she had no object in remaining at the Oaks any longer at present: so, having donned her hat and habit, she made her way out to the front-door, intending to take flight at once for Locust Grove.

She knew she would find Preston, the stable-boy, within call from the end of the veranda; and, hastily traversing its length, she glanced toward the carriage-house in search of his familiar face.

To her confusion, the handsome face and graceful figure of Mr. Fred Somers met her gaze. He was leaning lazily over some bars, watching the grooming of three handsome horses that Essie presumed he had brought with him; for she had never seen them before in the stable at the Oaks.

The young man raised his hat in graceful salutation, — a salutation which Esther returned mechanically, and then turned to beat a retreat. How should she get black Bess was the mighty problem that now troubled her.

In Miss Cally's small *ménage*, duties had been rather mixed. Preston swept and garnished the library and halls, as well as superintended the feeding of old knock-kneed Jinny and the flea-bitten white horse. Maybe, as he was not at the stables, he was in the library. From the veranda she passed through the open French window into the still dark apartment. She heard a rustling near the fireplace.

"Preston!" she called out softly.

"Who is that?" answered a strange voice, a low-toned, rich voice; and Essie found herself again in presence of one of the returned travellers. She had advanced far enough into the room by this time to discover that its occupant was not Preston, but the master of the Oaks.

"Pardon my seeming intrusion, Mr. Etheridge: I had no idea of finding tired travellers such early risers. I am looking for Preston, to ask him to saddle my horse for me."

"Is it Miss Brandon, my cousin's guest, then, that is casting such a slur upon the hospitality of the Oaks as to think of leaving it before breakfasting?"

"I shall have plenty of time to reach my home for breakfast, sir."

"You live near us, then?"

"But six miles off, — at Mr. Golding's. I am their teacher." Esther stated her calling and position with incisive distinctness, as if she wanted these aristocrats to understand at once that it was only Mrs. Golding's governess to whom they were extending their hospitality.

"If I ask you to grant me a favor before leaving us this morning, young lady, you will not think me presumptuous?"

"Ah, sir! if you knew how greatly I am already your debtor, you would feel at liberty to ask almost any thing of me."

"My debtor!" echoed Roger Etheridge.

"Yes, sir. For nearly six months now I have been luxuriating in your books, by Miss Cally's permission; and I do not know how I could have endured the monotony of existence without their aid. So now I would gladly give some testimonial of my gratitude to their owner."

"Sing to me, then, the song you were singing last night. It came to me as a greeting from the spirit-land, welcoming me, a weary wanderer, home to my rest."

Without other answer than a gently-spoken "With pleasure," Esther divested herself of her riding-gloves, and seated herself at the harp.

Why was it that her whole soul seemed poured out in that song as she sang it to the blind man, who hung over her, drinking in the sweet sounds as the drought-parched earth drinks in the heaven-sent shower?

She did not know it herself; but her song was a plea, — a plea for a dead wife, an exiled daughter, — a plea for her own lovely self.

"Thank you!" said the blind man at the close of her song. "You have done me good. May I hope that you will continue your regular visits here? Maybe it is a selfish hope. But I do not think it will make you any the less willing to accede to my request when I tell you that it would give me something to look forward to. Your sweet voice is something more than a pleasant melody to me. Will you come?"

"Say yes, my dear young lady; and rest assured that my most cordial welcome will be added to my dear brother's."

It was Estella Somers's smooth voice that spoke the words, as she stood before Essie in the softest and freshest of morning costumes redolent of *eau-de-cologne* and *poudre-de-riz*.

Such extreme cordiality from this haughty dame was totally unexpected by Esther. Had she misjudged the handsome widow by declaring that the lines of her face bespoke coldness and harshness? Had she not been foolish enough to allow old Dinah to bias her against the lady? If she were not kind-hearted and lady-like, why should she be so sweetly cordial to her, a penniless stranger, whose very

name she hardly knew? She raised her eyes from the harp to thank the new mistress of the Oaks in a becoming manner for her kind cordiality, when she found those steely gray eyes fastened upon her in such intense scrutiny, that, involuntarily, her own fell before them in embarrassment and confusion; while, stronger than ever, there came surging over her a feeling of repulsion toward this beautiful Mrs. Somers.

It was a clear case of natural antipathy. And, after all, are our antipathies meaningless? I think not. Are they not, rather, the equivalents of those instincts that are implanted in the breasts of brutes a little lower than ourselves, whereby they are warned against all poisonous or deadly substances?

Esther did not stop to analyze the feeling that prompted her to substitute a cold and non-committal "Thank you, madam!" for the grateful acceptance she had first meditated.

"Not a very satisfactory answer, brother; but I think we can prevail upon her to be sociable yet. Leave her in my hands." And, with the airiest of smiles, Mrs. Somers beamed down upon the graceful figure at the harp.

In the wee small hours of the night just fled, Estella Somers had concocted and matured her plan of action; and her smiling affability to Miss Brandon was but a portion of the *rôle* she had assigned herself.

She had no reason to believe that the child which had been put at a boarding-school up North was not yet alive. The fact that this girl, who bore such a remarkable resemblance to her dead sister-in-law, was named Brandon, was no conclusive evidence that she was not Roger Etheridge's daughter; for in that letter which Mrs. Somers had received on the death of that other child occurred this well-remembered passage:—

"To you once more, Estella Somers, once more, and for the last time, I come as a suppliant. *My child is dead.* Tell him, not for my sake, but for the sake of our child, I implore him to hear me now. Tell him that I *will* be heard. I am not wholly powerless. I will wait more than a reasonable time for an answer to this. Then, if none comes, our child shall be put beyond his reach or knowledge with a tried friend of mine, and under a name of my own manufacture; and

then, alone, I will seek him, follow him to the end of the world if needs be, prostrate myself in his dear presence, and then bow me till I am once more restored to my rightful place. He shall hear me. He shall not know in part, and then condemn. Once more, Estella, for the sake of our child,—his child and mine,—plead for me."

But Estella Somers had hardened her heart, and, instead of pleading, had lied; and Death, as merciless as she, had laid his icy-cold hand upon the poor lips that had vowed in their impotence to force the truth upon Roger Etheridge. So, for a long while, the spirit of justice and right slept the sleep of the sluggard, and the spirit of wrong ruled with insolent triumph.

And, remembering all these things, Estella Somers was forced to believe that fate had maliciously thrown this girl into her way to be a thorn in her flesh,—only an annoying thorn; nothing more hurtful: for, now that the only soul who could have borne witness to the fraud she had practised upon her brother was dead, no power on earth could overthrow her and Frederic. But Mrs. Somers had made up her mind to perform a piece of poetical justice.

She would find out from this pretty girl where she was educated. She would trace her up to her origin. If she proved to be nothing to her or Roger Etheridge, she might easily be dropped from their knowledge. If, on the contrary, she should prove to be her niece,—why, she was quite handsome and elegant enough not to disgrace the family: so she would bring about a love-match between Mr. Frederic Somers, the heir of the Oaks, and Miss Brandon, Cally's obscure friend. For once, Mrs. Somers was counting without her host, unwisely leaving out of her plan of poetical justice Miss Mira Walworth. Married to Fred, this girl would be brought into enjoyment of the fortune that belonged to her, and herself be relieved of the sharp twinges of remorse that so seriously marred her enjoyment of the fortune that did not belong to her.

Now you perceive why Mrs. Somers was so sweetly cordial to Miss Brandon that morning. But ignorant Miss Cally coming in just then, and not knowing the why, but gladly aware of the sweet cordiality, could have shaken Essie well for her cold reply.

She came in to announce breakfast: so Essie's plan of

flight was rendered of none avail by a combination of circumstances.

It hardly looked liked the same dining-room, or the same table, or the same Miss Cally, with whom she had *tête-à-têted* so pleasantly, seated at their little round table, which was now stretched out for the accommodation of these elegant and haughty owners, whom Essie could not but look upon as intruders.

"If I could cordially indorse the theory of the transmigration of souls, I should say that the soul of Mr. Frederic Somers, once upon a time, animated the body of a handsome Newfoundland dog," she thought, as she found herself face to face with handsome Fred Somers, and fell naturally into her favorite pastime of face-reading. "He looks exactly like it; bravery, kind-heartedness, and laziness, I take it, being his most marked characteristics. I don't fancy he is ever troubled by soul aspirations of any kind; but, on the other hand, it is impossible to conceive of him stooping to meanness or deceit. He has more nobility in his face than he ever inherited from his mother." But face-reading was suddenly terminated by Miss Cally's crisp voice.

"I don't believe I've told you yet, cousins, that Belton has found a purchaser at last; have I?" And the little woman included everybody by a glance in her kinship.

"No! Who?" asked Esther's handsome *vis-à-vis* animatedly.

"A Mr. — Mr. Walton, Waller, Weller, — W something or other. — What is it, Miss Essie? I never can catch a strange name, but, curiously enough, always know the initial letter."

"You are really excusable this time, Miss Cally; for the Belton purchaser's name is so absurd!" answered Essie. "It is Walruss, according to Mr. Golding's rendering, — Abner Walruss."

"Alfred Walworth!" cried Fred Somers eagerly and distinctly. "By George, mother! but ain't that jolly!"

As that name, his name, so fraught with bitter, haunting memories, rang out across the table from the careless lips of this boyish stranger, Esther Brandon stared across at him as if in a trance. What cruel chance had brought Alfred Walworth down to Le Noir, where she had sought and found a peaceful retreat? Was the world not wide

enough for him and her, that they should come together thus? Could he not have gone his way, and left her to go hers in peace? Did he know she was here? Or was it again the work of blind chance? Did chance, then, rule the world? Verily it must. We are but miserably helpless puppets in its hands. Would she see him? Need she see him? Dared she see him? Did she want to see him? Did she dread to see him? How would they meet? When was he coming? A thousand questions her racked soul propounded: not one could her dizzy head answer.

While, all the while, the young man opposite her ran on in a continuous stream of nonsensical delight at the prospect of having the Walworths for neighbors; and tortured Esther had to sit there, and hear *him* discussed as if he were just like other men.

"You are not eating, Miss Brandon. Let me coax you to try a piece of this fried chicken: I am sure you will like it." Mrs. Somers leaned persuasively toward her young guest.

From the startled contemplation of a buried love poor Essie was thus brought back to the gross requirements of civilized life.

"If Miss Cally and you will excuse me, Mrs. Somers, I think I will order my horse, and start for home," was her abrupt response.

"Ride six miles on an empty stomach! Dear child, if you're sick now, you'd be much sicker when you get there." And Miss Cally's face was full of concern.

"Please don't stop me!" The poor girl was no longer equal to the calls of etiquette; and with a hasty apology she rose, and left the breakfast-room.

She must get away from these people, — away by herself, in the sad, dun woods, where she could look this new trouble boldly in the face, grapple with it as best she might, conquer it if she could.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NAMING THE BABY.

"A BABE in the house is a well-spring of pleasure, a messenger of peace and love," says Mr. Proverbial Tupper; but, with all due deference to that gentleman's wisdom, we would suggest the omission of the little monosyllable "peace."

Be that as it may, a man-child was born unto the line of Walworth; and royalty's self was never greeted upon this mundane sphere with more pomp and circumstance.

And was it not royalty's self? Who more absolute a monarch than King Baby? True, the head that, figuratively speaking, wore the insignia of sovereignty, was very round and smooth and downy, for there was a paucity of hair thereupon; and the bright, innocent eyes that looked upon this new kingdom in such wide-open astonishment were not unfrequently bedewed with very unkingly moisture; and the unconscious hands that wielded the sceptre of absolute authority were very small and very aimless; and royalty's diminutive legs were given to a species of floundering and kicking highly subversive of court etiquette: but none the less absolute was his government, none the less loyal his liege subjects, — a sheepishly fond father; a mother who made a boast of her idolatry; an orthodox aunty, only too proud to be his majesty's football; *et als.*

"What shall we name him?" asked the sweet young queen-mother, looking white and fragile as a broken lily, bending over King Baby's lace-trimmed throne with softly

folded hands and bowed head, — a devotee bowing before the shrine of her idolatry. "What shall we name him?" And the fond reverence in Maggie's voice capitalized the him.

Could the meagre English language furnish, or the clumsy human tongue articulate, a name lofty enough, euphonious enough, or significant enough, for baby's acceptance?

Baby's mother doubted it.

Baby's aunt, having a more exalted opinion of the English language, or a less exalted one of the ruler of all the Walworths, thought possibly it might.

But as it was the only baby they had, and as, when a name was once tacked on to it, good, bad, or indifferent, it had to be worn (for, unfortunately, one cannot throw a name aside like an old shoe or an ill-fitting garment), it behooved them to be very deliberate and very painstaking.

Before the advent, Mrs. Walworth had fully made up her mind to Evelina; but Evelina had proved a boy, which necessitated a change in the programme.

The first decided suggestion came from the nurse, — a coarse creature of mere flesh and blood, good enough in her way, and skilful beyond comparison as a nurse, but a grovelling piece of humanity, who took a utilitarian view of every thing, and hence was utterly unfitted for a voice in such a weighty matter as naming the baby.

"Call him James! That's a good, hard, common-sense name; and, what's more, can be shortened into Jim. I never did believe in making more'n one mouthful of a name."

"Call my baby Jim!" shrieked Mrs. Walworth, horror in her voice, face, and eyes.

I hardly think, if nurse had suggested Judas Iscariot as a pretty name for baby, she could have produced more of a sensation.

"Well, then, Bob; that's another good short 'un," suggested the stolid wretch.

Here Mrs. Alfred Walworth called all her dignity to her aid to crush this monster of utilitarianism, and politely requested nurse to spare them any more of her suggestions.

"I am not in search of a short name, nurse: I am hesitating for a pretty one, a suitable one."

"Lord bless your purty white face! By the time you has a

half-dozen of 'em crawlin' round, pesterin' the life out of you, you'll think the suitableness lays in the shortness, and the shorter the purtier."

"You're an old hateful!" said Maggie with a pout. Then she returned to the subject in hand.

"Can't you think of a single name, Mira? You've been sitting there looking as wise as an owl for nearly an hour."

"With just about as much reason too," laughed Mira. "I was thinking it might please your father to have baby called Vincent. It would make a good Christian name."

"If it's a good Christian name you're huntin' for, call him Moses, and be done with it!" put in the irrepressible nurse.

"Nurse, I will certainly tie a handkerchief over your mouth if you open it again," said Mrs. Walworth, looking severe.

Mira's suggestion to name the baby for some one had set Maggie to thinking that maybe it would please Alfred to have him named for him.

Baby's father was something very near and dear to baby's mother's heart.

"How would it do to call him Alfred?"

"I veto that decidedly," said Mira. "It would be big Alfred and little Alfred. It is true," pursued the young lady with cutting irony, "it has one recommendation. As he is such a bouncing boy, it is susceptible of being neatly abbreviated into 'big A, little A, and bouncing B.'"

"My precious angel, does he hear Aunt Mira making fun of his poor mamma?"

Which interrogatory was answered by a spasmodic up-lifting of baby's small fist, that lunged out in an irrelevant fashion at space, saying, as plainly as a baby's fist could say, "Wait a while, and I'll fight for you."

"Frederic is a very pretty name," suggested Miss Walworth demurely.

"I am not so sure that there wouldn't be the same objection to big Fred and little Fred as there would be to big Alfred and little Alfred," said baby's mother briskly.

Miss Walworth grew very pink under this insinuation, and took refuge, from the raillery she had provoked, in Webster's dictionary.

"Let us see if Webster can't offer some happier suggestions than our unaided intellects are likely to bring forth."

"I propose to read out the first name, with its significance, that heads each of the alphabetical lists, thereby giving you twenty-six names to select from; after which, if you are not suited, I shall look upon you as a woman void of wit or reason, and shall leave you to your own dull devices."

"Well," exclaimed Maggie with childlike glee; "and I propose an amendment. We will let baby decide for himself. The first name that he smiles at *very* decidedly, we will give him: for you know they say, when a baby smiles, it is because he hears the angels whispering; and it will be the angels telling my boy which name to choose."

"Wise people are divided about that smiling of babies, you know. Some say it is an indication of colic," was Mira's cruel anti-climax to this romantic flight of Maggie's.

"O Mira! please be serious. I think it is very important that baby should have a nice name; and I think you might get in earnest about it."

"Very well, dear little mother, I am in hard earnest now. Here's the dictionary to prove it. I will read the names, and you watch for the smile: but, as he hasn't appeared the least bit colicky to-day, don't be disappointed if we reach X, Y, Z, without having been helped to a decision by the angels."

"If that is your 'hard earnest,'" said Maggie with a pout, "defend me from your levity."

For answer, Mira read from the open book upon her knee:—

"Aaron, — 'lofty, inspired;' Arab. 'Harun, or Haroun;' Lat. '*id.*'"

"Do you mean that you want me to name my baby 'Aaron, Arab, Harun, Lat. *id.*,' Mira Walworth?" exclaimed her sister-in-law indignantly.

"No, you precious little goose! Aaron means 'lofty' or 'inspired.' The Arabic of it is Harun, or Haroun. Lat. '*id.*' means it is the same in Latin," explained the reader.

"I don't like it a bit, if it is lofty and inspired," said Mrs. Walworth tartly.

"Yes; but what does baby say? He is to decide, you know."

"He looks decidedly sour about it; don't he, nurse?"

And Maggie appealed to that experienced lady for corroboration of her statement.

"Acid stomach!" was nurse's reading of the puckers round the royal mouth.

"Aaron has the advantage of having been celebrated in poesy," remarked Miss Walworth, "if that is any recommendation in your eyes."

"In poetry? By whom?" asked romantic Maggie with eager interest.

"Have you never heard that exquisite couplet of Mother Goose's? —

" 'Let's go to Sharon,' said Moses to Aaron;
 'Let's cut off our noses,' said Aaron to Moses."

"I wish you were in Sharon!" said Maggie with a pout.

"Well, then, ask your son what he thinks of Baldwin, which means 'bold and courageous;' Lat." —

"Spare me the '*ids*!'" cried Maggie in dismay.

"What does young Walworth say?"

"Baldwin, Baldwin," repeated Mrs. Walworth experimentally. "I like the sound of it. It is a strong sort of a name. — Baldwin, my son, how do you like your name?"

"Hold! You are to give no bias to his inclinations. The angels alone are to be permitted to advise him."

A royal edict was here issued against the name of Baldwin, so sharp, so expressive, so ear-rending, that, for a few moments, nomenclature was a matter of the smallest possible import.

"It's a fit!" shrieked the queen-mother.

"It's a pin!" cried the startled aunt.

"It's hungry!" said the stolid nurse, who had been watching the nonsensical proceedings of the two young women with contemptuous disapproval.

That nurse had no conception of the delicious relish a little daily nonsense gives to daily life.

Order having been restored in Warsaw by Maggie's gathering the small bundle of helplessness and power, strength and weakness, softness and tyranny, ribbons and lace, into her arms tenderly, cuddling the soft white face in the maternal breast, business was resumed.

"Cadwallader, — 'battle-arranger'" —

"We'll arrange a battle very speedily for anybody that tries to give us such a name; won't we, son?"

"Does he smile?"

"No: he just winks in the most facetious manner."

"Dan, — 'a judge'" —

"Oh! he's screwed his face up like a nut-cracker. It's very evident he highly disapproves of Dan."

"Don't blame him," said Mira. "Ask him how he likes Eben, which means 'a stone.'"

"Precious lamb! calling him hard names, when he's been in this naughty world only a month. — But seriously, Mira, did Mr. Webster go back to the ark, whence he brought his own name, for that whole list of names?"

"It does read like it. But here's one that I really like, — Felix. It means 'happy and prosperous.' Can't you tickle a smile of approval from his majesty's lips?"

His eyelids droop. How heavily he lifts them! Now they close again, — quietly, restfully, this time. He struggles no longer against sleep. His sweet red lips cease their hungry motion, fall softly apart; and through them in gentle sighs comes the pure, fragrant breath.

"He is asleep; he cannot help us," whispers Maggie in the softest of voices.

"Sleep signifies satisfaction," whispers Mira with corresponding softness. "He went to sleep at Felix. It evidently did not stir him to wrath. I like the name of Felix."

"So do I."

"Then Felix let it be;" and the lids of the big tome on Miss Walworth's lap were brought together noiselessly.

"Nurse, will you come and put my son Felix back in his crib?" A kiss as soft as a snowflake fluttered from the new-made mother's lips down upon the little face so close to her; and she tenderly repeated the name once more: "Felix, my son, God keep you happy and prosperous!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONJUGAL AMENITIES.

"GET ready to move to the plantation in two weeks! why, Alfred, it is simply impossible!" and Mrs. Walworth's positive assertion was rendered still more positive by a rapid enumeration of the many objections to this sudden migration, — objections which, in her eyes, formed insuperable obstacles.

She was just getting strong enough to go about with baby; and not half of Chester had seen their boy. She was just getting well enough to enjoy society; and now, just as the gay winter season was coming on, she must be buried on a plantation, with no chance to display the beautiful wardrobe she had brought from Europe.

She didn't know why he was so bent on moving away from Chester, anyhow. Chester suited her very well; she was perfectly happy there: she believed that was the very reason he wanted to tear her away from there. He wanted to take her where she would never see her dear father and mother again: she was certain she didn't know what they had ever done to him that he should hate them so. Poor little helpless baby! he, too, had to be dragged away from a comfortable home, and from every thing that loved him, and carried away to that hateful plantation, where there was nothing but alligators to eat him up.

From which you will perceive that Mrs. Walworth did not lean very kindly toward her new Louisiana home.

As Mr. Walworth had been strictly enjoined against letting his wife know that this migration to a warmer climate

was entirely on her own account, he had to bear her unreasoning opposition as best he could.

He was standing on the hearth-rug, paring his nails, when his wife concluded her jeremiade. He had just informed her of his intention to start for Belton that day two weeks.

He had no notion of altering that intention, nor had he any desire to prolong this altercation: so he remained true to his rule, and let his wife alone. The paring of his finger-nails seemed to absorb his every faculty.

"Won't you ever have done paring your nails, Alfred? I could have trimmed ten pairs of hands in this time."

"Do you wish the knife? It is at your service."

"No; I don't want the knife: I want something of far more importance, — something that, unhappily, I cannot purchase as easily as I could a knife."

"And that is?" asked Alfred in tones of polite inquiry.

"My husband's love and respect."

"Don't let us grow sentimental, and talk about love. What instance of disrespect can you charge me with?"

"You treat me just like a child."

"Prove that you are not one, and I will alter my mode of treatment."

"There you go, insulting me afresh at every turn!"

"If I insulted you, I beg your pardon."

"And you never give me your reasons for doing any thing: I complain of that."

"Unjustly. It is not necessary that I should explain every thing: you should have sufficient confidence in your husband to believe that he is acting for your good."

"My good, indeed! Much does it matter to you what my good dictates! Is it for my good that I am to be torn from every soul that loves me?"

"My dear, you are guilty of tautology. Don't ring the changes on one charge so often."

"O you cruel, cruel man! If you didn't love me, what did you marry me for?"

"For my own eternal torment, I suppose," answered Alfred Walworth, rasped beyond the powers of endurance.

Then Maggie fell back upon her forlorn hope, — tears. But Alfred Walworth was not a man who could be sobbed into terms.

"We leave this day two weeks, Mrs. Walworth: it will not be necessary for me to remind you again."

And, turning to the mantle-shelf, he scratched a match on its under-ledge for cigar-lighting purposes.

"There's no use choking the baby to death because you are angry with me," sobbed Maggie from behind her wet handkerchief.

"Excuse me! I had forgotten that the young man didn't approve of smoke." And the young father threw the lighted match into the grate. "I will go down stairs to smoke."

"I would if I were you! The idea of remaining five minutes with baby and me seems to be death to you lately."

"Did I not understand you to say that you preferred I should not smoke in your bedroom now?"

"Certainly you did. Is there any thing so very unreasonable in not wanting my child's lungs filled with tobacco-smoke?"

"Not at all. Therefore I was going away from him to do my smoking."

He reached the door.

"Alfred!"

"Well?"

"Don't you care the least little bit for me?"

"I suppose so."

"Alfred!"

"Well?"

"Please come back."

"I want to smoke."

"Just for a moment."

"Well, here I am."

"Alfred, ain't you going to kiss me?"

"I am only going down stairs."

"But you're angry with me."

"Not at all."

"You think I am perfectly hateful."

"Not at all."

"But you do."

"Well, then, I do."

"You might at least have the grace to keep it to yourself."

"You wouldn't let me."

"You think I'm the most spiteful woman that ever lived. I know you do. I can see it in your eyes."

"I think you are exercising your woman's prerogative to make yourself and every one around you infernally miserable."

"Heavens! that I should ever live to hear my husband use such language!"

"Then have a care how you rasp him."

"Don't lay your sins on my poor shoulders. Goodness knows, if I'd had the faintest conception of what a temper you had, my name would never have been Walworth."

"It is a pity some of your friends did not enlighten you."

"There! I always knew you were sorry you married me." Sob, sob, sob!

"Margaret, for God's sake, stop this childish nonsense!"

"Well, then, say you do love me some."

"I do love you some, if that will help you to behave yourself."

"And kiss me."

Mr. Walworth stooped and went through the osculatory ceremony.

"You don't kiss as if you meant it."

"Well, then, here's another."

"Alfred, am I very hateful?"

"No worse than other women, I suppose;" which was the utmost concession that could ever be wrung from her spouse by Mrs. Walworth in the not unfrequent recurrence of these pleasant little conjugal episodes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS. SOMERS CONDESCENDS.

"GRACIOUS GOODNESS have mercy on my soul! There's a carriage stopping at the gate; and I don't even know to whom it belongs, unless it's that splendid Mrs. Somers. I'm in a beautiful fix to receive a fashionable lady just from Europe! — my face as red as an Indian's, and my hands as black as a darky's with walnut stain; and, of course, my ketchup will all spoil before she leaves. And I'm sure it's very kind of her to be so sociable; but — Nanny, you outrageous little rowdy! how many times have I told you you just shouldn't pop corn at the parlor-fire? Run, miss, with that popper, quick! Jump! sweep those ashes back under the fender! Mercy, what a looking hearth! And there's father's old pipe for a mantle-ornament! Frank, can't you possibly induce Rip to select some other place but the parlor rug for a bed day and night? Drive him out! Look at the stubborn brute! Beat him, bang him! — Hush your racket, sir! — yelping as if you were killed outright. I vow it's enough to wear the flesh off a woman's bones to have to keep house for such a disorderly crew! You Jinny! if ever I do catch you peeping through the crack of the door at company again, I'll cure you of peeping forever. Shove that mess Frank's been making under the sofa! I'll begin on you and your sister to-morrow, sir, and see if I can't teach you the meaning of the word 'order.' O Lord! there they are on the steps! And look at my head! Gracious! this old check apron!"

Exit Mrs. Golding, — red and palpitating, coiffure frowsy,

general appearance more suggestive of homelike comfort than elegance, — driving her penates, Frank, Nanny, Rip, and Jinny, like a flock of sheep, ahead of her.

Enter Mrs. Somers, — aristocratically white, elegantly cool; coiffure not easily describable, by reason of a love of a Parisian bonnet which hid it; general appearance suggestive of entire satisfaction with her own superb self and her surroundings, — followed by Miss Cally Henderson, who, since the appearance of this magnificent planet, has sunk into the insignificant position of a satellite.

Whenever Estella Somers had once fully made up her mind to a certain course of action, weighty indeed must be the obstacle that could prove such in her pathway. A woman who has minimized her conscience, and maximized her will, can ride rough-shod over customs and social regulations that would prove fatal impediments to her weaker or more orthodox sisters.

Mrs. Somers had determined to satisfy herself as to Miss Brandon's antecedents: she had also made up her mind to a piece of poetical justice.

If this superb young beauty, now earning her own livelihood by the dreariest of all drudgery, should (as she shrewdly suspected she would) prove to be the child whom she had found it so easy, by the aid of spiteful circumstance, to defraud of a fortune, she would restore her to her own by a marriage with the present heir-apparent to Roger Etheridge's wealth.

And the world, for whom Estella Somers entertained the profoundest reverence, would look upon her son's union with this beautiful governess as an indication that the mother, whose influence over the son was known to be boundless, was a woman of such very superior mould, that she soared above all considerations of expediency in sanctioning this union of souls; and the world would praise her therefor; and the world's praises constituted her happiness.

A shrewd student of her kind, she had read Essie accurately enough, during the few hours they had been together under the same roof, to feel convinced that some extraordinary effort would have to be made by herself before the young lady could be prevailed upon to resume her visits to the Oaks.

The ends of poetical justice required that those visits

should be renewed: hence the bold determination to pay the initial visit to Mrs. Golding. Etiquette required that Mrs. Golding should pay the first visit: policy required that etiquette should be pushed to the wall. The Oaks could go to Locust Grove without derogation: the Oaks could not presume. Mrs. Somers could not intrude: she could condescend; and she did condescend.

Mrs. Golding returned presently, looking painfully conscious of having been gotten up to order, try as she would to make believe she'd been in reception-trim all day long.

To receive a freshly-returned European traveller in an every-day calico wrapper was palpably impossible: she didn't suppose anybody but the lowest order of menials wore calico over yonder. So her black silk, which rarely ever saw the light in that secluded country neighborhood, was jerked out of its linen wrappings in frantic haste, and Mrs. Golding's ample person jerked into its sacred precincts with equal haste. Alas! the dress had grown too small, or Mrs. Golding had grown too big. "King George and all his horses" could not have brought those last two buttons into amicable relations with their corresponding button-holes. It was evident they had parted never to meet again. There was nothing for it but to hide the deficiency by a flannel sack, which acted as a cloak of charity, albeit it somewhat marred the silken splendor of the robe. One or two skilful applications of the hair-brush brought each particular hair into such rigidity of position, that it was hard to conceive the possibility that another application of the brush would ever be necessary. Slapping her unoffending face mercilessly with a starch-bag in an irrelevant fashion, which was not productive of very artistic results, and arming herself with a pocket-handkerchief so very fresh and so very stiff, that, in mercy to Mrs. Golding's nose, let us hope she will reserve it entirely for ornamental purposes, her toilet was complete; and she returned to the parlor a perfect picture of amiable hospitality and physical discomfort.

With the easy elegance of assumed superiority, Mrs. Somers extended her hand when Miss Cally introduced her to the mistress of Locust Grove, and hoped Mrs. Golding would not think her very presumptuous in being so unceremonious. But in a small country neighborhood, where everybody ought to be such good friends, ceremony seemed sadly out of place.

Mrs. Golding was sure she was very much obliged to her for showing such a sociable spirit, and hoped they would all be good friends; during which little speech, Mrs. Golding's hands and feet, like ceremony, seemed sadly out of place.

Miss Cally regarded her handsome cousin with admiring astonishment as she glided on from topic to topic, never failing to select one that was within conversational reach of the mistress of Locust Grove. Estella was certainly a remarkably superior woman.

Malicious men-folks say that the gist of a woman's letter is always in the postscript. In the same way, when it was about time for Mrs. Somers to bid her hostess adieu, she introduced the real object of her visit.

Was Miss Brandon engaged? She could not think of such a thing as tearing Cousin Cally away without her having seen the sweet young girl who had taken such a hold upon her affections that she could talk to them of nothing else.

Miss Brandon was not engaged; at least, not with the children. Mrs. Golding would summon her.

Essie came promptly in answer to the summons; and, walking first up to Miss Cally, she kissed her warmly and cordially; then she greeted the handsome lady of the Oaks with a stately inclination of her head.

But a daintily-gloved hand was held out, which Essie had to clasp.

"My dear Miss Brandon, I come charged with friendly messages from my brother to add to my own solicitations that you will resume your weekly visits to the Oaks, and not allow our return to interrupt your studies. You see Cousin Cally has told us all about you, and, in fact, has stirred my poor brother up to take a greater degree of interest in you than he has taken in any thing or any one for a long time past."

"You are all very kind; and I thank you sincerely." But the look of gratitude that accompanied the words was sent straight into Miss Cally's kind eyes.

"Yes. But, my dear, we don't want thanks; we want promises," put in that lady. "I want you to show that you really do thank Cousin Roger for what is a remarkable display of interest on his part by doing as he asks you, —

resuming your weekly visits, studying during the day, and giving us some sweet music of evenings: that will be the way to thank him sincerely. 'Actions speak louder than words:' that's my philosophy."

"May I send the carriage for you on Friday, Miss Essie? Excuse the familiarity; but Cousin Cally's frequent mention of you as 'Miss Essie' must be my apology." Mrs. Somers was her most pleading self.

"Thank you, madam; but I could not think of such a thing as putting you to so much trouble."

"Miss Essie knows she is more than welcome to my carriage whenever she would like to go," interpolated Mrs. Golding. "But she has always seemed to prefer black Bess."

"My son would only be too happy to act as your escort, then, my dear. The poor boy is such an admirer of ladies, and, withal, such a passionate lover of music, that he would esteem it a happy privilege to ride over for you."

Esther was becoming sadly embarrassed, and, withal, genuinely puzzled. Her knowledge of human nature was limited; but what small experience she had was not calculated to make her err on the side of credulity. What Mrs. Somers's object was, she was, as yet, unable to fathom; but that she had an object in this flattering solicitude for her society, she did not for a moment doubt.

"It pains me to seem so rude and ungrateful," she said in answer to this last proposition of the lady's; "but the Oaks can never be to me what it was while Miss Cally was its sole occupant. I could never feel as free there now as I did then; and, though I do thank you and Mr. Etheridge with my whole heart, I cannot promise to do as you ask me. Please make him understand that I do thank him."

"Make him understand fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Miss Cally, irritated beyond all control by this stubborn refusal. "I shall make him understand that you are as full of stubborn pride as an egg is of meat. The Bible says, 'He that hath friends must show himself friendly;' and, 'Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall:' that's my philosophy. I am sure I am entirely out of patience with you." And she looked it thoroughly.

"Hold, my good cousin! Don't let us pelt our pretty

truant into terms with proverbial rocks. I do not despair of seeing her at home at the Oaks yet; but she shall not be scolded there. — You have proven one thing to me, young lady;" and Mrs. Somers carried her regards from Miss Cally's wrathful visage back to Esther's placid face.

"And that is?"

"That my brother, blind as he is, is a better judge of character than I am."

"How so?" asked Essie.

"He felt so sure that I could not prevail upon you all at once to resume your regular visits; and he feels so interested in your desire to fit yourself for dramatic readings, that he enumerated a certain list of books, and requested me to bring them over with me this morning, and begs you to keep them as long as you see fit."

Tears of genuine gratitude sprang into the young girl's beautiful eyes.

"There, now!" said Miss Cally. "I hope that makes you feel thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

"Not ashamed, dear Miss Cally, but, if possible, more grateful than before for such undeserved kindness; and it makes me look upon Mr. Etheridge as more than ever my benefactor."

"All very pretty, my dear; but when you refuse to grant your benefactor the solace, that, we all assure you, your music would be to him, I am compelled to think your gratitude don't amount to much."

"Don't abuse me any more, Miss Cally. I will come, if I can give Mr. Etheridge pleasure. Probably, if you knew all the reasons for my hesitancy, you would not judge me so harshly."

Poor Essie! They had badgered her into running the risk of meeting Alfred Walworth at the Oaks, rather than hold out any longer in seeming ingratitude.

"Darling child, forgive me! I'm nothing but a spiteful old maid. But I do miss you sadly; and, when all the family are prepared to take you into their affection, I could not very patiently endure the idea of your turning up that pretty nose so disdainfully."

"You have entirely misunderstood me; but let that pass."

"May I impose one condition on my visiting at the Oaks, Mrs. Somers?" she continued, turning to Estella.

"A dozen, my dear young lady, if you like."

"I only wish to say, that I have no desire to mingle in society generally. Promise that, in case I should find any one at the Oaks beside your own immediate family, you will not ask me to stay."

"Rather a queer condition, Miss Essie; but, as I consider the Oaks the obliged party in this visiting-contract, you are at perfect liberty to make your own terms, and treat any chance visitors we may have as cavalierly as you choose."

"Thank you! Then I will come."

"Not until you feel like it, my dear. I am sure it is the very farthest wish from our hearts to make you feel under any obligations to us. Roger sent you the books because he did not like to have your studies broken up by our return; and he has selected them with the nicest judgment, taking care to send those best adapted for your purpose. But they were not sent as a bribe. And I would not have you let Cally's denunciatory sentences act as a threat upon you. If you like us, come to us as to true friends: if you do not like us, be just as proud and stubborn as you like, without fear or favor; and I won't let Cally abuse you here or at home." Estella Somers looked very handsome and very persuasive as she stood up before Mrs. Golding's governess and said these words, holding one of the girl's slender white hands between her two delicately-gloved ones. Her fine gray eyes looked gently winning; and all that voice and manner could add, by way of giving weight to her words, was added.

Farewells were uttered; the footman was ordered to bring in the package of books; and the handsome new carriage rolled noiselessly away from the front-gate of Locust Grove.

"You lucky girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Golding, seizing Esther by the shoulders with all the enthusiasm her painfully-tight silk sleeves would allow.

"How!" asked Essie, who was reading over the titles of her heap of treasures with hungry delight.

"Why, my dear, it's as clear as the nose on a man's face."

"Whose nose?" inquired Miss Brandon abstractedly; for, from the titlepage of one volume, she had plunged into *media res*.

"No one's nose in particular, that I know of. I only

meant to imply that it was such a very clear case of love at first sight." There was a suspicion of tartness in good Mrs. Golding's voice that made Essie remember her manners.

She closed the book in her hand, and said politely, "Please excuse me: I don't believe I was listening very attentively."

"Why, of course, Miss Essie, all this unusual attention on Mrs. Somers's part can mean but one thing. That son of hers, who, they do say, is as handsome as a picture, has fallen in love with you at first sight. And people do say Mrs. Somers worships the ground he walks on; and I say, it's as clear as the nose on a man's face that she's courting you for her son."

"I had forgotten the young man entirely. He is very handsome,—handsomer than a good many pictures. But I don't think he is any more in love with me than I am with him; and that is not one particle," said Essie with that coolly-repellent voice which always warned trespassers off forbidden ground.

Notwithstanding which, Mrs. Golding clung tenaciously to the romantic solution of Mrs. Somers's affability.

"I declare," murmured the tender-hearted lady, expanding her chest for a good long breath on getting out of her black silk prison, "it will be just like a novel! A poor but beautiful young girl, teaching for her living, meets this handsome rich young man: but she's too proud to look at him until all the family court her for him; and then she—they—Mercy! my walnut-ketchup! I know it's nothing but ink!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

STRIKING A BALANCE.

ALONE in her room that night, with the tokens of Roger Etheridge's thoughtful kindness ranged on a table by her side, — mute witnesses to the fact, that, amid all his own heart-troubles, their owner had found time to think considerately of her, a stranger, and one in whom it was impossible he could have any selfish interest, — Esther said to herself, "He is a noble-hearted, unselfish man, and has taken this course to compensate me for my banishment from his splendid library. He is an unselfish man. How rare a thing that is!"

Whereupon Miss Brandon wandered off into a train of moralizing and self-communion, as was her wont in moments of thoughtful idleness, — a process as often productive of evil results as of good. But, in this case, I think the good was unquestionable; for it led Essie to strike a balance between the good and evil forces that had been brought to bear upon her in her fight against the world, and resulted in — wait, and see what.

The small bedroom, which was Esther's study as well as sleeping-apartment now that she was an exile from the grand old room, that, as she once enthusiastically declared to Miss Cally, "acted as an inspiration upon her," looked more inviting under its winter-aspect than in the hot summer-weather, when one craves unlimited space and air. What had been stifling in mid-summer was cosy in early winter. The flowery chintz-coverings, that had acted somewhat as does a red rag on the bovine genus upon a memorable occa-

sion when she was just freshly returned from the cool whiteness of Miss Cally's chamber-drapery, diffused a cheerfully warm look about the little sixteen by twenty, now that there was nothing but dead branches and gray moss and mud and slush outside to distract one's attention from their gay tracery. The andirons, that supported the brightly-burning ash-wood, were polished to the last degree of brightness, epitomizing the room and its contents through the media of two great brass balls that surmounted them; and the lamp on the table was newly filled and newly trimmed, and the glass globe bespoke recent ablutions. By the side of the fender, upon which were comfortably crossed Essie's small slippered feet, lay a fresh supply of white-ash wood for replenishing-purposes. A dreary November rain was splashing sullenly and monotonously against the sash, enhancing, by the laws of contrast, the inside comfort.

"But why this minuteness in describing a commonplace room, in a commonplace house, on a commonplace occasion?"

Because, my dear caviller, all those comfortable and comforting atoms had their bearing in enabling Miss Brandon to strike a just balance. Sages talk of the mastery of mind over matter. Are they not, rather, indissolubly connected, helplessly dependent? To illustrate:—

If the swart woodman, whose duty it was to fell, haul, cut, and cord the wood for household consumption at Locust Grove, had seen fit to select from the varied forest treasures at his command a sweet-gum in place of an ash tree, and, so selecting, had left the smaller official, whose duty it was to keep each apartment amply supplied with fuel, no option in the matter of green or dry; in consequence of which had Miss Brandon ruminated in front of a pile of sullen logs, from whose green hearts the sap exuded with a mournful wail most depressing in tendency; had murky gum smoke-wreaths curled upward where now danced cheery ashen flames, — would mental abstraction have been sufficient to render her oblivious of physical discomfort? Would not matter have asserted its sovereignty, and impelled Essie toward the lugubrious conclusion that this world was but a miserable place of probation, where we were to be fitted, by privation and suffering, for canonization above? For where breathes the man or woman heroic enough to philosophize cheerfully over a green-wood fire?

But the inspired woodman had felled an ash instead of a sweet-gum; his subordinate had supplied the andirons generously; and the cheerful flames penetrated through the *physique* into the *morale* of Esther Brandon, superinducing a corresponding warmth of soul. So I contend that the fire that laughed instead of sulking, and the curtains that shielded her vision from the distressed outside world, and the lamp that mellowed its light to her caprices, were all entitled to their share of the credit in helping her to a just balance.

A kind act from a total stranger had stirred the gratitude in her heart, and gave tone to all her thoughts for that day.

In that miserable time in the past, when, at one fell swoop, her happiness, her love, her most sacred memories, her faith in her kind, had been swept from her grasp, she had been ready to "curse God, and die." When, in the calmness of the despair that followed, the power of reasoning came back to her, she reasoned as do all those who have been sore smitten in their affections. Her logic was the universal logic of the wretched.

Happiness had proved but a bitter mockery to her: hence there was no such thing as happiness. Love had been to her a delusion and a snare: therefore to be wise was to love not. A fearful whisper had steeped the idolized memory of her mother in shame and bitterness: so, with iconoclastic zeal, she sneered at idol-worship. Her faith in her kind had been broken by the baseness of one man: hence all men were base.

And, for a while, Esther Brandon, whom God had made naturally trusting, loving, and charitable, was converted by the treachery of man into a distrustful, loveless, and bitter woman, suffering acting upon her as it does upon all her sex; for it is a sex that feels acutely, but reasons feebly.

But the homely, kindly atmosphere of Le Noir was obnoxious to the growth of cynicism, natural or cultivated. In mental stature, the Le Noirites were the veriest pygmies; but in all that appertained to moral growth, or healthy culture of the affections, they were giants in the land.

The live Christianity of Miss Cally Henderson, the uniform sunshininess of good Mrs. Golding, the never-failing charity of her placid husband, the brusque benevolence of genial Dr. Sparks, and now, added to these, the kind courteousness of the blind master of the Oaks, all wore slowly,

but surely, upon Esther's benumbed heart, which was as slowly, but as surely, awakening to new life under these kindly influences.

"After all," she murmured, glancing gratefully at the mental aliment furnished her by this new friend, "is not the good and evil pretty equally balanced in this world of ours, if one would only think so? How has it been with me? The mother who bore me cast me helpless upon the world, dowried with shame, stained by another's guilt. Madame Celestine, the stranger who took me in, was good and tender and patient beyond the ordinary run of mothers.

"Philip Walworth, the man to whom, for a short, bright while, I looked up to as to a father, made wreck of my faith in God and man: he is a blot upon the face of the universe. Roger Etheridge, a man whose life, like my own, has been broken by the wrong-doing of others, sorrow-stricken and lonely, deals tenderly and courteously with all around him, and thinks unselfishly of the needs and wants of an insignificant chance visitor under his roof.

"Alfred Walworth, the lover who swore to love me to the bitter end, whose devotion knew no bounds, who was ready to trample upon the world and its mandates for love of me, has forgotten my very existence in his wedded happiness. Old Dinah, a poor ignorant negress, through life and unto death was faithfully devoted to the mistress whom she alone of all the world befriended, and, dying, strove to obey her behests.

"Mrs. Somers I believe to be as false as she is fair. Miss Cally Henderson is as true as steel.

"And who have I of evil to place in the balances against bright, cheery Mrs. Golding, and dear old Mr. Golding, who calls me child, and treats me so persistently like a favored one, that my fixed resolve never to care again for people is melting like snow beneath the warm sunshine?

"And I have done very little to merit their goodness. It is just out of the fulness of their own kind hearts that they are so good to me." Two small white hands came softly and earnestly together; and a gentle aspiration fluttered over the girl's sweet lips.

"May I grow day by day more worthy of the new friends God is raising up to me!"

Ah! blind Roger Etheridge, you've sown the seed of kind-

ness in goodly soil. Ah! bright spirit that dances in the ashen flames, right bravely have you done your work.

But what can I do with a heroine who will persist in being a woman, when I want a character?

To preserve the unities, she ought to have gone on to the word *finis*, doubting, distrusting, despising, because she once had cause for so doing.

As it was, the incrustation of ice that had formed over her frozen heart was gradually melting away, and she was, day by day, becoming more like the old Esther Brandon, the Queen Zenobia whom the girls at school all looked up to with a queer admixture of love and fear; colder, quieter, more stately, — for all the enthusiasm of ardent youth had been chilled out of her, — but sweetly dignified, gently calm, serenely beautiful with the weight of her twenty-one years bearing lightly upon her proud young face; with a deep, soulful look in her dark blue eyes, that comes only to those who have felt the iron in their souls; a pathetic sweetness about the mouth that had well-nigh forgotten its trick of smiling; a creature well worthy the respect of all good men and true, albeit

“Not too fair nor good
For common mortal’s daily food.”

CHAPTER XXX.

CONTAINS A LETTER OF IMPORTANCE.

MORE than a week had elapsed since Mrs. Somers’s visit of condescension, during which period every spare moment of Esther’s time had been devoted to hard study.

The plan which she had mapped out for herself, in the calm security of her retreat from all disturbing influences, needed to be remodelled now, since a curious and remarkable chance had directed Alfred Walworth’s steps toward her asylum.

To maintain that placidity of mind so necessary for the pursuance of her life-object, in a locality where she was in danger of being thrown into contact with him at any moment, was manifestly impossible. She did not dare analyze the feelings that filled her soul at the mere thought of meeting this whilom lover: she only knew that the idea of meeting him at all filled her with the liveliest emotion. These new friends of hers at the Oaks were already acquainted with him: at their house alone lay the danger of seeing him. She had stipulated for the privilege of being as rude as she chose to be in case this danger should become imminent. Therefore she would resume her visits; for, beside motives of gratitude toward Mr. Etheridge, there was the disposal of the package which old Dinah had intrusted to her, which necessitated communication with the Oaks.

Her remodelled plan of action was this, — to avail herself of the books and the kindness of Roger Etheridge until the close of her engagement with Mr. Golding; to

remove from the neighborhood at the end of that engagement, and complete her preparations for public readings under the kindly protection of good Madame Celestine; and, in the mean while, to use every means at her command to fathom Estella Somers before rashly sowing the seed of discord between her and the brother to whom she seemed so indispensable, trusting to chance that the short remnant of her sojourn in the Le-Noir neighborhood might pass without her encountering Alfred Walworth.

"He has not come yet, or Mr. Golding would have mentioned it as an item of local gossip," said she to herself as she mounted her gentle palfrey to pay her promised visit to the Oaks.

Miss Cally received her with unaffected delight; Mrs. Somers, with an effusive warmth which puzzled, but did not impress her agreeably; Mr. Fred Somers, with the easy grace of a young man to whom a handsome woman was no novelty; while the blind master of the Oaks held her little hand in a firm, warm clasp, as he told her in a voice of gentle earnestness how much he wished she would try to feel as much at home in the old library as in the days of Miss Cally's sole occupancy. When he ceased speaking, he dropped the girl's small hand slowly and reluctantly. Its lithe, slender fingers, warm, soft palm, firm and magnetic clasp, thrilled him to the heart, quickening memories that only slumbered, but would not die. This stranger's hand, with its electric touch, was like no other hand but *hers*: the warm, firm clasp, the magnetism, were all hers. He could hold that little hand, and fondly dream it was the hand of his dead wife, nestling, as of yore, in his loving clasp.

Did this young stranger, whose voice was so sadly like hers, whose touch thrilled him as once had hers — did she look like her too? Ah, could he but see! Never before had Roger Etheridge rebelled against his blindness. In the first rush of his misery, he had said in bitterness of soul, when they told him that a cure was possible, "Why should I lament the loss of sight? Why should I try to regain it? The garish sunlight would but mock me with its brightness; Nature's smiles would but augment my midnight gloom; others would flaunt their happiness in my face, when happiness is but a cruel mockery to me; the

beauty of women, that snare for men's brains and souls, would but madden me with the recollection of the fair face that has been my ruin. No: let me be as I am. My soul is plunged in eternal darkness: let my body be so likewise. If God is merciful, he will soon relieve me of the life that has become a burden."

So reasoned the blind man in his fierce anguish, stubbornly refusing to be experimented upon. But God had been merciful, and had not released him from life, but had softened his heart, and mellowed his grief, until it had come to him to think, that, if that dark episode in his brief married life were to do over again, he would temper justice with mercy.

But the dead past would not live again; nor had he ever thought to wish it. But the sweet songster who had welcomed him to his long-deserted home with *her* voice and *her* song had stirred the dulled pulses of his heart with a strange power; and he lamented the blindness which hid her from his sight.

Miss Cally had carried Essie off in triumph to rid her of her cumbrous riding-habit; Frederic had left the room to give orders for the stabling of Miss Brandon's horse; and the brother and sister were left alone.

"Are we alone, Estella?" asked the blind man, who had sunk back into his arm-chair after greeting their young guest.

"Yes, brother: do you wish anything?" And, with the alacrity that always characterized her motions when Roger called, Mrs. Somers came and stood over him.

"Estella, does she look like *her*?" The strong man's voice had a pathetic tremulousness in it, that told how deeply he was stirred.

Well, very well, did his sister comprehend his meaning; but she needed a little longer space of time in which to draw her fancy picture: so she answered with another question:—

"Does who look like who, Roger dear?"

"Does this Miss Brandon look like my Amy? Tell me quick. I want to think so." And the poor sightless eyes were upturned so eagerly to the handsome face bending over them, as Estella's jewelled hand was caught in a feverish clasp.

"My poor brother, what a cruel hold that beautiful adventuress took on your noble heart! No: this pretty stranger resembles her in not one respect. She was tall: Miss Brandon is *petite*. She had melancholy violet eyes: Miss Brandon's are blue, it is true, but light blue, with a brightly defiant look in them. Her mouth was sweet, but weakly tremulous: this girl's has a firm decision about it that hardly belongs to her sex. Her hair was black as sloes: Miss Brandon's is light almost to the verge of bloneness."

"Enough, enough: let us talk of something else. It was a foolish fancy."

Estella Somers had looked straight down upon her helpless brother, and given this false description of Esther Brandon, without a quaver in her full rich voice, or a blush of shame dyeing her handsome face. It was a lie, and she knew it was: but it was a perfectly safe lie; for never since the blow descended had her brother ever alluded to his trouble to any one but herself. Nor was it at all likely he ever would do so. It was for her interest to destroy, as far as in her lay, this tendency on Roger's part to dwell on the past. He had startled her terribly since their return home, by saying half dreamily, half as if he meant it, "If I were not so helpless, I would try to find her child, and provide for it."

Upon which his sister had hastily reminded him that the child had been put in good hands, with relatives of its mother, who were well to do in the world.

That had been all; but it had been startling.

Essie came back presently, and lent herself with right good will and triumphant success to the task of showing the blind master of the Oaks her gratitude.

She sang to him song after song as he called for them, winning grateful thanks from him, graceful flattery from Mrs. Somers, and loud praises from Mr. Fred Somers; Miss Cally sitting by all the while, beaming with a proud look of satisfaction, as if Essie was entirely a piece of her own home manufacture, about which she was justly entitled to be a little boastful.

Nothing would satisfy Mrs. Somers's hospitable interest in their visitor but to accompany her to her room that night.

It was the room Essie had always occupied on her visits to the Oaks, — a cosey little bedroom called the "octagon," that was stuck on to the extremity of the left wing.

Mrs. Somers conducted Miss Brandon thither in state. Then she must go in and see that Essie's fire burned satisfactorily. "Tell me, my dear child, where that exquisite voice of yours was cultivated."

The question was an apt one, coming so closely on the singing Esther had been giving them, carelessly put; the answer to which did not seem to interest Mrs. Somers half so much as the re-adjustment of some sticks of wood, that had burned in two, and fallen apart over the andirons.

"At a Madame Celestine's," answered Essie in her touch-me-not voice; for she always winced when any one grew inquisitive about her past.

"Madame Celestine's. Ah! her school is in New York, I believe?"

"No: in Pennsylvania."

"They certainly understood musical instruction there. Your voice has been cultivated with care."

"Madame was a most conscientious teacher."

"So I should judge. Is her school a large one, a promiscuous one?"

"She is very particular about whom she admits."

"Just so. That will suit exactly," said Mrs. Somers musingly. "I have had an object, my dear Miss Brandon, in making such minute inquiries about this school. I have an intimate friend, who is foolish enough to trust very much to my judgment in various matters, because I have knocked around a good deal in the world, I suppose; and she has been importuning me to help her decide upon a school for her daughter, a girl of fifteen, who, like yourself, is gifted with a glorious voice. As I think Madame Celestine could not have a more glowing advertisement than your singing, I am going to ask you to give me her full address for the benefit of my friend."

Not dreaming that the intimate friend and the gifted daughter were mythical personages, who would appear, as the play-bills have it, for that occasion only, Esther promptly gave the required address, — "Madame Celestine, — County, Penn."

"Thank you! You have enabled me to help my foolish friend to a decision."

A little more talk about nothing; and, with a cordial

good-night, Mrs. Somers swept from the octagon, leaving her guest to her repose.

After her departure, Essie seated herself before the fire, and began leisurely unbraiding her long hair; when a gentle tap announced another visitor, and Miss Cally, resplendent in a red flannel wrapper, trotted briskly in.

"Dear heart, I am glad to find you are not undressed yet. As I was wandering around, seeing that there was nothing left in the galleries for the dogs to chew to pieces (for, since that boy Fred has come home, the dogs are about to take the place), I found the window-sashes belonging to the window just behind your bed quietly leaning up against the side of the house. They were taken out to be washed this morning; and Madame Lidy got sick, as she always does if you give her a little extra work to do; and I suppose the boy that made the fire in here didn't notice for the heavy curtain. But, if you'd gone to bed in that bed, you'd have died of pneumonia long before morning. It was a providential inspiration that sent me out on the galleries to-night."

"I assure you I haven't felt the least draught. I don't suppose, with the blinds closed, and that heavy curtain down, it could possibly hurt me. I am not at all subject to pneumonia. Never had it in my life."

"Good and sufficient reasons why you never should have it. I've come in to move you into another room, my dear. 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure:' that's my philosophy."

And Miss Cally peremptorily hustled Essie from the little octagon, through the silent halls, into a large front-chamber, that looked very gloomy and very stately after the cheery little apartment she had just vacated.

"You won't be afraid to sleep in here by yourself, will you, dear?"

"Of course not," replied Essie deceitfully.

"It is rather cut off from the rest of the house; but loneliness is better than pneumonia. If you smell smoke very early in the morning, you needn't trouble yourself to scream 'Fire!' Fred's smoking-room is just the other side of that door; and he generally begins the day by a thorough fumigation of himself and his surroundings. He's a terrible boy. A body might as well have a regiment of soldiers quartered in the house, what with his smoke, and his guns

and things. But I know you wish I'd take myself and my long tongue to bed. So good-night, dear child! Be sure and name the bed-posts;" with which final injunction the red flannel wrapper flitted through the heavy oak door, leaving Essie alone in the gloom of the strange room.

It was not long before she had turned out her lamp, and settled herself to sleep.

And, while she slept, Estella Somers was inditing the following letter to Madame Celestine, — a letter which was despatched by an early messenger next morning: —

"If Madame Celestine would do a great kindness to her former pupil, Miss Esther Brandon, she will write full particulars of her early life, beginning with the time and manner at which she was placed under madame's care, up to the hour of her leaving it, to the following address. The writer believes herself to be in possession of knowledge that will secure a large fortune to Miss Brandon, should the answer to this place at rest certain doubts as to the young lady's identity.

It was a random shot; but

"Full many a shaft at random sent
Finds mark the archer little meant."

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN EMBARRASSING SITUATION.

No uncanny visitors, habitants of this world or of the other, disturbed the profound slumber into which Essie fell soon after bidding Miss Cally an affectionate good-night. She slept on dreamlessly and peacefully till the sunlight peeped through the blinds and accused her of sloth.

It was reserved for her hostess to introduce the element of disquiet into this new day. There was no inducement for early rising at the Oaks. Breakfast was always served with aristocratic tardiness; and Nature, at this season of the year, was not charming enough to lure one from a comfortable bed.

So, in luxurious laziness, Essie lay wide awake in the stately old four-poster, under its rich canopy of quilted silk, that was brought to a focus, and pinned with a golden star; speculating in an idle sort of way over the handsome silk patchwork quilt under which she had slumbered, weaving a romance about each gay shred of silk, until her vivid fancy had peopled Mrs. Somers's state spare-room with a goodly company from the land of shadows.

From an inch square of rich old brocade she had just completed a magnificent dinner-costume for a "gentle ladye of goode degree," and was just about to pin the wedding marabout into her powdered tresses, when she was brought back from romance to reality by sounds that gave unmistakable evidence of masculine occupancy of the adjoining room; a wide crack below the connecting door, and a loose transom above it, giving free ingress to the slightest noise.

An outer door was opened and closed again with that reckless expenditure of physical force which is a sheer waste of energy, but has a sort of masterful sound about it that pleases the strong sex, I suppose, else they would try to be more tender of feminine nerves. Some fresh logs of wood were flung at the fire, judging from the way they clattered down upon the andirons; a peremptory "Down, sir!" gave evidence that Mr. Fred Somers's chosen companion was with him; and presently a contented whistle, followed soon after by fragrant silence, indicated the fact that the heir of the Oaks was enjoying his ante-breakfast Havana, during which time it was his wont to despatch all his intellectual duties for the day by reading a paragraph or two in "The Complete Sportsman," skimming over "The Spirit of the Times," or giving Don Juan, the noble pointer that followed him like a shadow, his morning's lesson in field-tactics.

Presently the outer door opened again, but was closed, this time, with a gentle quietness that bespoke a feminine touch and a lady-like.

"Halloo! What's got the handsome mother out of bed at such an unusual hour?" was Mr. Somers's greeting to the new-comer, who stooped and kissed his broad white forehead before answering.

"I slept wretchedly last night; and it was a relief to escape from my bed."

"Not sick, I hope, *belle mère*. You do look knocked up this morning. Take this chair: it's a long shot the most comfortable in my den." And, with affectionate solicitude, Estella's son ensconced her in a big leathern arm-chair.

"Your 'den,' as you call it, son, looks too dangerously comfortable."

"Rather a queer combination of adjectives, if they are adjectives. Grammar never was my forte, nor any thing else in the book way, I am afraid. But where's the danger?"

"Your snuggery looks too much like contented bachelordom."

"And the danger lies in the content?" asked Fred with a light laugh.

"No: in the bachelordom."

"Then put your maternal heart at rest, handsome mother. If that is the most substantial bug-a-boo you can scare up, you had better retire from business. You are too young and handsome yet yourself to want to be made to look old by a young and handsome daughter-in-law."

"I hope my son does not think me capable of such selfish frivolity as to allow such a consideration to weigh for a moment against his happiness." And Estella Somers's voice was full of the tenderest reproach.

"Your son does not think you capable of any conduct that would be unbecoming the Virgin Mary herself," was the enthusiastical, reverential reply.

"Bless you, my boy, my darling son! who so exalts his mother, not from her own merits, but from his own pure soul. But I did not pay you this visit to speak of myself, nor to coax pretty compliments from you. I want to talk about your own affairs."

"All right, *belle mère*. What subject dealing exclusively with my own good-for-nothing self shall we enlarge upon? Shirt-buttons, dogs, guns, or horses? I think the first-mentioned is about the only one you are prepared to discuss knowingly."

"Suppose we return to my young and handsome daughter-in-law that is to be."

"All right. Matrimony in the prospective, then, let it be. Shall I describe her to you?"

"Your ideal wife?"

"My real wife that is to be."

"Yes, go on. I am all interest and attention."

"She is about the size of—well, not to be too particular about inches, say of an overgrown doll, plump as a partridge, merry as a cricket, eyes and hair brimful of sunshine, mouth looking all the time as if it were about to ripple out into smiles, hands"—

"Fred, you are describing Mira Walworth," interrupted his mother.

"I am trying to," answered the young man; "but a deuced poor fist I make at it. Might as well try to describe the glory of the angels, the sweetness of the flowers, the brightness of the firmament, or any thing else that masters the senses, but defies the tongue," was his lover-like peroration.

"My son, you are not engaged to Miss Walworth?"

Mr. Frederic Somers's powers of discernment were not acute enough to detect the anxiety conveyed in the tones of his mother's voice. It was only a question to him, and one which he answered with energetic honesty.

"No, by George! But it's not my fault that I'm not. I tried to get the little thing to give me an up-and-down 'Yes' or 'No' before we parted in Europe; but, every time I edged up to the subject in a business-like way, she would look volumes of reproach at me from those sweet eyes of hers, and ask me how I could think so poorly of her as to believe her capable of listening to such talk when her precious mother was just fading from the face of the earth. Then I'd feel uncommonly like a great brute, and would tell her as much: whereupon she would look sweeter than ever at me, and vow I wasn't a brute, but just the dearest and best friend she had, and all she asked of me was patience and constancy. So I'm being patient and constant; and, after the regulation-time has expired, I'm going for the little darling, and bring you all a sunbeam into this grim old house, that will make the shadows fly for very shame."

But this prospect did not seem to elate Mrs. Somers to the degree it did her infatuated son; for Mr. Somers was in love, and Mrs. Somers wasn't. He was not engaged, though: there was comfort in that. In Europe, the pretty daughter of wealthy Philip Walworth had seemed a very desirable *parti* for her handsome son. Now she had other views for him. By his marriage with Esther Brandon, should she prove to be Roger Etheridge's daughter, one more head would be cut from the hydra Remorse. Until she was fully satisfied on this matter, Frederic should marry no one.

Her present object was to pave the way for the transfer of his affections from Miss Walworth to Esther Brandon. She apprehended no great amount of difficulty in this; for was not her influence over her boy boundless? Perhaps. But the little blind god wields an influence more potent than thine, proud mother!

"Miss Walworth is undoubtedly a very attractive girl; but," she said presently in a musing sort of voice.

"But what?" asked Frederic in quick, impatient tones.

"I would not willingly sow the seeds of doubt in your ardent young soul, my precious son; but do not be too sure

of finding her as much in earnest about this thing as yourself."

"Mother, what right have you to speak so of her?" the young man asked with impetuous passion.

"The right given me by a thorough knowledge of my own sex, — a sex in which, alas! constancy is sadly rare."

"I would stake my life on Mira Walworth's truth and constancy!" cried Mira's lover. "It is cruel of you, mother, cruel, to slander my darling behind her back."

"Foolish boy!" said Estella in a soothing voice. "Who is slandering your darling? She has never promised to marry you; has she? She has never told you that she loves you; has she? So where would be the breach of truth or honor, if, since you and she have parted, she should have met some one she liked better, and have promised to marry him?"

The quick passion in the youth's voice was replaced by sorrowful despondency.

"Is that the way with women? Do they look one thing, and do another? For surely, if ever a modest woman's eyes acknowledged the tale she would not consent for her lips to tell, her eyes have told me that she loved me."

"A woman's eyes! My precious boy, learn to place your trust in something more worthy of it. Don't you know it is a prerogative of the sex, and one of which pretty young girls are only too fond of availing themselves, to deceive too ardent youths through that very medium? They can do it with impunity, you know. A word once spoken can never be recalled; but who can be held responsible for what the eye says?"

"Maybe you're right, mother," answered Frederic Somers simply. "You know more about women than I do. But I've judged them all by my mother. Maybe that's not always a safe plan. But until I go to Mira Walworth, and ask her the plain question, if she loves me, and get from the lips I love so well a plain dismissal, I won't doubt her, nor despair. Maybe you've read her truer than I have. But I want to believe in her; and, by Heaven! I will, until she breaks my faith by act of her own."

"As you will, Frederic," answered his mother coolly; "but Miss Walworth, who is rather commonplace, in spite of her pretty face, is certainly not the woman I should have thought likely to inspire my son with a *grande passion*."

"Commonplace!" retorted her son angrily. "Maybe that is what women would call her; but she suits me to a dot. And what in the devil am I, that I should expect to mate with perfection?"

"Frederic!"

Mrs. Somers had deliberately goaded her hot-souled son into a frenzy, and then signified her indignant surprise at the result by uttering his name in a lively crescendo.

"Beg your pardon, mother, for forgetting myself; but I'd have to be a confounded duffer to sit by quietly, and hear the woman I'm in love with sliced into shreds, and sewed up with red-pepper sauce."

"You're a red-pepper goose!" said Estella, desirous of jesting the black cloud from her boy's handsome face. "Pretty Mira Walworth has no warmer admirer than I am, saving your own spooney presence. I was only generalizing about possibilities, to prepare you for any disappointments that might be in store for you."

"Well, don't generalize any more then, please. It makes a fellow uncomfortable."

"Suppose we try neutral ground. What do you think of Miss Brandon's singing?"

"Divine!" was the laconic rejoinder; for, as Mr. Somers was not in love with Miss Brandon, it was not necessary to be expansive about her.

"She is a remarkably handsome girl."

"Superb!" acquiesced Fred cordially.

"That is decidedly higher praise than I ever heard you bestow upon any other woman."

"Is it? She deserves it, though."

"Then she is so gentle and dignified and lady-like!"

"She is so," responded her son cheerfully.

"She is altogether the most superior girl of her age I ever came in contact with."

"She looks it every bit."

"If I were a young man, I think I should find her irresistible."

"Under altered circumstances, I might indorse that too."

"You egotistical boy! Can't I praise a handsome girl without danger of your thinking I am throwing her at your head?"

"Oh!" said Fred innocently. "I'm glad you're not

throwing her at my head; for I'd be under the painful necessity of throwing her back."

"There!—that is the breakfast-bell! I've wasted two hours on you. You're not worth it."

"Hold on, *belle mère*:—waste another five minutes. I think your cat has peeped out of the bag. Half a dozen words now may save us both a deal of trouble hereafter. If your object in being so particularly interested in Mr. Golding's handsome governess is the hope of ever seeing me married to her, put that hope away from you with as little delay as possible. Critically speaking, I suppose she's handsomer, more intellectual, grander in every way, than my little girl up yonder. But then, you see, I love my little girl, and I don't love this very superior young lady. In fact, I believe, now that I come to think of it, I am opposed, on principle, to superior young ladies."

With which the outer door closed again, leaving the smoking-room vacant; while on the other side of the treacherous door that had allowed all this talk to leak through into Essie's tingling ears stood the "superior young lady," striving vainly to establish her title to be so called by trying to rise superbly indifferent to all that she had heard.

Was it her fault that they wouldn't hear the various noises she made by way of making them aware of her close proximity? She was in a room that had not been occupied since the return of the family: so whatever noises emanated therefrom were accredited to other sources. For how could Mrs. Somers possibly guess her presence therein, when she had herself seen her to the octagon bedroom the night before?

With cheeks of a tell-tale crimson, she issued from her bedroom to obey the summons of the bell. She met belated Miss Cally on her road.

Suppose that lady should make some allusion to her change of locality? She must be forewarned, else great would be the confusion at that breakfast-table.

"Wait a minute, Miss Cally: I want to ask a favor of you. Please don't mention the fact of my sleeping in the front-room last night. I'll tell you why after breakfast."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Cally in an awe-stricken whisper. "Did you see it?"

"Did I see what?" asked Essie.

"Why, the darkies have always contended that cousin's wife's ghost haunted that room, which used to be hers. But I never believed it before."

Esther laughed merrily, but had no time to set Miss Cally right, as her hand was on the dining-room door.

She was glad of this trifling incident; for it helped her to look unembarrassed and unconcerned when she entered into the presence of the young gentleman who had been discussing her that morning with such charming candor and cool insolence.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A RIDE WHICH TERMINATED STRANGELY.

MR. FREDERIC SOMERS was not a model young man; for which let us return thanks: he was simply a hot-headed, hot-souled, hot-tempered young Southerner, of mediocre mental calibre, but with a heart full of the most generous emotions. His raising (if indeed he could be said to have had any) had been injudicious and faulty in the extreme; notwithstanding which, he seemed to have reached majority with pretty correct views on all the cardinal points that constitute the gentleman. He was brave to recklessness; his regard for truth was worthy of George Washington and his hatchet; and his reverential respect for woman-kind was deserving of praise without stint, taking into consideration the fact that he came into this world long after the abolition of the complimentary idea that woman "was Heaven's best gift to man." As an offset to these desirable traits of character, I shall have to acknowledge that he was wont to give way to his wrath on very insufficient provocation; upon which occasions his communications were decidedly more energetic and exclamatory than the monotonous "Yea, yea, and Nay, nay," so strongly recommended in Holy Writ.

To make a long description short, he was what a good, mild young woman would regretfully have pronounced "a terrible fellow;" what a spirited girl would declare "superb, splendid," &c.

Now, as the young man had been rasped by his mother's slighting allusions to his chosen Dulcinea into retaliatory

measures, and had spoken somewhat sneeringly of the young lady, who, by all the laws of hospitality, was entitled to the most respectful consideration, his generous heart smote him for his ungenerous conduct, and he strove to make the *amende honorable* by paying Miss Brandon the most assiduous attention during the remainder of her visit.

"Aha," was Estella Somers's erroneous but triumphant mental conclusion, "I have succeeded in directing his attention to her beauty!"

"He is brave and generous," thought Essie more correctly, "and is sorry for his discourtesy. I like him; and I want him to like me."

Great would have been the young man's regret and mortification had he but known, that, aided by previous knowledge of his offence, Miss Brandon was reading his motive in this atonement as readily as if it had been placed before her actual vision in great-primer type.

Nothing would appease Mr. Somers's remorse but ordering his horse when Miss Brandon ordered hers, and declaring his intention of seeing their guest home.

"It is entirely unnecessary, I assure you," said Miss Brandon on learning his design. "In this secluded neighborhood, there is neither impropriety nor danger in a lady's taking so short a ride alone."

"Pardon me," urged the handsome offender in his most persuasive voice. "I was selfishly considering my own pleasure in asking to ride with you, with no thought of dangers or improprieties."

"And yet a danger, and a very great one, in my eyes, threatens you at this moment." And Essie looked straight into the young man's fine eyes with her own truth-loving ones.

"And that is?"

"The danger of becoming insincere."

A conscious flush mounted to his broad white forehead; but Mr. Somers stood his ground manfully.

"Not knowing upon what Miss Brandon founds her most distasteful accusation, I shall have to submit to it in silence. But I am not insincere in saying that I am honestly desirous of the pleasure of riding home with her. May I go? Don't say 'No,' please." And he suddenly assumed a

boyishly pleading attitude, against which Miss Brandon's stately reserve was not proof.

"Yes," she replied lightly; "and I will leave the task of punishing you for your society fibs to your own conscience, which I have good reason to believe is tender in the extreme."

Fred's face grew red again under this second shot; and as he assisted the young lady to mount black Bess, who at that moment was led up to the steps, he found himself wondering if the girl was a clairvoyant, or a witch, who had been able to divine all that had passed between his mother and himself that morning. "Else how in the deuce can she hit so straight home? She must be devilish deep, or I must be devilish shallow!"

In the minute and a half that it took him to vault into his own saddle, Esther had formed a daring resolve.

She had unwittingly come into possession of this young man's private affairs. She would inform him of the whole truth, which would relieve her of a certain unreasonable feeling of having been an involuntary eaves-dropper, and at the same time afford her an opportunity of lulling to rest any suspicions of Mira Walworth's truth and loyalty that his mother's words might have aroused.

She would form a pact with this handsome lover of her dear old schoolmate, that would place their future intercourse on a more desirable footing than it was likely to soon attain should he remain under the impression that she was lending herself to the furtherance of his mother's matrimonial schemes.

How to carry this bold plan into execution was a still unsolved problem, when the great outside gate to the Oaks lawn clanged to behind them. Then a commonplace remark from Mr. Somers furnished her with a cue.

"Cousin Cally complains bitterly of your defection from the Oaks. Says it used to be another home to you."

"She is very good to miss me so."

"I think the old lady considers me and my dogs a poor substitute for your society."

"In which she makes a display of very poor taste," said Miss Esther, with a dash of irony in her voice.

"I begin to be afraid you are sarcastic," answered Mr. Somers. "For God's sake, spare me, if you are. Of all

perfectly helpless, perfectly powerless, utterly crushed and spiritless creatures conceivable, the worst is your escort in the presence of a sarcastic woman."

"We can't all be Mira Walworths," she replied teasingly; "nor can we be all Miss Callys, — dear little woman! a most superior woman in every respect; and, as I am not opposed on principle to 'superior women,' I do love her dearly."

"The devil's to pay!" thought poor Fred as he turned full upon Esther Brandon his handsome face ablaze with crimson mortification, wanting to say something, but helplessly unable to decide what. He looked so handsome and so crestfallen and so deprecating, that Essie's heart smote her for the pain she had inflicted.

"Forgive me, and let us be friends," she said, extending her little gauntleted hand across to him.

"Hang me if I know what I have to forgive!" said her escort in honest perplexity.

"I had no right to tease you so. I have a confession to make. Last night, owing to the absence of the window-sash in the room I usually occupy, Miss Cally installed me in the room adjoining your private sitting-room. I tried effectually to notify two occupants of that room this morning of my close proximity. I let the tongs fall on the hearth; I stirred my fire in the most energetic fashion; I splashed the water from my pitcher into my basin with a most boisterous manner: but you wouldn't hear me; and you just would go on until you had informed me that you were in love with the dearest, sweetest schoolmate I ever had, and that you didn't have much opinion of me, her most ardent admirer and staunchest friend. But, if you will just try to like me a little bit, I'll try very hard to be as inferior as possible."

Luckless Fred! He was in doubt whether to swear, or to laugh; whether to hide his head in shame, or hold out his hand to this candid young lady, and beg her pardon. He concluded to do the latter.

"If you don't despise me for a confounded cowardly backbiter, I should like to shake hands with you, Miss Brandon."

With frank cordiality Essie once more extended her hand, saying, —

"Indeed, I think you nothing of the kind. I only won-

der, that, under the exasperation of hearing Mira Walworth accused of lack of truth and constancy, you did not launch out, after the manner of your superlatively just sex, into wholesale abuse of us women."

Quick to apologize for the mother he adored, Fred said promptly, —

"Mother does not know her as well as I do."

"Nor as well as I do."

"She is an angel; isn't she?"

"No; but she is something more desirable: she is a sweet, true woman, who will be a blessing to the man she marries."

"And by Jove you are a trump!" cried Fred enthusiastically, forming a mutual-admiration society on the spot by way of testifying to his eternal gratitude for this unadulterated praise of his darling.

"Thank you!" said Essie demurely. "Of the two, I believe I prefer being a 'very superior woman.'"

"Say that you forgive me, and that you don't despise me."

"I don't despise you, and I do forgive you. There, now: will that do? I think, now that I have convinced you I am not a bit more in love with you than you are with me, we shall be the best of friends."

"Your hand on it!"

Ungloving, by way of sealing this compact of good fellowship more impressively, she placed her delicate white hand within her new friend's. With old-time courtesy, the young man lightly touched his bearded lips to its soft white surface. As he dropped it, the two riders became conscious of a third presence.

From a sharp bend in the road had emerged with startling suddenness a spurred and booted horseman. The handsome horse that he bestrode gave unmistakable evidence of great fatigue. His silky coat was flecked with moisture; his proud head drooped dejectedly; and one foot was dragged after the other as if the effort were almost too much for equine fortitude. His rider looked hardly less travel-worn. His dress was careless; his gray felt hat was slouched over one ear with utter disregard to elegance or becomingness; while the boots, within whose tops his gray pants were stuffed for protection, bore road-marks upon

every inch of them. A heavy beard and mustache clothed the lower part of his face. As he came in sight of Esther and her escort just in time to be an unobserved witness of the kiss Fred had imprinted upon her pretty hand, he muttered a sneering comment: —

"Two spooney simpletons, who fancy themselves desperately in love!" But, as he neared them, frenzied anger and wild jealousy chased the sneering devil from his eyes. Three years had not changed the lineaments engraven ineffaceably on his heart. Whence or how she came there he could not guess: but advancing toward him with cool unconsciousness was Esther Brandon, the one love of his life; and the man who had just given her that lover-like caress was his friend, the avowed lover of his sister. "Beautiful serpent! lying hypocrite." He included them both in the anathema he almost hurled aloud at the advancing figures.

With simple curiosity, Esther glanced at the travel-stained, bearded horseman coming toward her; but a sudden ejaculation from her companion startled the blood from her cheeks, and made her sway helplessly in her saddle.

"Alfred Walworth, by the gods!" cried Fred.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FACE TO FACE.

"Is it death?"

"No: it is a swoon."

It was Frederic Somers who asked the question, in a frightened voice, of Alfred Walworth, as he crouched upon the roadside, tenderly supporting the form of the unconscious girl.

White, lifeless, pathetically beautiful in her helplessness, lay Esther Brandon, her queenly head pillowed on the heart that had once loved her sinlessly, the blue-veined lids mercifully veiling from her pure eyes the look of passionate adoration that burned in Alfred Walworth's gaze.

How often had those two, in moments of idle speculation, tried to fancy the how, the when, the where, of their possible meeting! How seldom do these soul-speculations ever trench upon the probable! The coming suddenly face to face, without a moment's warning, in a forest-road in far-away Louisiana, had not been the suggested theatre for the next scene in their life-drama: unconscious helplessness had not been Esther's pre-selected rôle.

The meeting him at all had been a dreaded probability ever since his purchase of Belton. She had schooled herself into theoretical dignity and calmness; but theory and practice can seldom be made to accord in a woman's wayward heart.

"What shall we do?" asked Mr. Somers, looking down in manly helplessness upon the two at his feet.

"In my saddle-bags you will find a flask of brandy;

bring it," answered Alfred, without once taking his hungry eyes from the beautiful face so close to him. He spoke in a voice as soft and low as if it were his own little Felix asleep in his arms.

Fred obeyed him with alacrity. A few drops at a time they poured through the slightly-parted lips. Presently a long, convulsive sigh rewarded their efforts. Then the white lids grew tremulous, were feebly raised, and closed again.

"She is coming to! — fetch her horse!" said Alfred in a quickly peremptory voice.

Could he share the first look of consciousness from those lovely eyes, still so dear, with this other man, her lover though he might be? Surely one stolen moment, full of blissful joy, was but meagre compensation for the suffering that was past and the blankness that was ahead. One deep burning moment he would have; one bright second she should be all his own. There in his arms he held her: her reviving gaze should rest upon his face, and his alone.

Fortunately for all parties concerned, the horses, which had been so unceremoniously deserted by the actors in this *tableau vivant*, were of a most unambitious turn of mind. A long and a hard day's ride naturally inclined Mr. Walworth's handsome animal to the conclusion that standing still was the best sort of amusement, especially as he was a stranger in a strange land, and had no favorite locality to tempt him into deserting his master. Mr. Somers was riding his hunting-horse, to whom it was no novelty to find himself left riderless while his master crept up on the wary wild duck or other game: so he quietly grazed around, making the best of his freedom. And black Bess, servile and imitative after the fashion of her sex, remained quiet because the others did, just straying a little way off to feed on the long gray moss that festooned the trees by the roadside. After her Mr. Somers went, as requested.

Again the waxen lids were upraised, strongly and fully this time. One startled, upward look was flashed into Alfred Walworth's waiting eyes; and then, with the speed of a frightened fawn, Esther Brandon sprang to her feet, and stood white and trembling before her old-time lover.

"Alfred! In your arms! Where am I? Why could I not have been strong? Mr. Somers — where is he?"

Confusedly, disconnectedly, the words fluttered over her trembling lips. She was conscious of but one desire, — to speed away from the presence that had once made the sunlight of her heart.

She had spurned him from her in the very first moment of full consciousness. The look of loving recognition he had passionately longed for had not been granted. The old tenderness that the sight of her had brought welling up in his heart went surging back, submerged under a scorching lava-stream of wrath and bitterness as he looked upon this flashing woman, standing majestically aloof from him, a superb incarnation of outraged dignity and exalted womanhood.

"Where are you?" He repeated her words in a low, passion-laden voice as he confronted her with a mien as proud and defiant as her own. "You are face to face, at last, with the man whose honest love you repaid with treachery and desertion three centuries ago, if time were to be counted by my weary heart-beats."

"Was the treachery mine, Alfred Walworth?"

"Yes, by Heaven it was! for, had you loved me with a tithe of the mad passion I've wasted on you, ten thousand fathers could not have kept us asunder."

"Hush! You are blind; you are ignorant. I alone know the horrible truth" (a shudder convulsed the girl's stately form); "and, in the light of that truth, this talk of love between you and me — a dead love though it be — is monstrous!"

"A dead love! No, by all that's enduring! But see! here comes your new lover to snatch you from me. May your next favor be bestowed upon him beyond the reach of my tortured vision!"

Had Esther designed an answer in words, there would have been no opportunity to deliver it; for Mr. Somers was close to them now, calling out, in his cheery, boisterous voice, —

"All right again, Miss Brandon! Gad, but you gave Alf and myself a scare! Your gentle black Bess has been so considerate as to break your bridle. I believe I've mended it, though; so we can reach Golding's in safety. — Now, Walworth, let me introduce you more formally to the young lady you so gallantly rescued from what would have

been a pretty severe trouble; while I, like the lout that I am, was staring at your unexpected apparition, and lost sight of her."

With a sudden impulse of kindness (for the lines of suffering that seamed and hardened his once frankly-pleasant face touched her to the heart), Esther held out her hand to Mr. Walworth with gentle dignity, and, by a few wisely-spoken words, relieved them all from what threatened to be an overwhelming embarrassment.

"Mr. Walworth and I are already acquainted. We were friends in the long-ago; and I hope we may meet as such in the future." But she did not trust herself to take her eyes off Fred's innocent face while uttering that hope.

"Now, please, let us get on our way again," she continued. "I feel far from well."

It was Alfred Walworth who sprang forward once more, and lifted her lightly into the saddle. Then, for a second, he held her hand in a fierce grasp.

"Your words mock me. Friends, — never!" In another moment he had sprung into his own saddle, and disappeared like a flash.

"Gone," said Fred regretfully, "without giving a fellow a chance to ask a single question. But I'll follow him to Belton as soon as I've seen you safe home."

Essie pleaded physical weakness as excuse for taciturnity; and the rest of that ride was accomplished in almost unbroken silence.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FAMILY MAN.

THE easy, conversational gait at which our two equestrians had been travelling before the interruption described in the last chapter was exchanged for a brisk canter, that very soon brought them to Locust Grove. Having politely bowed Miss Brandon into the house, Mr. Somers hastily remounted, and started at a fleet pace for Belton.

He found its owner moodily crouching over a new-made fire in the library.

"And now, old fellow," he exclaimed as he was ushered into the room, "I've come to say 'How do you do?' and bid you welcome to our stupid neighborhood; neither of which seemed exactly the thing to do with a fainting woman on our hands. By George, though, I am glad to see you!"

"Thank you! Sit down," was the uneffusive rejoinder, vouchsafed in the most ungracious of voices.

But so void of offence was Fred's conscience, that he attributed his friend's palpable gruffness to fatigue, and the general discomfort pervading the house that had been closed so long.

So, seating himself at Mr. Walworth's curt invitation, he persisted in being cheerfully colloquial.

"But what are you doing here by yourself?"

"I am seeing that the windows in Mrs. Walworth's room are not draughty, that the cow with the youngest calf is taken up and stall-fed, and that the sheets are well aired," answered his host with sarcastic readiness.

"Draughty windows, cows and calves, airing sheets,"

echoed Fred, extracting the gist of his friend's voluble reply with no very satisfactory result.

"Yes," explained Mr. Walworth. "I'm a family man; and the above is but a meagre list of my marital responsibilities. But you will know how it is yourself before long, I presume."

"Gad, I hope so!" exclaimed Fred, honest joy illuminating his handsome face.

"More fool you!"

"That does not come gracefully from you, Alf."

"Why not?"

"Has my choice been the choice of a fool?"

"No; oh, no! It is a wise choice, an exceeding wise choice,—one of which I wish you joy." He spoke in a voice of suppressed passion; and the glance that he cast at the young man opposite him was full of wrath.

"Now you're talking like a man; for you know her, I guess, if anybody does."

"Yes: I know her."

"And love her, I suppose, well enough to desire her best happiness?" It was put interrogatively, in the pleasantest of voices; but it seemed to arouse his friend to the highest pitch of frenzy. Had she entertained this new lover with their old love-tale? It was a wild, foolish conjecture; but that remembered caress goaded him almost beyond endurance. It was with a mighty effort that he controlled the wild words that rushed to his lips, substituting irony for bitterness.

"Excuse me, Somers, if I beg you to select some subject of more general interest. I am afraid I am past the age when I can help a spooney young fellow to gush." It was said very coldly, very sneeringly.

"You are uncommonly unsatisfactory is all I have to say. Miss Brandon's worth forty of you when a fellow does want to gush."

"I make no manner of doubt of that."

"She helps a fellow along, and says sweet things herself."

"And lets a fellow kiss her hand so accommodatingly!" sneered Alfred.

"Did you see that too?" answered Fred in the airiest possible manner. "You would have kissed it too if you'd heard what she said just before that. I said"—

"Curse what you said!" And Mr. Walworth bestowed a fierce kick on the sulky wood-fire with such intense feeling, that nothing but a log of wood could have quietly endured it.

"Don't get savage, old fellow: it will burn presently. Well, then, she said that your sister, Mira Walworth, was the truest, sweetest woman that God ever made, and that she would be a blessing to any man. And, now, could I help kissing her hand in gratitude? — a handsome hand it is too, by the way."

A wonderful change flashed over Alfred Walworth's face. Had he been mistaken? He would know.

"Then you are not her lover?"

"Whose lover?"

"Miss Brandon's."

"Do you take me for a scoundrel, sir?" demanded Fred, growing fierce in his turn.

"I see no question of scoundrelism."

"Have I, or have I not, given your sister reason to believe that I loved her?"

"I believe you did about a year back."

"Was there any thing besides her own filial devotion that sealed my lips?"

"I really can't say, my dear boy," answered his host, growing affably cool as Fred heated up.

"Well, then, I don't know of any thing in my general character or previous conduct that should warrant your unjust aspersions. I suppose that accounts for your unusual huffiness!"

"I suppose it does," said Alfred, willing enough for this plausible covering for his crabbed discourtesy.

"You were jealous for the dear little girl up yonder."

"Maybe I was."

"Shake hands, Alf. I like you forty thousand times better than I did when I came into this room."

"Thanks! take a cigar."

"By way of calumet," said Fred as he accepted the proffered weed.

Muse of Miss Braddon, help me! I know, if your romantic pen had the handling of two handsome women, rivals in the affections of one handsome man, you would

hurl them into each other's presence, eyes "in a fine frenzy rolling," hearts full of murderous hate, ready for treason, stratagem, or spoil, with, maybe, a pretty little jewelled stiletto hidden snugly away in case of emergency; but my handsome rivals were destined to come across each other's paths in the most provokingly humdrum fashion, just like real folks in real life.

Mr. Walworth had selected a season of the year for his removal to his plantation when the navigation of Le Noir was tedious and uncertain. So, as his own riding-horse and his wife's carriage and horses constituted part of their baggage, the last day or two's travel was performed by land.

The first day's journey was accomplished without accident or incident: the second brought them about noon within sight of the Locust-Grove houses, with every prospect of making Belton in time for dinner, when an agonized scream from the interior of the carriage brought Mr. Walworth, who was riding leisurely in the rear, galloping up to the side of the vehicle.

There in the nurse's arms, while his frantic mother bent over him wild with anguish, lay little Felix in convulsions.

"I knew it, I knew it! I said this hateful travelling would kill my darling!" cried Maggie as her husband's face appeared at the window.

"Drive up to that house!" was the quickly imperative command of the young man to the coachman; while he dashed ahead to make known their extremity.

By the time the carriage reached the gate of hospitable Locust Grove, sympathetic and motherly Mrs. Golding stood upon the steps ready to receive and aid her new neighbors thus startlingly introduced to her.

The convulsion, one of the commonest ills that baby-flesh is heir to, soon yielded to her skilful ministrations; and, in less than an hour, frightened Maggie had the satisfaction of seeing her darling sink peacefully to sleep upon her bosom.

But it was Mrs. Golding's thoughtfulness that had sent Alfred on his way alone.

She declared to him that it would be the height of imprudence to take that fragile-looking little woman and a young infant into a cold, damp house, that hadn't seen

a fire for a year; and made them feel so heartily welcome in her own cheerful home, that Mr. Walworth, yielding to her solicitations and Maggie's fears, consented to precede his family to Belton by a night.

Thus it came about, that when Esther reached home, and entered the family sitting-room *en route* for her own apartment, she found herself suddenly in the presence of a diminutive little lady, with a childish pretty face, dressed in a rich travelling-costume, whom Mrs. Golding introduced to her as their new neighbor, Mrs. Walworth.

Only a slight addition of pallor, and the faintest tremor in her soft, sweet voice, betrayed the internal agitation produced by this second encounter, as Miss Brandon politely acknowledged the acquaintance of Mrs. Walworth: then, pleading serious indisposition, she passed on to her own room, and was seen no more that evening.

In the solitude of the little room that had grown so familiar with her soul-battles, long and fiercely did Esther Brandon wrestle that night with the spirits of darkness that swarmed around her, taunting her with this woman's happiness, her own loneliness, with the suspicion of black treachery she was compelled to bear to shield a father from the curses of his only son, with the poverty that bound her captive in this spot that was no longer a refuge and asylum, with the persecuting fate that had brought Alfred Walworth once more across her path, reviving old feelings, re-opening old wounds, tempting her anew to curse the day in which she first saw the light.

Long and fiercely did she wrestle, — wrestled and conquered. Then was she mightier than he that taketh a city; for she had conquered her own soul.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CONTAINS A LOVE-LETTER.

SLOWLY and quietly enough did life drag along in the old stone mansion in Chester, whose sole occupants now were Philip Walworth and his daughter Mira.

A great change had come over this man, whom the world held to be without fear and without reproach, since he had lost his good angel, — the wife who had been his guide, counsellor, and friend for more than a quarter of a century of such placid companionship as rarely falls to the lot of the yoked.

His wife Mira had been his inspiration; the instigator of every good, generous, or noble act of his married life. To his desire to be exalted in her dear eyes was added a vague sort of feeling that he could atone to the world at large for the foul wrong done to one frail human atom. So his course since his union with Almira Stanley had been a uniform one of open-handed generosity, courtesy, and universal charity; and his reward had come to him in the shape of universal homage and profound respect from his fellow-men.

And was he happy? I doubt it.

Now that the beloved companionship that had filled the days of his life so full of placid enjoyment was dissolved, the past proved mightier than the present, and drew him backward on its strong current with a force he could not resist; for she was in the past, too, now, — the wife he had loved so well. But memory did not stop at the contemplation of her gentle beauty, her spotless life: it hurried past those green spots into a long-buried past, when he was what the charita-

ble world would call "in his wild-oats age," and with torturing vividness brought back haunting ghosts that made his days days of weariness, his nights periods of wretchedness indeed.

In that long-ago he saw a fair-browed, loving-hearted girl, an orphan, dependent upon the charity of his own proud mother, wooed, won, betrayed, deserted, by a man whom the world bowed down to as the soul of honor; saw a crushed and almost dying woman pleading for a father's care for the child still unborn, — pleading to a man for whom a pure bride was then waiting, pure as the new-fallen snow; saw a stately, fair-browed girl standing before the altar with his own idolized first-born, from whose young lips his own hand must needs dash the brimming cup of happiness, and send the innocent out into a friendless world to suffer for the sins of the father; saw the boyish adoration that his only son had been wont to lavish upon him turn to dark distrust and sullen disrespect; saw it, and suffered for it; brooded over it, and over the probable punishment in store for his guilty soul, until the desire to bribe Heaven's mercy by tardy atonement grew and took entire possession of his soul.

What atonement could he make but the meagre one of acknowledging that third child, and lifting her from her life of drudgery to one of elegant leisure? — not publicly; for that would no more benefit her than leaving her in her present obscurity.

Part of his punishment should be a full confession to his boy Alfred. Alfred was a man, — a man of the world: he could understand, and mayhap forgive, that mad weakness of the long-ago, — if not forgive, at least condone; and with him he would leave the task of finding and dowering that lonely girl whom he had loved so disastrously. That was all he could do.

All! — and a most pitiful all it is, too, Philip Walworth, when weighed in the balance with a young life spent in loneliness and poverty, all the sweetness and brightness crushed out of it by your cruel hand.

This was the plan he had fully determined upon. But there was no need for immediate action. It was not a pleasant task to humiliate himself before his son. He would put off the evil day.

Despite his years, he was hale and active in the extreme; rode down town every day to gather up local items; gave orders to the workmen about his model farm; played his regulation games of cribbage with dutiful Mira, filling the hours systematically with regular employment, allowing no sign of his inward distress and perturbation to ruffle the outside calm of the stately structure that almost defied Time's defacing touch.

With Mira, the gentle calmness that distinguished her movements was internal as well. With a heart that knew no guile, at peace with God and her fellow-men, why should she not be calm? True, she was very lonely, now that Alfred, between whom and herself the tenderest devotion subsisted, had gone away, taking with him her bright-eyed pet, baby Felix, and the little sister-in-law, whose very helplessness had endeared her to Mira's heart. But her life was full of duties, — duties performed with cheerful alacrity and filial devotion, making her days pass without weariness, if without any great joy. And, then, had she not a rosy future ahead? Was there not a bright bow of promise making beautiful the morrow, — a glad promise of great joy to come? Must she needs be impatient because every thing was not in her grasp right now? Ah, no! she could wait; she could trust him. He was honest and true: her life upon that! He would come in his own good time; he would love her none the less for ranking him beneath her duty.

So she went about her quiet routine of daily duties with a sweetness, cheerfulness, and patience that promised well for her future lord's happiness; for "she will do him good, and not evil, all the days of her life."

Two months had fully elapsed since Alfred's removal South before any letters from him or his wife reached Chester. It was utterly impossible for Mr. Walworth and Mira, living as they did in a thickly-populated country, where the postal service was of some importance, to realize how miserably it was conducted in the obscure locality to which their relatives had removed: so they had remained a prey to the keenest anxiety.

Every morning would Mr. Walworth have himself driven in to Chester, returning about noon with the never-varying "Nothing yet, daughter. Be patient."

And at last her patience had its reward.

Mr. Walworth, returning one day sooner than usual, threw into her lap three letters from Louisiana.

"At last!" she cried, grasping her treasures with eager delight, and hastily scanning the superscription of each.

"One from Al, one from Maggie, and one — why, who?" Then that third letter disappeared mysteriously under Miss Walworth's little silk apron to find a haven of rest in the pocket of her dress while she prepared to read aloud the two family letters.

They were very long and very satisfactory, and very full of apologies for tardiness; and, having read and duly canvassed their contents with her lonely father, Mira stammered something deceitful about seeing to dinner, and sped away to the privacy of her own chamber to devour that third letter, whose authorship she rather guessed than knew.

With tremulous fingers did sweet Mira Walworth break the seal of the letter, in which patient Fred Somers, with infinite difficulty and laudable painstaking, had tried to convey to her in language creditable to himself in an intellectual way, and worthy of her in an angelic way, the new, startling, and totally unexpected revelation that he loved her.

It had cost the young man, with whom the gun was far mightier than the pen, a good half-hour, and several sheets of his mother's best satin paper brought direct from Paris, to decide upon the best style of address.

"Miss Walworth, honored Miss," was decidedly too Grandisonian to meet with Fred's approval, who was rather anti-Grandison than otherwise. "Miss Walworth" simply, sounded harsh and stern, as if he were about to arraign her for some sin of omission or commission. (Bless her pure soul! as if she *could* commit a sin!) Please accredit Mira's lover with that parenthesis. And yet, if he called her "Dear Miss Walworth," she might snub him for taking things too much for granted. He couldn't help it: she was dear. So here goes: —

"DEAR MISS MIRA, — This sheet of paper looks so cold, and ink is such an uncommonly unsympathetic sort of fluid, with its everlasting black looks, that I'm afraid what I want to say to you will reach you in a chilled and meaningless fashion, that will but poorly convey one-half I want to say

to you; for, if put on oath as to what I considered my most shining acquirement, I couldn't say letter-writing.

"But I do think, if I were sitting near enough to a little lady we both know right well to possess myself of one of the pink-tinted snowflakes she calls her hands, I would hold on to it until my clumsy tongue could manage to speak the words she forbade me to utter a year back.

"Mira, darling, haven't I waited long enough? Please say 'Yes,' and write to me to come. This is written with your brother's consent and cordial indorsement. A little encouragement from your own sweet lips is all that is wanting now to send me spinning from this to Chester, the happiest dog in Christendom.

"My inclinations would have led me to go on to you instead of writing; but, little and soft and gentle as you are, you have a trick of putting a fellow down, and keeping him at your pretty arm's-length, that isn't the most comfortable position for a man who loves you with a love that is nonest and true, my darling, and who asks nothing better of the Fates than permission to spend his life testifying to that fact. So, if there are any more duties that are incompatible with our immediate union, I think I can stand better to have you snub me through the post-office than when I'm close enough to you to be tempted by your sweet face into angry expostulations. I think I made it clear to you, over yonder in Europe, that I loved you very dearly; and now I would like to make it equally clear to you that I want you for my wife, and that with as little delay as your own kind heart will permit.

"It is not much that I'm offering you, sweet lady, in offering you the name and hand of Frederic Somers, who, at the best, is but a useless drone, for whose idle existence he oftentimes blushes, reaping where others have sowed, owning the very roof that shelters him to the misfortunes of others. But I vapor sometimes about the disgraceful sluggishness of my life, and talk of studying for a profession; and then my uncle opposes me, and tells me that his helplessness renders him dependent upon me for the honest administration of his extensive business. I think he does it as a sort of salve; upon which I quiet down, and try to convince myself that I am of some account in the world by being a faithful superintendent of his affairs. A noble occupation,

is it not, for a young and lusty man? But for an enervating, slothful, objectless life, commend me to that of a Southern boy with means or with expectations. I believe that's the worst part of me. I'm of no account for any thing in particular; but if you will be content to accept as your guide (no, that won't do; for you will have to do the guiding, you're such a deal better than myself), — if you'll take me for what I'm worth, I'll be good and true and loving to you until death comes to part us, (which God grant may not be until the beautiful brown hair that crowns the head of my beloved is silvered by the hand of Time!) till we've grown old together, Mira darling, in the full happiness of a union made in heaven: and then I would be the first to go; for this world would be but a dismal void unbrightened by the presence of my most well-beloved Mira.

"And now, dear lady, look not to the manner of this writing, but to the matter; and let your own kind heart dictate a speedy and favorable response."

A queer love-letter!

Perhaps. Nor is it likely ever to be admitted into the "Complete Letter-Writer," as a model for lovers, who are more burdened with emotions than ideas, to copy.

It was not a model, any more than was the young man who wrote it. But Mira Walworth did not view it with a critic's eye: she simply read it with a lover's interest.

And who would give a rush for a woman who *could* criticise her lover's letter?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A LIVING DEATH.

ONE blissfully long, tantalizingly short hour did the young girl indulge herself with, in which to read over, ponder, and decide upon her answer to the rambling but none the less comprehensive missive in her hands.

There was no beloved mother now to counsel and direct her, no affectionate sister to sympathize with her in her promised happiness. Her father, even, was not what he used to be to his children. In late years he was strangely cold and silent. She believed she was growing afraid of him. Would he think it very unnatural of her to want to marry? Of course, she would never leave him: she would convey that determination to Mr. Somers in her answer. Ought she to show his letter to her father? Could she do it? Would not the requirements of filial duty be satisfied by informing him of its object? She thought it would. How would her father receive it? Would he be harsh and stern, as some fathers seemed to think they must be when their daughters wanted to marry? How could he be harsh and stern when it was *him* she was going to marry? Poor father, lonely old man! A thousand husbands should not make her desert him. They would all three live together right there, in the old house near Chester; and Fred would fill up ever so nicely the void left by Alfred. In sixty minutes the pretty magician has arranged their three united lives to her own satisfaction; at the expiration of which time she sprang nimbly up, thrust her precious letter back in her pocket, resolutely put from her the delicious haze that threatened to envelop her mentally, and returned to the consideration of roast or boiled.

Duty was the watchword of Mira Walworth's life; and, in this supreme moment, it asserted its supremacy. Father's dinner should not come a moment later because of her love-dreams. Fred must yield to fricassee, matrimony to marmalade. The whole long delicious afternoon, the afternoons that she used so to dread, was before her for dreaming. Would the days ever be too long again? Would not each moment be so brimful of happiness, that it would fly only too swiftly for the fulness of enjoyment?

O Love, blessed Love, sanctifying, purifying, exalting Love, how dost thou gild the bright-winged moments! How beautiful does life become under thy magic touch! How poor and powerless and mean seem earth's heaviest trials if Love but sustain us through them all! how sweet and light and holy life's lowliest duty if but performed for Love's dear sake! The lesson that thou teachest is one soon learned by a gentle heart, never forgotten by the female heart.

Mira Walworth knew it very thoroughly, as became the pupil of so earnest a teacher as handsome Frederic Somers.

She peeped shyly into the library as she passed by it with her jingling key-basket on her way to prepare her father's favorite desert for dinner, by way of atonement, argued the tender little soul, for having lost sight of him for ever such a little while.

She could just see the top of his head as she peeped in. He was all right, taking his nap nicely: so she closed the door with the utmost gentleness, and proceeded about her household duties.

Not more than half an hour was she absent: then, hastily folding away the ample check apron that had effectually guarded her dainty dress from spot or stain while she concocted the day's desert, she returned to the library to fill up the interval before dinner by reading to her father, as was her daily custom.

"I staid a disgracefully long time, didn't I, father dear?" And, with the brightest of faces, she bent caressingly over the back of his chair to kiss his broad white forehead. Then a shriek of terror rang out clear and wild upon the atmosphere from the girl's frightened lips.

With a fierce grip, Philip Walworth's strong hands had clasped the arms of his chair; great swollen veins corded his

bloated, purple face; while over the blackened lips oozed a continuous flow of white froth.

With frenzied haste Mira rang for the servants. They came in a body. One she sent dashing off for a physician; another she despatched for their nearest neighbor: and then, returning to her stricken father, the brave girl heroically applied herself to wiping the oozing froth from the scorched-looking lips. It was all she could do, poor child! but she would not yield to her first cowardly impulse to fly from the torture of witnessing the suffering she could not relieve.

So she stood nobly by her unconscious parent, as he writhed in the agony of an apoplectic-fit, until help came in the persons of the family physician, their nearest neighbor, and his wife, — a motherly old lady, who took the shivering girl tenderly in her arms, and bore her away to her own room, where she promptly administered a powerful opiate, considering oblivion the happiest condition for her under the circumstances.

When Mira awoke, some hours later, she found this same kind friend sitting by her bedside; while upon her hearth-rug stood the doctor, regarding her with eyes full of pity.

"He is dead, he is dead! — and I left him to die alone!" she cried in wildest agony, springing to the floor as she spoke.

"He is nothing of the kind, dear child," answered the medical man, hastily coming forward while he spoke, and seizing her by both hands to detain her.

"Then why do you look at me so pitifully, as if you were all so sorry for me?" and the tender eyes upraised to the doctor's were blinded with great tears.

"Because, my poor little girl, you will have to make up your mind to something worse than death."

"But there is nothing worse than death!" cried Mira, with impatient misery in her voice. "Tell me the worst at once, please: I can bear it. I can bear any thing but to have him die."

"God has seen fit, child, to afflict your father with total paralysis of the lower extremities. He may live for years; but it will be a living death. At present, his arms alone retain any vitality. His tongue is paralyzed; but that, we hope, may be only temporary. I am doing as you asked me, — telling you the very worst at once. But I know you to be a brave,

good girl; and I believe God will help you to bear the burden of this affliction, which, poor child! will fall as heavily upon you as upon your unfortunate father."

"How can you say so?" cried Mira between her gusts of passionate sobbing. "How can you compare the hardships that this will entail upon me with the terrible prison-life of a living soul within a dead body? Father! — my poor, precious father! — if the untiring devotion of a lifetime, if your daughter's cheerful servitude, can lighten this hard visitation from the hand of God, then shall they be yours, — gladly, entirely, always yours!"

Tears stood in the physician's honest eyes as he pressed the two little hands he held within his own, and called her his little hero.

"May I go to him?" asked Mira.

"Not now: he sleeps."

"Then will you and dear Mrs. Weston forgive me if I beg to be left alone for a little while? I will join you, as soon as I can, in the sitting-room."

Her two friends left her.

Then, for a while, the storm of grief raged tempestuously within the poor girl's breast.

Her first and keenest suffering was pure, unselfish lamentation for the terrible fate that had descended upon her father; and it was in terms of violent reproach that she acknowledged the presence of another and distinct source of suffering.

Once more must her bright dream of love and happiness be put away from her: this time forever; for she could not bid him wait again. Her life was bound up now in the helpless one of her father's. Frederic's spring-time of happiness need not be blighted too. He must give up all thoughts of her, and seek happiness with some other more favored daughter of earth. She would write to him all this that very night; and it was for strength to do it without a murmur, even a silent heart-murmur, that she went down on her knees, and prayed to God.

Whether or not her prayer was answered, or whether a plaintive heart-murmur did breathe through her letter, in spite of her brave resolve, judge for yourself.

"BEST OF FRIENDS, — And such God grant we may both

be until time has silvered both our heads! But more than that it seems his divine will we shall not be.

"Happiness seems such a far-away, dreamy sort of thing to me now, that I can write to you of the happiness you did give me, without being over-bold.

"Your letter, dear Mr. Somers, made me very happy, — so happy, that I think, for a little while, I forgot every thing in the world but just you and me and our love.

"I had hoped some day to get just such a letter from you; but, when it came, it seemed to bring with it such a holy calm, such a blessed assurance that all my future was to be one bright, glad day of unspeakable happiness, that I think I forgot that there was a God above who works in most mysterious ways.

"I know, that, if my angel-mother could speak to me to-night, she would bid me remember that 'He doeth all things well.' I will try to think he does. But it is hard, my dearest, so hard, to have to give you up entirely! I say, entirely: for I do not love you with a selfish love, dear Frederic (my heart shall have full scope for just this once); and I would not go to your arms, promising to be a help-meet to you, when your claims upon me must always rank second to my father's. It has pleased Heaven to visit my poor father with a terrible affliction.

"He is a hopeless paralytic. His heart beats, his brain works, his soul suffers, in a dead body. Can you conceive of a greater horror? And can I, his only daughter, think of taking upon me new ties, new duties, while he needs me so sorely? Your heart may rebel against my determination to cleave unto him, and put from me your own beloved self; but your upright soul will pronounce my decision the only one compatible with a daughter's duty.

"If I could have married you, the aim of my life would have been to render yours of some value in this world. I know too well the temptation to idleness and sloth that a well-filled purse is to a young man. But there are avenues of usefulness open even to the favored ones of the earth. I had my dreams about helping you find these, dear friend; but it is otherwise ordained. I could not be a help-meet now if I were yours.

"So long as my father lives, I will never marry. But not for a moment would I seek to clog your life with the heavy weight that has almost brought mine to a stand-still.

"You are young, handsome, attractive. The world is before you to choose from. I am not so vain as to think my insignificant self can have taken such a hold upon you that you will not be able to conquer the disappointment that I know I am giving you in this letter: so, in time, *you* may be very happy. God grant that you may be!

"I will not be so insincere as to say I hope it may be soon; for I love you, Frederic Somers, dearly enough to feel at this moment the most savage jealousy of the woman who shall usurp my place in the heart that a cruel decree compels me to resign. But in time, maybe (mind, it is only a maybe), I might come to feel kindly toward her. I know I could if she made you very happy. I — that is, I think I could.

"And now will you write to me a good strong letter, telling me that I am right, that you are sorry for me, and that you will be my friend for all time to come? Help me, O my beloved! — help me to bear this hard burden: for, though my spirit is willing, my flesh is very, very weak; and it is a grievous, hard burden to bear. Help me to say, 'Thy will be done!' for of my own repining self I cannot say it.

"Once more, good-by! Lovingly, sorrowfully, your friend: only this, and nothing more."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN ANSWER TO AN ANSWER.

WITH this letter Mira despatched one to her brother, detailing the particulars of the affliction that had befallen their father, and conveying an urgent request from the paralytic that his son would come on and help him to arrange some pressing business-matters.

Fully three weeks had elapsed since the mailing of the two letters, — three weeks of wearing, patient, devoted attention to the stricken man, whose largest liberty was the power of using his hands and the recovered faculty of speech.

Night had closed in. His attendants had just wheeled his chair through the sitting-room door into his own sleeping-apartment to dispose of his helpless body for the night. Mira's duties for the day were over. Wheeling a low ottoman in front of the fire, she cast her weary body down upon the soft rug; laid her arms upon the ottoman; and, drooping her head upon them, she allowed the tears, that she kept bravely out of her father's sight during the day, to fall unchecked. Life was so dreary, so lonely, so joyless! Was she very wicked because her disappointed heart would repine over the might-have-been? She tried to be strong and cheerful: was it her fault that she did not always succeed?

"O mother, mother! If God had only taken me, and left you!"

"Poor little sister! Is it so miserable as to wish for death?" And tenderly she was folded in a pair of strong

arms, while on her brother's breast she sobbed her grief away.

"I feel better now, dear Alfred, since you've come to help me bear it. I ought not to keep you from poor father any longer. He may be asleep: don't wake him if he is." And, resolutely wiping her glittering lashes, Mira lifted her head from her brother's breast, and pointed to the door leading into her father's chamber.

"Some one has come with me, Mi, to help you bear this too, if you will let him. — Fred!"

From the other end of the long drawing-room, in whose obscurity he had delicately remained out of sight while Mira was so overwhelmed, Mr. Somers advanced eagerly in answer to his friend's call. A suspicious moisture glittered in the fine eyes that were fixed upon the face of the girl he loved, full of tenderest admiration and ineffable pity. Alfred left them alone, passing through the door into his father's presence.

"Was this wise?" asked Mira, extending two small, trembling hands, as she raised her tear-stained eyes to her lover's handsome face.

"Do love and wisdom ever go together?" asked Fred, smiling gently down upon the sweet, sad face, as he clasped the two little hands in one of his own; and, drawing her daringly into the shelter of his arms, he pressed a tender kiss upon the mouth that had just given him such a doubtful welcome.

Then Mira's ready tears sprang afresh. That quiet taking possession of her had given her just the faintest foretaste of the sweetness of being loved and sheltered. But the tears that she shed, with his arm around her, while one of his hands smoothed the soft hair from her flushed forehead with a touch almost womanly in its gentleness, were bereft of half their pain. They did not scorch and wither and drain her heart as the tears she shed when alone and unpitied. His dear sympathy assuaged her grief in a marvelous fashion.

"My poor darling! And you fancied yourself strong enough to dispense with me, did you?"

"I have dispensed with you; but I didn't do it by way of proving my strength. I did it because I wasn't selfish in my love." She was sitting by his side on the sofa, her little hand lying passively in his.

"Do I look like a man that had been dispensed with?" asked Fred, raising her face so that her eyes met his fully.

A shy, tender glance, and a pretty pink flush on the sweet face, was all the answer he got.

"And you thought your letter was the closing paragraph to our love-tale, did you, little lady?"

"It was the closing paragraph."

"This looks very much like it, don't it?" And, with the utmost deliberation, he folded the small form in his strong arms.

"Cruel! You taunt me with the weakness of indulging my starved heart for this one only time;" and the glance he received from the eyes he so dearly loved was full of reproach and indignation.

"I charge you with nothing, my precious little wife that is to be, save with total lack of confidence in the strength and durability of my love."

In rosy confusion, Mira turned her head aside; but she ceased struggling to extricate herself from the clasp that was so deliciously firm.

"Now listen to me," said Fred with an air of almost marital authority. "Your brother and myself have most fully discussed this whole thing on our way hither. You are not to be allowed to sacrifice yourself to an overweening sense of duty. While this terrible affliction is new to your father, I could not ask you to enter upon new duties. And I do not propose to be an ogre, who expects his wife to perform the duties of an upper servant: in fact, I don't know what the duties, which you talk about so prettily, will consist of, besides always looking your prettiest; having a sweet smile for me whenever I come for one; exercising your patience toward my many shortcomings and my dogs; also jingling around with a key-basket by way of looking important."

"You don't know what you are talking about!" said Mira, the model housekeeper, indignantly; smiling, though, for the first time in weeks.

"Don't I? Well, then, you needn't jingle the key-basket. But let me go on. Alfred and I have arranged, that, at the end of the year, we are to get married."

"You and Alfred?" asked the young lady demurely.

Fred was luminous at the idea of having coaxed a hu-

morous assault from his depressed little lady-love: so he readily forgave the fling at his eloquence.

"Which will give me, you see, an opportunity to arrange things, so that my uncle's business will not suffer."

"It is Alfred's desire that your father should be removed to Belton, if" —

"That would never do!" said Mira hastily. "Maggie could not half take care of him."

"Well, my darling," answered Fred cheerfully, "things are a little mixed at present; and there is no knowing what will happen before the year has expired. But I have brought something along with me, by way of sealing my ownership to this most coveted little treasure." And he raised the hand lying in his own tenderly to his lips.

"You love me?"

"With all my heart and soul."

"You are willing to be mine; and, by this ring of promise, I do most solemnly swear to wait patiently for my beloved Mira until we can be joined together in the sight of man in God's own good time."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALFRED LEARNS THE TRUTH.

WHEN Alfred Walworth had so considerably and wisely left the task of comforting his sister to Frederic Somers, betaking himself into his father's presence, strong man as he was, he actually started at the fearful change disease had wrought in the magnificent *physique* before him.

It seemed as if a decade might have passed over his father's head, every year ploughing its own deep furrow in the high, broad forehead, and planting fresh wrinkles round the handsome eyes. Physical suffering had drawn and contracted his mouth into a fixed expression of cynicism; and there was an air of helpless wretchedness about the whole man that touched his son's heart, and caused his manner, as he advanced toward the chair of the paralytic, to savor more of the old-time deference than Philip Walworth had received from his boy since that ill-fated night, four years gone now, when he had torn his beloved Esther from his arms.

"Father, this is sad indeed! From my soul I feel for you."

"Thank you, boy; thank you! I am glad you've come. I've wanted to see you. I want to talk to you; to tell you something; to do an act of tardy justice. It is never too late to do good, is it? Send those fellows out."

Alfred dismissed the attendants, telling them he would ring for them when his father needed them to complete his preparations for retiring, which his own arrival had interrupted.

"Come close to me. *Théré!* now promise to listen to me

very patiently, and as kindly as you can, my boy; for it is no easy task I've set myself: but justice requires it; and I think there's One above will approve of what I am going to do."

"Justice to whom, father?"

"To Esther Brandon."

Alfred started violently, and his face crimsoned at this unexpected answer.

"Do you love that girl yet, Alfred?" A look of distress flitted across the father's brow; for it was only too evident that his son could not even hear that name spoken without emotion.

"I shall die loving her with the maddest, truest, wickedest passion that was ever wasted on a woman!" was Alfred Walworth's passionate answer.

"God help me! my task is a very hard one. But the painful story I am about to tell you may help you to overcome your ill-fated love for that poor girl. Heaven grant it may!"

"Hold, father! Are you going to tell me any thing against Esther Brandon?"

"Nothing. Esther Brandon, for all I know to the contrary, is all that even your ardent fancy paints her."

"Then I am ready to listen to you. But are you equal to the exertion?"

"The physical effort is nothing; and, if I take time to think much more about it, I may never tell it. Now or never."

"Now, then, let it be," answered Alfred, rolling his chair, as requested, close enough to his father's to hear distinctly every word of the following confession, delivered in a slow, labored manner by the enfeebled paralytic:—

"At the age of twenty-one, Alfred, I was what people call a fast young man. Nor was it much wonder. I was the only child of a very weak mother, whose unlimited means enabled her to gratify every desire of her boy's heart, however unreasonable; and whose highest ambition seemed gratified by seeing me lionized and petted by fashionable women, while I led the *ton* of fashionable young men.

"When I returned from college, I found that my mother had domesticated with her a young girl, an orphan, a distant relation of my father's, whose beauty far surpassed any thing

I had ever seen in the fashionable circles which I frequented.

"Her position was that of a dependant in my mother's house. She was housekeeper and lady's companion; reading to mother, whose eyesight was failing, and riding out with her on her airings and shopping expeditions. Of course, she was poor in the extreme.

"I fell in love with her, — honestly, madly in love with her. I would gladly have married her, and said as much to my mother. Never before did I know what reserves of harshness and obstinacy there were in her apparently yielding nature.

"Her wrath was terrible. She upbraided me with ingratitude, with grovelling tastes, with low desires. She anathematized poor Amy Wharton as a bold, unscrupulous adventuress, who had thrown her wiles around me, and was striving to entrap me into a marriage, because of my wealth and social station. I defended her stoutly, and avowed my intention to marry her if she would have me. I was hot-tempered and disrespectful. I left home for a day or two: when I returned, Amy had been banished to parts unknown. A tender little note from her, however, imploring me not to let her breed discord between me and the mother who so idolized me, revealed to me her whereabouts. I followed her up; I forced from her the confession that my love was reciprocated, and bound her by a solemn oath to wait for me until I could marry her. Then I tried persuasion on my mother: she was wrathfully obdurate. I had a confidant in my trouble: it was a fast young man about town, a former college chum of mine. I went to him for sympathy: he gave me sympathy and advice. He proposed a secret marriage. 'Mother would worm the secret out of the Devil,' I answered him; 'and I don't know that I am quite ready to be cast adrift with empty pockets, even for Amy Wharton's sake.' — 'Probably; but not out of me,' was his significant reply. 'It is the girl you want, isn't it?' I told him that it was. 'Well, I can splice you as well as any black-coat; and then, you know, there's no danger of my turning State's evidence. And it will be all the same to her: she won't know that I'm not a right reverend and all that sort of thing.' Looking back on it now, it all looks black enough: then it struck us both in the light of a charming *escapade*, —

something that all the other 'bloods' would call 'deused clever,' and women would smile at behind their fans, reserving all their frowns and condemnation for the one innocent participant in the whole affair. It was not difficult of accomplishment; for the innocent child loved me so ardently, that I found it easy enough to convince her that there was no sin in marrying me privately, and waiting for me to win my mother's pardon for us both. My chum performed the ceremony that gave me full possession of the object of my passion. For over a year I lived a life of uneasiness and growing anxiety, enjoying by snatches of weeks, sometimes only days, the charming society of the innocent creature who fondly believed herself my wedded wife; but never yet had I been able to muster the courage requisite to a full confession to my mother, who had grown tender and loving again, now that she thought I had given Amy Wharton up entirely.

"It was about this time, my son, that your angel-mother came across my pathway. Then, for the first time, I knew what pure, undefiled love meant. I knew, that, with her for my wife, life would have a truer, better flavor than it had ever yet possessed for one who spent his time in mad orgies, in uncontrolled enjoyment of whatever offered. I proposed for her hand, and was accepted. I had never yet broken off my connection with Amy Wharton; but, from the night on which your mother promised to be my wife, I never returned to her. I knew her shrinking disposition too well to fear any thing from her. I wrote to her, confessed the fraud I had practised upon her, implored her forgiveness, and offered to salve her wounds with a handsome settlement. I received no answer to my letter. My mother was feverishly anxious to see my marriage with Miss Stanley consummated without delay. We were engaged but a few months. On my wedding-night I received a strange summons: it was to Amy Wharton's death-bed, or, rather, what was then thought to be her death-bed. I obeyed the summons, which was simply a call from a physician of some note to follow the messenger to a certain house. With my pure bride waiting for me, I went. They showed me into a chamber; and there, wan and perishing, lay Amy Wharton. She told me, that, for herself, she had nothing to ask; but she pleaded for kindness and care for the child that she was about to give birth

to. I was horror-stricken. What could I do? Nothing but promise what she asked, and get away from her as soon as I could. I went back to the physician in attendance. He told me then, what he said he had not been courageous enough to tell her, that she had not twenty-four hours to live. He was more than positive she would die before day-break. I heaved a sigh of murderous relief. She was a living reproach to me: her death would remove that reproach. There would be no child born: the man of science was ready to stake his reputation upon that. I wrote out a check for a thousand dollars for her use. 'If she needs more, let me know,' I said. Then I went back to my bride. We were married, and left the next day for a bridal-tour to Europe. I never heard again of Amy Wharton. Of course she had died that night. Twenty-four years of peaceful happiness I had spent with your angel-mother, when your sister came home from school, bringing with her Esther Brandon, whose remarkable likeness to Amy Wharton almost deprived me of the power of speech when I first saw her. But, when I discovered that she was Mira's age, I knew it could be but a chance likeness; for Amy Wharton had died years before Mira's birth. I was willing for you to marry this young girl, penniless as she was; for I remembered my own boyish passion, and the woe springing from injudicious opposition. I satisfied myself by a rigid cross-examination that she was nothing to Amy Wharton. When I went to New York, just before your marriage was to have been consummated, Esther gave me an old bracelet which she said had been her mother's, asking me to have it made smaller. The jeweller drew my attention to the fact that he would have to cut through a curious inscription on the inside of it. I had not seen the trinket before, having handed the box to him just as I received it from Esther. At his request I took it to examine the inscription. In cipher were the words, 'My Amy,' — a sophomorical inscription I had caused to be engraven in one of my love-tokens.

"Esther Brandon, then, was Amy Wharton's child. How to account for the discrepancy in age I did not try. In mad haste I whirled home in time to prevent your union. I hunted up the physician before alluded to. He informed me, that, contrary to his expectations, his patient had recovered, and had left his charge six weeks after my visit, with her

one-month-old infant. Then my last doubts were removed. The rest you know. I believe my days are numbered. I would do that poor child some sort of justice. I wish to divide my property evenly between you, your sister Almira, and my natural daughter, Esther Brandon."

A dead silence fell upon the air. Nothing was audible but Alfred Walworth's heavy breathing, as with bowed head, and gloomy eyes fixed upon the glowing coals, he sat listening to this strange recital.

Philip Brandon spoke again.

"Have you not one word for me, boy?"

"Not one, by G-d! in extenuation of the society-scurdrelism that let the perpetrators of a most foul wrong go scot-free, but fell with a crushing weight upon the trembling shoulders of a poor, weak girl, whose heart is as pure, whose soul as exalted, as any saint's in heaven."

"I would offer her atonement."

"Atonement!" cried Alfred, his bearded lip curling with scorn ineffable. "How little, sir, do you know of the nature of proud Esther Brandon, to dare think of offering her atonement for her mother's betrayal, her own stained life! 'Twould take a braver man than I to face her with the bare offer of moneyed atonement."

"Then my humiliating confession has been all in vain."

"Not so," answered his son; "for it has vindicated my exalted estimate of Esther Brandon's character, and has enabled me to charge my blighted life to the proper source."

"Your blighted life, boy! What do you mean?"

"Yes, my blighted life. What am I but a most successful failure? Where are all the high aims, the grand plans, the brilliant hopes, with which I started out in life? Gone, dead, buried in the grave of my ill-starred love for Esther Brandon. She was the light of my life, its inspiration. When I lost her, I lost every incentive to ambition. What am I but a social drone? — a man who eats and drinks, and spends money, and rides fast horses, and has sound credit at the banker's, and devil a thing more creditable. So, if it is any disappointment to you — and, God knows, I hope that it is — to know that the sole representative of the Walworth name is a failure, charge it in a retributive way to yourself and the fast young blood, who, with you, concocted the manly scheme of enticing an ignorant girl into a fraudulent marriage before my advent into this accursed world."

"Alfred, Alfred, my son! I shall not be here long. Do not harden your heart against me. My crime was not such a heinous one, that you, a man, cannot find it in your heart to excuse" —

"Stop, father!" cried the young man impetuously. "You are speaking now as a man of the world to another man of the world. I know how society winks at such things. I know that you have gone through life honored and respected by men, admired by women, beloved to the end of life by one of God's purest and best creatures, — my own angelic mother. I doubt, if the whole world had known it, if you would have received one token of respect the less; or, at most, a little transient condemnation might have been meted out to you by the very persons who would have hounded your victim out of society as unworthy to touch the hem of their garments. But I take the liberty of coming to issue with society on this point; and when I think of Esther Brandon, — a woman of fine intellect, proud nature, tender heart, — and fancy what she must suffer, and has suffered, for the sins of her father, I could find it in me to curse the maker and merciless executor of that most monstrous decree."

Then Philip Walworth remained silent, following the impetuous motions of his son, as he strode up and down the room in impatient wrath, with wistful, pleading eyes.

In one of his revolutions, Alfred caught this sad glance. A sudden impulse brought him to the side of his stricken father. He held out his hand.

"Father, I think God is punishing you already for Amy Wharton's ruin. You have been a good parent to me; and, for the sake of the dear saint who loved us both, I will try to remember that it is not my province to sit in judgment on your misdeeds. Forgive me for the angry bitterness my feelings have betrayed me into. I am glad you have told me the whole truth. I think it will help me in more ways than one. Now I will leave you for the night." And, ringing in the attendants, he bade his father good-night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ANIMATED SYMBOLS.

HAS it never struck you, reader mine, the curious resemblance that frequently presents itself between things animate and inanimate? I hope it has; for I prefer not being held solely responsible for the assertion, that some human beings are nothing more nor less than animated symbols.

Has not almost every family its bolster? — the family bolster generally being a tender-hearted old maid, whose unappropriated energies are employed in bolstering the weak, encouraging the flagging, sustaining the drooping, aiding and abetting in all good works, a comfort and a convenience, as are all good bolsters.

Then there are the "finished" demoiselles of the fashionable circle. What are they more than pretty pictures, fair to look upon with their graceful outlines and dainty color combinations; splendid ornaments with which to enrich a parlor, seeing always to it that the frame in which they be set is richly gilt; masterpieces, outlined by the hand of Nature, filled up and colored by the artistic hand of madame the *modiste*; elegant luxuries within reach only of the wealthy amateur collector?

Then I know a duster, — a soft, dainty, motherly feather-duster, that perambulates about of itself, cleansing all things, brightening dingy spots, purifying the home atmosphere, carrying comfort, pleasure, and good cheer with it in its feathery peregrinations, brushing away the moths of discontent that darken the sunshine of home, waging war upon all the enemies of domestic comfort, until the children of its generation are ready to rise up and call it blessed.

Alfred Walworth had taken unto himself a grater for a wife, — a pretty, pink-complexioned, blue-eyed, golden-haired, soft-voiced woman, to the eye; but, to all intents and purpose, a genuine human grater, who rasped and grated with a persistent industry worthy of a better cause, and with a sublime unconsciousness of the mischievous tendency of that industry that was peculiarly feminine.

If any one had presented a picture of her home-life to Maggie Walworth in the form of a syllogism, thus, — "We desire to torture only those whom we hate: you torture your chosen lord persistently; therefore you hate your chosen lord," — she would have hurled the spiteful logic back at one in a burst of indignant denial, have shed copious showers of outraged tears, and have loudly proclaimed her wifely devotion to that chosen lord.

And she did love him, — loved him dearly; loved him, and made him miserable. Is Mrs. Alfred Walworth *sui generis*?

Was she to blame for being a grater? Or was Mr. Walworth to blame for having failed to ascertain any thing beyond the leading items, — that Miss Maggie Vincent was of unexceptionable family and undoubted wealth? Rather, were not both to blame for forgetting that they had taken each other for better or for worse?

Had they not have been the happier for a personal application of St. Paul's good advice, — "Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise, also, the wife unto the husband"?

Your pardon, dear reader, for this prosy moralizing: my better judgment pronounces it both unwise and unpopular.

When the letter announcing the family trouble in Chester reached Belton, Alfred went into his wife's presence to read it to her, and to inform her of the necessity for his immediate compliance with his sister's summons home.

He found her worshipping at the shrine of her idol. A soft Afghan was spread upon the carpet before the nursery-fire, upon which lay baby Felix deep in the mystery of his crimson clad toes; while Maggie was curled up on the Afghan behind him, patiently coaxing a dozen hairs of one inch in length to curl round her slender white finger. A pretty picture the two made, — the child-mother and her child-sovereign.

Mrs. Walworth glanced up as the door opened to admit her husband.

"Shut the door quick, please: the draught will blow on baby."

Mr. Walworth had long since learned to regulate his hand, feet, voice, desires, and inclinations to suit the needs and convenience of his royal majesty, the ruler of all the Walworths. So he shut the door with such indiscreet haste, that a startling bang was the natural consequence.

Baby Felix, who had inherited a most unreasonable set of nerves from his mother, started, glanced toward the intruding monster, turned for refuge to the maternal haven, finally giving expression to his dissatisfaction by puckering up his rosebud of a mouth in an injured fashion, saying, as plainly as a young gentleman could whose command of language was rather limited, "Isn't he a rude monster to frighten my infant soul in that fashion?" The puckered mouth was enough for the intense mother.

"My poor angel, mother might have known he would have banged it as hard as he could. Next time mother will shut it herself, and she'll try to remember that babies have baby-nerves."

"I have a letter here from Mira, Maggie, which contains bad news," said Alfred, ignoring the insinuation thrown out, that he had not remembered the important fact that babies have baby-nerves.

The magic word "news" was potent enough to cause Mrs. Walworth to gather herself and baby up from the Afghan, and seat herself in a rocking-chair; inquiring eagerly, "What is it?"

"Father has been struck with paralysis."

"Horrible!" ejaculated Maggie. "But that is better than dying," she added, essaying the comforter.

"I disagree with you: I should consider death far preferable."

"Of course, you disagree with me: I have yet to see you agree with me."

"I am not in an argumentative mood just now," replied her husband coldly. "I came to let you know that I shall have to go on to Chester immediately."

"What! And drag baby and me back over that horrible journey we are not yet rested from?"

"I have no notion of taking you and the boy with me."

"Leave us here all by ourselves, to be murdered by your horrid black slaves!" cried Mrs. Walworth in a frenzy of unreasonableness.

"Leave you here? — yes. All by yourselves? — no. The overseer and his wife are within stone's-throw of you, and can, if you desire it, occupy one of the up-stairs rooms during my absence. As for your being murdered by my horrid black slaves, I think the white race would be improved by the possession of their gentle disposition and kindly nature."

"That means me, of course. You never omit an opportunity to assure me of my inferiority; but I hardly expected even you to say that I wasn't half as good as your negroes."

"I am not aware of having made any such remarkable assertion. Shall I request the overseer to move over for your protection during my absence?"

"Have that great common wretch tramping his mud all over my hall oil-cloth and my stair-carpet? No, I thank you! Of the two evils, I believe I prefer being murdered in my bed by your kind-natured negroes."

"I think loneliness will be the only calamity you are in danger of. Suppose" —

"Loneliness!" interrupted the pretty grater with lugubrious sarcasm. "I am sure I ought to be used to that by this time; for what with your overseers, and your crops, and your dog-training and deer-hunting, it is little enough I see of you as it is. It's a wonder sometimes you don't forget how your own wife and child look."

"If you ever gave any indication that my company was a source of pleasure to you, probably I should inflict myself upon you oftener; but I am generally made to feel like an unwelcome intruder. If the baby is asleep, I must tip-toe; if he's going to sleep, I mustn't say a word. I mustn't smoke, cough, nor sneeze: in fact, I mustn't do any thing but remember the baby."

"Of course I am an ogress for attending to my child's actual wants properly," replied the injured wife.

"Not at all, Margaret; but are wifely and motherly duties totally incompatible?"

"That's right, — accusation upon accusation. I knew you were perfectly furious about something when you banged the door so after you. But where's the use of having a wife if you can't take out all your spite on her?"

"I was not accusing you, Margaret: I was only excusing myself."

"There! I said you were perfectly furious. You never call me Margaret until you get to hating me."

"Silly child!"

"I'm not a silly child: I'm a wretched woman."

"Wretched woman, then!" said Alfred, trying to jest her childish anger away. "I was about to propose that you should invite Miss Cally to spend with you the two weeks I shall be absent. She seems to be a cheerful soul."

"Cheerful! I call it fidgety. She would give me the St. Vitus's dance before she'd been here two days."

"Curse it!" cried the exhausted husband: "that is my last suggestion. Here you stay: now suit yourself with a companion."

Mrs. Walworth looked at her husband with calm dignity, which was generally the *rôle* she assumed promptly after having completely robbed him of both calmness and dignity.

"I don't think, Mr. Walworth, in the whole circle of my acquaintances, there figures another man who cannot, just cannot, discuss any subject quietly and amicably with his wife, without winding up with a coarse burst of profanity. It is sincerely to be hoped that you will have learned to control your temper by the time our angel-boy is of an age to take his father for an exemplar."

"It is sincerely to be hoped," was Alfred's gloomy response, "that, before that time shall have arrived, I shall have found rest from this wearing existence in the grave, and you may select as my successor a more fitting exemplar for the boy than his own unhappy father."

Swiftly as a bird on the wing, Maggie deposited her precious burden upon his crib; then, speeding back to the husband whose soul she had been grating upon with baleful industry for the past hour, she threw her arms tenderly around his neck, substituting caresses for abuse.

"Take back those cruel words, my husband, or I will cry my eyes out."

"But I meant what I said: therefore retraction is unnecessary."

"Meant that you wanted to die, and leave poor baby and me!"

"Meant that it would be no hardship to me, no loss to you."

"You sha'n't talk so;" and, in a passion of grief, Alfred Walworth's child-wife threw herself into his passive arms.

"Alfred," presently.

"Well."

"Don't you love me a bit?"

"I don't know. You make it deused hard work sometimes."

"Please say 'Yes.'"

"Yes."

"And, Alfred, don't you believe I love you dearly?"

"You have a queer way of showing it, if you do."

"But I do."

Silence pregnant with incredulity.

"Please say you believe I do."

"You believe I do," echoed Alfred meaninglessly.

"Hateful!—to laugh at me!"

"Shall I cry with you?"

"No; but you can pity me."

"I don't think you need pity."

"But I do."

"For what?"

"For having a husband who don't love me; who is either sneering at me or laughing at me all the time; for having to go through life famishing for happiness, but never possessing it; for having been torn from the bosom of a doting family, and sent into exile to die of a broken-heart," was Mrs. Walworth's melodramatic *finale*.

"You have forgotten your chief claim to pity, my wife."

"What is it?" asked Maggie, brightening at the prospect of another grievance.

"The curse of a totally unreasoning nature. For that I pity you,—pity you heartily and sincerely. But we are alike objects of pity, Margaret, in being married, but not mated. Yours, maybe, is the harder lot of the two. It grieves me that nothing but my death can release you. Divorces, you know, are not exactly the genteel thing; and, however miserable we may be, let us be genteel. According to the world, for which I know you entertain the most profound respect, better lead the life of the infernal regions in private than come out boldly, declare your

burden too grievous to be borne, and legally rid yourself of it. Therefore, sorry as I am for you and for myself, there is no help for us: for we both swore very solemnly before God's altar to make each other miserable until death did us part; and, by the Eternal! I think you've carried out your part of the contract like a soldier."

Subdued and remorseful, Maggie sobbed out her promises to be more amiable and reasonable; and, to her credit be it told, she faithfully kept that promise until—the next time.

On the day succeeding this by no means novel entertainment, Mr. Walworth had left for Chester, as we have already seen, accompanied by Mr. Somers.

CHAPTER XL.

CONTAINS A REVELATION.

It was mail-day for the Oaks and for Belton. The postal arrangements down on Le Noir were primitive in the extreme. A rude shanty, called, for grandeur, a "warehouse," stood upon the banks of the little river, and was occupied by a responsible individual, who received and stored all freight intended for the various plantations in the vicinity, and took charge of such mail-matter as was forwarded from the nearest distributing-office, distributing the same in his turn as called for.

On the day in question, the mail messenger from the Oaks received from the responsible individual at the warehouse a letter for Madame Estella Somers, and a newspaper for the master of the Oaks, both of which were fraught with more than ordinary interest.

Mr. Etheridge was indulging in an after-dinner siesta when the messenger returned; and his sister was the sole occupant of the library, whither she repaired to read her letter undisturbed: for the Frenchy address, and the unfamiliar calligraphy, assured her, before she broke the seal, that she held in her hand the anxiously-looked-for answer to her letter of inquiry respecting Esther Brandon's early history.

Mrs. Somers was in a peculiarly complaisant frame of mind. Things were going just to suit her of late. The growing friendship and intimacy between her son and Mrs. Golding's handsome governess pleased her well. It was evident that Frederic liked Esther better and better, the

more he saw of her (bear in mind that Mrs. Somers was not in the secret of the pact between Mira's two friends). Proximity was every thing in affairs of this kind. And, although Frederic had gone on to see the other one, she felt confident, from the tenor of Miss Walworth's letter, that nothing could induce her to enter into a matrimonial engagement with any one during her afflicted father's lifetime. She had lauded the young girl's heroic determination to the skies, when Fred, as was his wont, had brought her his lady-love's letter to read and pass judgment upon. How tenderly and pathetically had she dwelt upon filial reverence, and a daughter's duty, and the beauty of self-sacrifice, and the necessity for patience, &c. !—with what triumphant success, witness her son's prompt action in engaging himself to the object of his love.

But that untoward fact was as yet unknown to Mrs. Somers: hence her complacency. Every thing was working just to suit her. Proximity was two-thirds of the chances for winning the game: Mira absent, Essie present, was the other third. So she might as well consider it already won. And she should so consider it, provided the contents of the letter in her hand should prove it worth her while to play it out. To the letter, then:—

"MADAME ESTELLA SOMERS, — It is with pleasure most unspeakable that I hasten to give you what meagre information I have at my command concerning the early history of my dear pupil, Esther Brandon; for you assure me you desire to do her good. And I rejoice at the prospect of any good befalling that sweet and most deserving child. I regret only that I cannot tell you more, fearing that the little I know myself will aid but slightly in clearing up the mystery that enshrouds my poor Esther's early years. In the long-ago, when my school was just beginning to pay me handsomely, there was brought to me by a Mr. Richard Walworth a young girl of about fifteen years of age, exceedingly beautiful, to be educated. She was the orphan-child of a very dear but distant relation of his, he told me, whom he was going to educate, and then provide for in life. Her name was Amy Wharton; and never was teacher blessed with sweeter, brighter, or more docile pupil. She remained with me three years; at the end of which time, the

widow of the good Mr. Walworth who had brought her to me came and took her away.

"Then she passed out of my knowledge entirely for ten long years; when what was my astonishment one day to have her come back to me a broken-hearted, sad-faced woman, bringing with her a sweet little girl of five years old, or, maybe, a little more! My old pupil was very miserable; but, for reasons best known to herself, she would tell me only just so much of her trouble as was necessary to secure my assistance.

" 'A monstrous wrong,' she told me, was about to be done her. Her child was to be taken away from her during that year. She wanted to leave it with me until she could win her husband back to love and mercy; which she could do, poor thing! she wildly declared, now that he was calm enough to listen to her. What her husband's name was she would not tell. I judged he was a Southerner from her allusions to 'down South.' She went away confident of returning in triumph for her child within the year. When she clasped the babe to her bosom for the last caress, she murmured words of comfort into the little ears that were too young to comprehend them. 'Mamma and papa are coming back together for their darling,' was what she said; then tore herself away, and almost ran from the presence of her little forlorn one. She was very fragile at the time. Death, I fear, overtook her before the accomplishment of her design; for she never came back for that child, who was Esther Brandon: whether that really be her name, or not, I cannot say. The jewels which Amy left with me, and which I sold for her child's support, betokened her husband to be a man of wealth. One bracelet of all the lot I saved as a keepsake for the forsaken child. That bracelet is in Miss Brandon's keeping.

" Hoping, my dear madame, that the good God will aid you in your noble efforts to right my sweet Esther at last, I remain yours,
" ROSALIE CELESTINE."

With the most absorbing interest did Mrs. Somers read this letter, which removed the last shadow of a doubt that Esther Brandon was really the daughter of Roger Etheridge, whom she, for her own son's sake, had defrauded of name, home, and fortune. Restitution was now her aim.

By Frederic's union with his beautiful cousin, the girl whom she had so wronged would be restored to home and fortune; and Roger Etheridge would gain in Frederic's wife a tender-hearted, loving niece, who would be to him in reality all that she could be as an acknowledged daughter. Nothing in heaven or earth now must be allowed to interfere with the marriage of those two. And such was Estella Somers's divine faith in her own powers, that not a fear for the result found resting-place in her wily bosom. The one human being from whom she had any thing to fear, old Dinah, had been kindly removed out of her pathway by her great ally, Death: so not a cloud disturbed the summer of her content.

The closing paragraph of good Madame Celestine's letter did make her wince slightly; but that was all. She had no further use for that letter now: so, leaning forward, she dropped it into the glowing fire, which speedily reduced it to a black nothing.

Then Mrs. Somers composed herself to the reading of the paper which had come with her letter. Column after column of news, social and political, she leisurely scanned, until the words, "Terrible Steamboat Disaster on the Mississippi River, just below Memphis!" caught her eye. With placid interest she read this, too, in all its horrible details; for Estella Somers's heart was not quick with its sympathies for the world at large. "List of passengers missing, supposed to be lost." Then placid interest gave way to horrified surprise. "Alfred M. Walworth, Frederic Somers:" the names headed the list, — her darling's, and that other man's who was nothing to her, — nothing to any one in comparison with Frederic, the light, the joy, the glory, of her existence.

With the fascination of horror she held the paper in her quaking hands, and read the monstrous item over and over.

"Frederic, my Frederic, dead, burned! My beautiful boy blackened, scorched, hurled into eternity, writhing in agony, dead! It is a lie! — a monstrous, monstrous lie! Heaven could not be so cruel! My boy gone, murdered! God has robbed me, — robbed me of my darling! Now let him take me, woe is me! from this darkened earth. Amy, Amy! is this your vengeance? Did you dictate it to the foul fiend? Why not have struck me in his stead? He was innocent, — my boy, my beautiful! — in-

nocent of all guile. To bear, to rear, to love — is it for this I have suffered? — for this sinned? Yes, sinned; and my sin has found me out."

Wildly raving, the miserable mother grovelled upon the floor, still clutching the fatal paper in her grasp.

Awe-struck and wondering, Esther Brandon stood upon the threshold of the door, unnoticed by the half-crazed woman.

She had just arrived, and, with the freedom of intimate acquaintanceship, had dismounted, and found her own way to the library just in time to hear those last few words, — words which contained a revelation for her, and left her no longer in doubt as to whether or not Roger Etheridge should be privately put in possession of the package old Dinah had charged her with.

"Amy, Amy! is this your vengeance? — for this sinned?" The words stamped themselves upon Esther Brandon's brain with terrible distinctness, pregnant as they were with dark meaning. But just now, guilty though she was, this woman was suffering. She needed help. Turning softly, Esther sped away in search of Miss Cally; told her that Mrs. Somers was evidently in great trouble about something: then, calling for her horse, she remounted; for, at such a time, visitors could hardly be welcome at the Oaks.

Pondering deeply on the strange scene she had just witnessed, and the wild words she had just heard, Esther was slowly pacing homeward, when the sudden plunging of a horse behind her caused her to rein up suddenly, and turn black Bess's head. It was Alfred Walworth's large black horse, upon which was mounted the Belton coachman.

"What is the matter?" cried the young lady involuntarily; for the man's frightened face and frantic speed betokened trouble at Belton too.

"God only knows, young mistress," said the man, halting as he spoke. "Bad news from master, we's 'feared. He's up at his old home. Poor little mistress is all by herself, and took with a faintin'-spell. I'm hurryin' for a doctor." And away he dashed at lightning-speed.

"Trouble there too, and she alone! I will go to her. This is no time for weighing objections." And, turning toward the Belton gates, Esther put black Bess upon her

mettle, and soon found herself at the door of Alfred Walworth's home.

A group of frightened slaves were collected on the front-gallery, who opened a pathway with alacrity for Miss Brandon to pass through. Striding up and down the large entrance-hall she found the overseer, — a coarse, good man, whose face was pallid with fright.

"What is the trouble, sir?" asked Esther, advancing toward him.

"This, ma'am, we're afraid. When the darkies comed for me and my wife, we found the po' lady in a dead swoon, with this in her hand;" and he held up for Miss Brandon's inspection the newspaper-paragraph that had stricken Estella Somers to the earth.

"Lost, — Alfred M. Walworth, Frederic Somers."

For a moment only did heroic Esther Brandon remember that it was the lover of her youth, the chosen idol of her soul, who had gone down in the pitiless deep; for a moment only yield to the mortal agony that knowledge cost her: then she put her own misery away from her, and tried to think only of the crushed young wife, so young and soft and helpless, and of the little child whom God had seen fit in his inscrutable wisdom to make fatherless.

It was a face full of divine pity that poor Maggie Walworth's eyes, filled with frightened pain, rested upon when consciousness returned to her; and it was a voice of angelic tenderness that spoke to the child-wife of Alfred Walworth, pouring the holy balm of human sympathy into her sore and bleeding heart.

"I have come to you, not to try to comfort you; for time alone can do that. But my heart aches for you; and if you will let me stay by you, and help you bear your great trouble, I shall be glad."

Then two impulsive arms went up over the girl's queenly neck; and on Esther Brandon's own sore, aching heart, Alfred's wife wept in childish abandon, spending the first passion of her grief in soul-relieving tears.

But the luxury of tears was not for Esther. Hers it was to be a hero in the strife. Was not her old-time vow being fulfilled?

CHAPTER XLI.

ALL A MISTAKE.

FOR three long, sorrow-burdened days did Estella Somers rave in the delirium of her wild agony, crying aloud against high Heaven, who had quenched the sunlight of her life for ever and ever.

For three long, sorrow-burdened days did Margaret Walworth lay stricken to the earth by the terrible blow that had widowed her, and orphaned her baby-boy, clinging in her childish helplessness to the comforting presence and tender ministrations of Esther Brandon,

And then there came flitting Le Noirward two white-winged messengers, bringing glad tidings of great joy, uplifting the stricken hearts of mother and wife, dispersing the black cloud that had settled over the Oaks and Belton.

Dropping metaphor, two telegrams were received by the reliable individual at the warehouse, who promptly forwarded them to their separate destinations.

Read Mrs. Walworth's, "A mistake. Am safe: will telegraph when to look for me."

Read Mrs. Somers's, "Newspaper lie. Wasn't even on the boat. Never was aliver than at present. Walworth ditto."

The telegram from Mr. Walworth was placed in Esther's hands while she was sitting at the dismal breakfast-table, where her one plate was laid with punctilious ceremony, but was seldom turned; a cup of strong black coffee being all-sufficient to satisfy and stimulate her for the weary day before her.

Maggie had not left her bed since the fatal newspaper-paragraph had met her eye. An explanatory note from Miss Brandon to Mrs. Golding had brought back a sympathetic reply, begging her to remain with the unfortunate lady so long as she could be of service to her. So Esther had remained, spending the days in listening to the bitter wailings and mournful self-accusations of the forlorn little wife, to whom Alfred's gloomy words about finding release in the grave came back now with crushing weight, bearing remorseful fruit.

"Oh! if I had been a good wife to him, I could bear this hard blow better. But I was cross and peevish and childish; and God has taken him from me because I did not appreciate him," was her simple reading of the fatal decree; and remorsefully she bewailed her own well-merited punishment.

In pained surprise had Esther heard these ravings. Then his married life was not complete, his home not happy. She had fancied that this pretty usurper had filled the place left vacant by her own banished image. His lot was harder than her own, in that he had taken upon himself a yoke that was not easy to bear. It was his own free act: but she pitied him none the less; pitied them both; for her own idea of home-happiness was such an exalted one, that from the depths of her soul she pitied any people who were bound together indissolubly without the blessing of that sanctifying love which so powerfully aids both man and wife to bear and forbear.

So, as Esther sat at her lonely meal, moralizing, pondering, and pitying, doubting if, after all, Alfred was very much to be pitied for his sudden summons hence, the telegram was placed in her hands. Fearing some fresh shock for the bereaved wife, she read it first herself. And, behold! he had not been summoned hence, but was still Maggie's, to have and to hold and to torment!

Quickly Essie glided up stairs to break the happy news to Mrs. Walworth.

She must not startle her; for these weak women were as powerfully affected by joy as by sorrow.

She found Maggie propped up in bed, little Felix, her one comfort, cuddled in her arms, while she moaned over him with a voice as plaintive as a mateless dove's.

"You feel better this morning, I hope," said Essie, bending over her new friend, and smoothing back the soft yellow hair from the wan forehead.

"Better!" and Maggie looked up at her comforter very reproachfully, — "better! Is my grief so old that I can forget it?"

"Can you think of nothing that would make you feel better?" asked Essie, stumbling on toward her good news awkwardly enough.

"Nothing," answered Maggie, sobbing the word out.

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing, but for the cruel grave to give back its dead."

"And should the cruel grave do that very thing?"

Then Maggie uplifted her eyes; and, by the glad light in Esther's own, she read the blissful truth.

"He is not dead! he is not dead! Oh, put it into words, sweet lady, and how my glad heart will bless you!"

"He is not dead!" said Essie in a tender voice: then she laid the telegram upon the trembling little hands, that Maggie might read the happy truth for herself.

"My boy, my baby-boy, God has given him back to us! How I wish you could help me thank him! You do thank him in your tiny heart. Mother knows it by the bright glad light in your dear eyes."

And, of a truth, the baby-face did beam with the reflected light from its mother's joy-lit features.

Quietly Esther looked upon the wife in this newer and brighter phase. "She is such a child! He could mould her into any thing he would. She is of wax. They might be happy. They may be happy yet. God grant that this foretaste of what a bereavement his death would be may assist her to being a truer help-meet!"

It is the most natural thing in the world for us to judge others by ourselves in an emotional way: hence Essie had expected her good tidings to affect Alfred's wife in an entirely different way from what they did.

Under like circumstances, she would have wanted to be left alone to commune thankfully with the sender of her new happiness. Words would have afforded her no relief. Feeling thus, she turned quietly to leave the room, when the cheeriest of voices called her back.

"Don't leave me alone, dear Miss Brandon! I am so brimful of happiness, I must talk to somebody. Come right here, and sit on the bed by me. Let me talk to you of my precious Alfred. Oh, to think I shall be in his arms again soon, very soon! You must stay, and get to know him. He's so splendid and dear! And he will have to thank you for your angelic goodness to poor helpless me in my sorrowful time. You will like him; I know you will: you cannot help it. And I don't want you to help it. I want you to be the very best of friends; for, oh! what would I have done without you? How could I have lived through it all? You angel of goodness! Kiss her, my boy, and tell her that we love her with all our hearts, and that father dear will love her too." And baby Felix was held up for Esther to kiss by his chattering child-mother.

Very tenderly Essie kissed the pure, sweet lips, and very bravely did she possess her soul in quietness, while the voluble Mrs. Walworth threw dart after dart into her long-suffering heart.

In her helpless misery, Maggie had been an object of unalloyed and tenderest pity. In her restored happiness, her frivolity and shallowness awakened a feeling very near akin to contempt. Esther ardently longed now to be gone; to get away from the house, before, by any possible mischance, Alfred should return: so, when Maggie had apparently exhausted her flow of wordy gladness, she announced the necessity for returning to her school-duties.

"Oh, not yet, not yet, please, dear Miss Brandon! One more day! I am so dismally lonesome! If you go away, I'll just be foolish enough to doubt the truth that Alfred is not dead!"

"What! with his telegram in your hand?" said Essie, smiling indulgently.

"And I'll get sick again," urged the spoilt child.

"But I have duties to attend to, my dear Mrs. Walworth."

For "duties" Mrs. Walworth entertained a lofty scorn, and so pleaded and coaxed that Essie yielded.

"To-morrow, then, let it be. Will that satisfy you?"

"I will tell you to-morrow," answered Maggie saucily.

And there the matter rested until to-morrow.

What miserably helpless puppets we are, to be sure, in

the hands of Fate! and how impossible was it for Maggie Walworth to guess that what she pleaded for with such ignorant earnestness, as a social boon, was to prove to her a source of woe unspeakable!

And is it not ever so with mortal supplication? We plead, in our ignorance, for that which, if granted, would prove in the end a baleful curse, and not the expected blessing.

And yet we rail with all our puny might at the Infinite Wisdom which goes on its sublime course, unmoved by our entreaties, creating a cosmos where man would have wrought a chaos.

CHAPTER XLII.

TO-MORROW.

THE day in which the house of mourning had been turned into a house of rejoicing at Belton — a sabbath-like day, holy in its calm — had passed away in its duly-appointed time; and the eternal stars were shining resplendently over house and lawn, when a little skiff shot swiftly around a curve in the river, and made a landing in front of the Belton gates. From it sprang Alfred Walworth, who had steamed it to a landing some twelve miles below, the highest navigable point at that time, and then hired a skiff, with which he completed his journey.

He had failed in his promise to telegraph again; considering it, on second thoughts, entirely unnecessary.

Pausing just long enough to pay the boatman his fare, he walked quickly on toward the house.

It was early bedtime; but, knowing Maggie's cowardly nature, he was not surprised that the front-door refused him ingress.

A wide veranda skirted the house on all sides. He would pass on round, and tap at his wife's bedroom window. On his way, the glimmer of a light from a bed-chamber, separated from Maggie's by several rooms and a passage, attracted his attention. In some surprise he glanced through the uncurtained window, which was protected simply by Venetian blinds.

By a table near the fire sat Esther Brandon, one slender white hand supporting her beautiful head; while her tender, sweet eyes were fixed upon the dancing flames of the wood-

fire with a gaze unspeakably sad. Around her in a shimmering mass fell her glorious hair, just relieved from the bondage of braids and combs; and the hand that lay upon her lap held a brush in a listless grasp.

Her whole attitude betokened weariness; and she was weary — oh, so weary! — of this never-ending, still beginning strife with her own passionate soul.

Can the consciousness of duties well done, of self-victories nobly won, bring to a woman's famished soul that full measure of content that constitutes happiness? Can she reason herself into that unnatural state of mental exaltation that shall render her independent of her sex's grand need, — loving guardianship? I doubt it, holding her to be but part a woman, and all an anomaly, who thinks to render her life complete without its full share of heart-cheer.

During the active occupation of the day, Essie's heroic determination carried her bravely along her lonely pathway; but when the night came, — "in which no man can work," — in the stillness of solitude, the sense of dreary desolation in her unloved, unpitied existence, swept over her with crushing intensity.

For a second only did Alfred Walworth stand transfixed with surprise at the sight of Esther Brandon, domesticated, apparently, in his house. But in that second the tender blue eyes of the woman he loved so well filled suddenly with great blinding tears; and Queen Zenobia's proud head was bowed upon her supporting arm as she yielded to a burst of uncontrollable misery.

Starting with a feeling of criminality, Alfred passed on. His face burned with shame. He had not meant to pry upon her. His pause had been involuntary. But the sight of those tear-blinded eyes, that bowed head, lashed him into a frenzy of hatred and parricidal wrath against the man who had wrought her woe and his. How his heart yearned over that lonely girl in her wretchedness! How passionately he longed to put his strong arms around her, and soothe away those soul-scorching tears! He could not go into his wife's presence yet: he must wait a while. The sight of Esther, and Esther unhappy, had agitated him so powerfully, that he must take a little while in which to become more composed.

Softly descending a flight of stairs that led down into

the lawn from the side of the house, he noiselessly paced the grassy walks to and fro, trying to decide a matter that had haunted him ever since his father had put him in possession of the truth. Should he tell Esther that he knew it, and beg for a brother's right to care for and shelter her? Should he do it? Could he do it? Dare he do it? At the end of a half-hour he was no nearer the solution of this problem than he had been any time during the past three weeks; but he was in a calmer frame of mind: so he remounted the steps, and proceeded once more toward his wife's apartments.

Little Felix was unusually restless that night; and Maggie was still up, trying to lull him to sleep with deceitful promises of a "coach and four little ponies, white and gray, black and bay," when he should awake again. But the promised reward did not seem to be much of an inducement to the young gentleman; for his eyes were very wide open, and very bright with saucy defiance, as he listened unmoved to the coaxing lullaby.

A slight tap on the window caused Mrs. Walworth to emit one of an inexhaustible stock of ready-made screams she always kept on hand for emergencies.

"It is I,—Alfred!" said a voice from the outer darkness.

Then the frightened scream was supplemented with one of delight; and, in the space of a minute and a half, Mr. Walworth was admitted to the bosom of his family, and had Maggie clinging convulsively to his neck, laughing and crying and exclaiming, all in a breath. Before he was allowed to sleep that night, his voluble little wife had told him "*every thing*,"—from the arrival of that horrid newspaper, to her fainting, and the coming of that angelic Miss Brandon, and the telegram, and her misery when she thought him dead, and her bliss when she knew him alive, and her repentance for every naughty thing she had done since she had been his wife, and her settled resolve to be a model wife for the future, and her eager desire that he should know and love that sweet Miss Brandon, and—and, in short, *every thing*.

In exchange for which verbal generosity, Mr. Walworth stingily explained that he and Mr. Somers had taken passage on the ill-fated steamer, and had registered their names,

but had afterwards seen fit to go by rail: hence the mistake which had cost his wife so dearly. And Maggie fell asleep that night with a profound conviction of special providences.

What would become of people in polite society if it were not for the blessed facility with which masks can be adjusted?

Mr. Walworth had Miss Brandon at something of a disadvantage; for he had twelve long hours in which to prepare himself for the rencounter, which took her entirely unawares.

Coming down rather later than usual, — for the night just gone had not been a restful one to her, — Essie entered the breakfast-room, and, to her infinite confusion, found herself once again in the presence of Alfred Walworth, who, with his wife, sat awaiting her coming before breaking their fast.

"There she is now!" exclaimed Maggie, springing up with eager delight as the opening door admitted the good Samaritan who had ministered to her in her time of sore need.

A slight pause, a quickening of treacherous pulses, a blanching of the soft, fair cheek, an heroic striving for self-control, and then stately Esther, full panoplied in the armor of calm dignity, glided forward, and held out a hand in greeting to the restored master of Belton.

"I believe, that, in the miserable confusion of the past few days, I have had no opportunity to tell Mrs. Walworth that you and I need no introduction. Let me add a friend's sincere congratulations to those I know you have already received from that little lady." The words were spoken with an easy coolness that surprised no one more than Esther's self.

"Am I really ossifying?" she asked herself.

"Is this calmly dignified woman of the world the sorrow-bowed creature my heart yearned over so last night?" asked Alfred Walworth of himself.

But, happily, Maggie was present; and a much-needed safety-valve she was.

"You know Alfred, and never told me so!" Her wide-open eyes expressed astonishment, but nothing more.

"Was not an old-time acquaintanceship a very trivial matter of comment in the presence of your great sorrow?" asked Essie, smiling bravely down on Alfred's wife as she repudiated the one tender memory of her life.

"Yes; but" —

"But," interrupted Alfred, who was fairly wincing under these personalities, "suppose you accept, unquestioning, the wonderful fact, that Miss Brandon and your sister-in-law are old schoolmates and dear friends, and that, one bright vacation, the old house at Chester was honored with her presence, and then let us proceed to the more important discussion of breakfast." With reckless audacity he had taken his cue from Esther, who had shown herself persistently determined to speak of their former intercourse as of an ordinary acquaintanceship.

This course alone, Essie reasoned, would render their chance meetings tolerable in any degree.

"You hungry monster! Men are always hungry," said Maggie lightly, as she led the way to the table. "But you haven't uttered a word of thanks yet to your old friend and my new one for all her goodness to me while you were drowned."

"And yet I think she knows that I have cause to be, and am, deeply grateful to her;" and Alfred Walworth's dark eyes rested upon Esther's face for a moment with a gaze so intense, that it threatened the overthrow of her hardly-won control.

"And so you went to school with Sister Mira," chattered Maggie as she deftly plied the sugar-tongs. "Isn't she sweet?"

"She is the dearest girl that ever lived," answered Esther enthusiastically.

"And, oh! now I come to think of it, maybe you can tell me who that owl-like-looking girl is in the picture upstairs with Sister Mira. I have asked Alfred half a dozen times; but he asks me if I would be any the wiser for knowing, and scolds me for idle curiosity."

"Which are rather strong measures, I think. But that is the best picture of Mira extant. — I should think you would have a larger one taken from it, and throw that old one away. I think I would do it if I were you."

Miss Brandon looked very steadily at Alfred during the latter part of this suggestive address.

"Throw that old thing away! Why, it is the apple of his eye. I believe he would throw me out the window, and baby after me, before he would part with that picture."

"Rather an exaggerated type of brotherly devotion," said Essie, with something wonderfully like a sneer curling her pretty lip.

Then Mr. Walworth, with dignified composure, begged to help Miss Brandon to a piece of fried chicken, and Miss Brandon accepted the proffered delicacy in the most unemotional manner possible; and Maggie buttered a muffin with volatile disregard to the fact that not yet had her idle curiosity respecting the owl-like-looking girl in the picture up-stairs been satisfied.

Hardly had this pre-eminently social breakfast been well despatched, when an infant wail from the remote regions of the sleeping-apartments smote upon the quick maternal ear; and, with a hasty apology, Maggie darted from the room, leaving her husband and guest *tête-à-tête*.

For a moment, a painful silence reigned in the room, — a silence in which Esther almost fancied the fierce beating of her throbbing heart was making itself heard.

He was standing on the rug, resting one arm upon the low mantle-shelf, looking down upon her, trying once more to solve the problem of whether to speak or not.

A sudden uplifting of the girl's pure eyes, a hardly perceptible quivering of the sweet lips, as Essie sought to break the spell that was upon them both by an abortive attempt to say *something*, suddenly determined him.

"Essie!" Very tenderly he uttered her name.

The dear old familiar form of address startled, swayed, then aroused her.

"Is this generous, Alfred Walworth? Have you already forgotten why I am here under your roof?" And Esther was herself again.

"God forbid that I should forget one jot or one tittle of your claims to my respect; nay, my reverence! But I have something to say to you, Esther (I think I have a right to call you by that name); at least, I think I have something that I ought to say to you. And yet, God help me! clumsy dolt that I am, I have not the nice perception to decide whether, though my speech might be silver, my silence might not be golden.

"I want to help you, Essie, to do you good, to extend that guardianship over you that you need, my heart's chosen one, if you will but let me. Listen to me calmly, please; for

I see the monstrous misconception of my meaning in your blanching face, Essie. What pitiful esteem you must hold me in!—me, the man who would gladly lay down his life at any moment for your dear sake. Do you know why I was summoned to Chester?"

A half inaudible "No" was all her answer.

"It was to see my father, whose days on earth are numbered."

A nervous thrill convulsed the form of the young girl, upon whom he was looking down, hoping to read some sign in her countenance telling him whether to stop or go on. Her two hands were clasped convulsively together; and in breathless agitation she awaited his next words.

"And, Essie, I know the truth now, — the whole torturing truth; and I want to beg your pardon, dear, injured Essie, for every harsh thought I have ever entertained against you; and I want to ask you to give me a brother's right to befriend you. It is his wish." He hesitated in helpless confusion.

"What is his wish?" asked Esther in a sharp, ringing voice, scorn and just wrath lighting up her face with flashing beauty.

"It is his wish that you share his fortune evenly with Mira and myself."

"And is it you, you, Alfred Walworth, who once formed my ideal of manhood, that dare come to me with the base proposition of moneyed compensation for the shame of a mother, the blasting of my own innocent life; you, who but just now spoke to me in accents of tenderness; you, who ask to befriend me, yet choose to insult me; you, who might have spared me this last bitter degradation; you, whom I loved so in the long-ago; you, whom I have so pitied for having to bear your share of this cruel dispensation; you, whom I would have spared every pang, — you come to me, and crush me to the earth with the bitterness of knowing that my degradation is no longer a secret between me and the author of my woes!"

Then the flashing eyes were veiled under the tremulous lids, and the pure face that was dyed with the shame of another's guilt was bowed upon the white hands in speechless emotion.

Crushed by the miscarriage of his well-meant endeavors,

Alfred Walworth stood wordless and miserable, in his heart cursing the mistaken impulse that had loosed his tongue.

Presently, with regal dignity, the girl's bowed head was uplifted. Her eyes were raised proudly to meet his gaze; and in a voice from which all the passionate excitement had died away, leaving it calm and sweet, she bared her soul before her old-time lover.

"Forgive me, Alfred. In my frenzy of mortification, I am afraid I have wronged you. You meant it for the best; I can see that now: but it was a terrible mistake, — the mistake of a man who understands nothing of the nice organization of a woman's soul. What his motive was in confessing his baseness to his own son, I cannot fathom. It would have been truer kindness to me to have let you die in ignorance of it.

"As the world looks at such things, on me alone, now that the grave has mercifully closed over my erring mother, should rest the stain. But I take my stand against the world. My life has been one long struggle; but in that struggle I have taken for my watchwords truth, duty, and honor; and I have lived my watchwords. Has Mira, the tenderly-reared, love-sheltered child of wedlock, done more? In my dealings with my fellow-beings, justice and charity has been my motto; and I have acted up to my motto. Has that petted child of fortune up-stairs, your wife, Alfred Walworth, done more? When God in his might first laid this heavy cross upon my weak shoulders, I shivered and trembled under its cruel weight, arraigning high Heaven for injustice and mercilessness; but yet a little while, and I conquered my rebellious soul, and have learned to bow me to the inevitable uncomplainingly and patiently. Have you, Alfred Walworth, the strong man, whose share of this burden is light by comparison, learned to do as much? Was my soul not created by the same God, in the same heaven, whence came your baby Felix? Was my baby-heart less pure than his is now? And if, in spite of desertion, poverty, and despair, I have kept my soul and heart 'unspotted from the world,' shall I not claim my rightful share of the world's respect? I claim my place in the great universal family as a co-heir to its honors with the proudest scion of nobility. I will not slink through its by-ways and alleys

with bowed head and humble mien, crushed to the earth by the wrong-doing of others.

"I have suffered — God, the searcher of hearts, alone knows how I have suffered — during the past four years. But I think I have grown strong through that suffering, — not all at once, but by long and persistent wrestling with a murmuring heart and stubborn soul. But the victory is mine at last, I hope and believe. And never did I feel surer of it than at this moment, Alfred Walworth, when I can look you, the man I have so loved, calmly in the face, and bare my soul thus before you. It was with acute pain that I heard of your coming across my path again; and I knew then, by token of that pain, that my victory was not complete. I longed to get away from the spot that had proved a peaceful asylum to me before a strange fate sent you hither. When chance threw us together that day upon the roadside, I learned, to my bitter humiliation, that the task of tearing your image from my sinful heart had been but clumsily performed. But I did not cease my prayerful struggles. When the false news of your death reached us, for one little moment I thought of you as a perished lover, then only as a lost husband and father. And now, now, Alfred Walworth, I can look you in the face with unquailing eyes, and swear before high Heaven that my heart is purified from the old-time love, — a passionate, covetous love; and in its stead has come a tender yearning for your welfare, a pure, unselfish love, that would gladly watch over you, aid you, and lead you onward and upward toward a higher and better life than you are leading now, dear friend.

"There is no treason to your chosen wife in this feeling or in my heart. You have selected her from among all women to be the honored bearer of your name, the mother of your children, the companion of your life. As such, she is entitled to your tenderest consideration in thought, word, and in deed; as such, I bow to her superior exaltation. Nor would I blush to have her read my inmost soul, provided she be one of those rare women who can understand and feel for a less fortunate sister.

"Margaret Walworth has every thing, — you, her beautiful boy, fortune, and a home.

"All these things are wanting to me. Surely I may eat of the crumbs which fall from her table. From her plenty may she not spare me the precious boon of a friend? That is all I ask, all I crave. And I would be your friend, claiming the right to remind you of your buried talents, your lost opportunities, your frittered life; claiming the right, O my friend of magnificent possibilities! to encourage you to throw off your unworthy cynicism and inertness, and take a higher place in the world's broad field, in the great battle of life."

She ceased speaking. Her voice, toward the last, had grown tremulous with its burden of earnest feeling. Her eyes glowed like stars in the midnight heavens. The fervor of inspiration had transformed her into a beautiful Pythoness.

In rapt silence had Alfred Walworth gazed and listened. Her glowing eloquence, for a moment, fired his heart with answering enthusiasm. Could he not be as strong as this fragile woman? might he not yet be? Was there not yet call for soldiers in "the world's broad field of battle"? With her to aid, exhort, encourage, might he not yet write "Excelsior" upon his banner? Then came the crushing "might have been." With her for a wife, glorious, indeed, had been the possibilities of his life; without her, supineness, lethargy, failure! And the flicker of glorious enthusiasm was choked out by the powerful weight of confirmed inertia; and his worded answer, when it came, was but a poor response to her earnest exhortation. Gloomy his eyes, and gloomy his voice, as he said, —

"It is too late!"

"Alfred Walworth!" and the fair Pythoness rose up before him, laying one white hand impressively upon his own: —

"For the soul that springs upward, and yearns to regain
The pure source of spirit, there is no 'Too late.'"

Then that white hand was clasped in a fervent grasp, and raised to Alfred Walworth's bearded lip as he solemnly registered a vow, that, God willing, he would prove to her that her words had not fallen upon stony ground.

"Be my friend, my steadfast friend, my beautiful inspiration, and the magnificent possibilities you accredit me with may yet prove massive realities."

And a pair of frightened, wondering eyes glanced in upon the pair unnoticed; and Maggie Walworth caught the deep tones of her husband's voice, saw the bearded mouth pressed reverently to the beautiful white hand, noted the glowing glance that was fastened upon Esther's beautiful face, and read the secret of those two with the quick insight of a jealous heart.

A low moan of pain escaped from the child-wife's lips: then she turned, and fled back to her room, where she flung herself down by the cradle of her idol, weeping and sobbing her wounded heart away.

"Let us die, my baby! — die, and go away from them! He does not care for us: he would not grieve. This beautiful thief has stolen him from us, and filled his soul. He did not even see me. Why don't she go? Why did she stay? Because, poor fool! I begged her to stay and rob me. She's so beautiful, and so wicked, and" —

A tap at Mrs. Walworth's door.

A slight pause; then a steady "Come in!"

Calm and serene, habited for her ride home, Miss Brandon made her appearance.

"You have delayed your return so long, that I presumed your tyrant would not let you return to us: so I have come here to bid you good-by." And she held out her hand in farewell.

It was a new Maggie, quiet and grave, that put out a bit of a hand, thanked Miss Brandon again for her kindness, and said "Good-by" in a strangely quiet voice.

But Essie stooped to kiss the little woman, looking very calm and very innocent, which Maggie set down as so many indications of hardness and boldness.

She was gone! And the injured wife passionately wiped that kiss from her lips.

"She dared kiss me! — leave a Judas kiss upon my lips! I know their secret now; but I will perish before they shall know how they've stabbed me. It will kill me soon: oh! I know it will. I hope it will! No, no! God and baby, forgive me! I would not go and leave you behind, my boy, my comforter, my idol."

The excitement of the past few days, with its alternations of sorrow and joy, and now this last, worst trouble, proved too much for her fragile *physique*; and when, having seen Miss Brandon off, Alfred sought his wife's presence, he found her prostrate upon the bed, muttering and moaning in a strangely incoherent fashion.

CHAPTER XLIII.

FATE'S HANDMAIDEN.

As may be imagined, it was not in the calmest frame of mind that Esther Brandon wound her way slowly homeward through the forest bridle-path, that looked bare and bleak enough in its mid-winter ugliness. As she rode along, she pondered retrospectively.

When Mrs. Golding had written to her old preceptress for a teacher for her children, and Madame Celestine had so strongly urged her acceptance of the situation, her principal motive for yielding to this urgency had been to tear herself loose from all old associations; to remove far from her all reminders of that one terrible episode in her life; and to put between her and Alfred Walworth such a distance, that the probability of their ever meeting again would almost amount to an impossibility. She had found Le Noir a haven of rest and quiet; when, lo! the "divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will," had put at nought all her plans, and directed his steps to her place of refuge.

Did she regret it? At first, yes. It had cost no little pain to contemplate the possibility of meeting him. But, now that the possibility had become a reality, she believed she was rather glad than otherwise. This actual contact with the idol of earlier days had done her good. It had destroyed the glamour that enveloped the past, and enabled her to accept the present with much more calmness than, before his coming, she could have believed possible. She had been face to face with him now in the presence of his

wife; and the ordeal had not proved fatal. She had listened, hour after hour, to the feeble chatter of that wife, whose talk was all of him, — her Alfred, her husband, her possession, — and yet lived. This married Alfred Walworth — with the hard, cold face, whose wife she had tended, whose child she had caressed — seemed like, yet unlike, the old-time Alfred, who had been all her own. She was glad she had come in contact with him in his new life. The present was real, palpable, and earnest. The past was unreal, impalpable, and hideous: let it be obliterated from the record of her life.

She had been carried away this morning. She had not meant to do aught but vindicate her own defiant position against the world; but, fired by the "electric spark of opportunity," she had gone on to plead with him for the fulfilment of his life's fair promise. She had gathered enough from Maggie's idle gossip to read the story of his home-life. All was not as it should be; and she had striven by a few earnest words to improve matters for them both.

She had promised him to be his friend, — his steadfast friend; and she would be it. She would write him long, kindly, friendly letters, — letters that he and his wife might read together; for (and tired Esther heaved a sigh of relief) her sojourn on Le Noir was rapidly drawing to a close. A few more weeks, and she would bid farewell to its quiet banks and the gentle-hearted dwellers thereon, and go about her life-work. Eagerly she looked forward to it. Work, work, — life's great panacea for all the ills the human heart is heir to, — was what she wanted, what she craved, what she must have.

One more duty she had to perform before leaving the neighborhood; and it was one from which she shrank, putting off the evil hour until the very last moment: that duty was the execution of old Dinah's commission.

It was not an easy nor a pleasant task to go to the blind master of the Oaks, and sow the seeds of suspicion in his gentle heart against the sister who had been all in all to him now for so many sad years. But if, as old Dinah firmly believed, Roger Etheridge had a daughter living, — a child who was being defrauded of her name, her home, and a father's love, by this same good sister, — was it not

imperatively her duty to place in his hands the clew to that child's fate? Had she done right in being so tardy about this thing? She thought she had: for she had waited for some chance confirmation of the nurse's charge against Mrs. Somers; and it had come in the wild ravings of her supposed bereavement. "Amy, Amy, is this your vengeance?" and "For this have I sinned?"

Those words had sealed Estella Somers's fate and Esther Brandon's resolution. Nor was there hope of accomplishing the desired end by proxy. She had sounded Miss Cally sufficiently to be convinced, that, if intrusted to her, the package would be unquestioningly handed over to Mrs. Somers.

And where, then, the hope of righting the wronged?

But one more day remained of Esther's allotted stay with the good people at Locust Grove, between whom and herself had sprung up a sincere attachment.

On that day she asked for the carriage to ride over to the Oaks to make her farewell visit, and to return the books that kind-hearted Mr. Etheridge had continued to send her from time to time. This time she carried with her the fateful package. How it was to be delivered was not yet clear to her.

Arrived at the Oaks, she was received with the usual amount of sincere welcome by Mr. Etheridge alone.

"The ladies," he told her, "had just been driven over to Belton by Frederic on a visit to Mrs. Walworth, who was rumored to be quite ill."

The cause of their absence was lost sight of by Esther in wondering consideration of what seemed to her like a God-sent opportunity to accomplish the ends of justice.

"I am so glad!" was her apparently heartless remark.

"Glad!" repeated the blind man incredulously.

"Yes, sir, glad," replied Esther, plunging headlong into her subject: "not that Mrs. Walworth is sick, of course; nor yet that I shall lose this opportunity to say 'Good-by' to dear Miss Cally, and your sister, and Mr. Somers; but because their absence, Mr. Etheridge, affords me an opportunity, that otherwise I might never have found, of telling you something that has been weighing very heavily upon me ever since before your return from Europe."

They were seated in the library by this time; and Mr. Etheridge's voice was full of kind encouragement as he replied, "My dear young lady, how I thank you for your frank trust in me! I know all of your story that my cousin is possessed of, and would gladly aid you in any way you may point out toward the fulfilment of your life-plans."

"Dear, good Mr. Etheridge," answered Essie in a gentle voice, "how my heart thanks you for your goodness! But it is nothing that concerns myself: it relates to you, Mr. Etheridge, — you and your great life-trouble."

A deadly pallor overspread Roger Etheridge's fine face; and his thin, nervous hand groped about helplessly in the dark until it clasped Esther's soft, warm palm. Then he spoke in a voice hoarse with emotion: —

"Me and my life-trouble! What do you know, what can you know, a girlish stranger, of my great life-trouble?"

Softly Essie brought her other hand to close upon the feverish one that he had placed within her grasp as she answered, —

"Very strangely, indeed, Mr. Etheridge, have I come in possession of what I am now going to tell you. But I believe it to be true. Will you try to listen to me calmly?"

"Hold a minute! You have shaken my soul to its centre: give me a little while to compose myself. It is not your words alone, child, it is your touch, — the touch of long, slender, lissome fingers, — your voice, so like to hers: they thrill me with the bitter-sweet remembrance of the loved and lost. It pleased me to fancy, when I found you here, that your face and form might be hers too; but Estella tells me not. Her hair was dark: yours, they say, is golden. Her eyes were sad with the burden of sorrows manifold: yours, they tell me, dance with the fires of youth and hope. She was a Juno in bearing: you, they say, are *petite*. But why do I maunder on about a disappointed fancy, — I, whose cup of life has been filled to the brim with disappointments?"

In unmitigated astonishment had Esther listened to this false portraiture of herself. Why it had been given, it was beyond her to fathom; nor did she care to do so, in view of the far more important matter she had in hand: so she dismissed it with a jest.

"Your sister, I fancy, painted my portrait for you, dear Mr. Etheridge, before she had ever taken a satisfactory in-

ventory of my physical possessions, else she could hardly have applied the term 'golden' to my nearly black hair, nor the adjective '*petite*' to my almost ungainly height. But that is of ever so little importance. Will you listen to me now?"

"I am ready," answered the blind man, loosing his hold upon the young girl's hands, and assuming an attitude of the most rapt attention.

"Do you remember old Dinah, Mr. Etheridge, — the nurse who accompanied your wife when she left home?"

"I do! Go on! quick! What of her?"

"I was thrown accidentally into her way one day last summer, during a ramble in the woods; and the old woman took an unaccountable fancy to me, choosing to imagine that I resembled the dead mistress whom she had loved so faithfully to the bitter end.

"Her sole desire on earth seemed to be to live to see you once more. Her mistress, on her death-bed, had given her a letter, making her swear solemnly that in your hands, and in no one's but yours, would she place it. She came home, and, to her bitter disappointment, found you gone. Year after year, she said, she had lived on in the patient hope that you would come home. She said she had sent you such messages, through Miss Cally, as ought to have brought you home, had you any heart left. At last, when she was convinced that her days were numbered, she sent for me, told me all that I have told you, and confided to me the trust that your absence and her death alone prevented her fulfilling in person. She gave me that letter; making me swear solemnly, in my turn, that into your hands alone would I deliver it. I suggested Miss Cally as a more fitting person for this duty. She vehemently protested that Miss Cally should not have it. I asked her why. She said Miss Cally would deliver it over to Mrs. Somers. 'And why not?' I asked. Her reply I give to you without comment, repeating it only from a solemn sense of the binding force of a death-bed promise. 'Miss Stella was no friend to my poor Miss Amy in her lifetime. They say master is blind. That letter would never reach him if it passed into Miss Stella's keeping.'"

Esther stopped speaking. The heavy, labored breathing of the powerfully-agitated man smote audibly upon the stillness of the room.

"And that letter?"

"Is here," answered Fate's fair handmaiden, laying the package in the eagerly outstretched hand as she spoke.

"And I am blind! I am blind!" moaned the unhappy man, clasping his treasure in feverish haste.

Then words of hope and comfort sprang to Esther's lips.

"Do you know your blindness to be incurable, dear Mr. Etheridge?"

"In my wretchedness I have not cared to inquire."

"But now you have an incentive?"

"Yes; but the weary months of waiting and of probable failure!"

"Better that than trust the reading of a dying wife's confession to profane eyes," said Esther boldly.

"You are right, sweet monitor; and if there be aught in man's boasted skill, please God, these veiled eyes may still be blessed with the sight of my pardon, written by that beloved hand before it lost its cunning."

Then Esther got up to go away. She felt an unconquerable disinclination to meeting Mrs. Somers now: so, with loving regrets for Miss Cally, and grateful thanks to himself for his many kindnesses, she re-entered the carriage, and, by daybreak next morning, was many miles away from the Goldings, the Walworths, and the people of the Oaks.

CHAPTER XLIV.

RESOLUTE ACTION.

WHEN Esther had tenderly pressed the hand of Roger Etheridge, bidden him a grateful good-by, and gone out from his presence, she had left him wrapped in a sort of trance. She had made her communication purposely as concise as possible, desiring her own share in the whole affair to be strictly limited to the delivery of Dinah's message and the letter. She had purposely avoided all mention of the daughter, who, the nurse protested, was not dead, fearing that, in that matter, some mistake might lie hidden, and rightly judging that the letter would give him all necessary information on that point.

So, as the blind man sat alone in his luxurious library, holding the letter with its faded inscription in a nervous clasp, as if fearing it might yet escape him, passionately longing to know its contents, mournfully deploring the affliction that shut out from his eager gaze the dying confession of his unhappy wife, he dreamed not of a living joy in store for him, thinking only to be soothed by the sight of words of pardon for the cruel haste with which he had passed sentence upon the fragile creature whom he had taken to his bosom for better or worse. Chaos reigned in his mind. The curious chance that had brought this young stranger as a mediator between him and his dead; the warning not to trust Estella, — the sister who had been true as steel to him through the misery of what seemed a lifetime; Amy's prayer that the reading of her letter should not be intrusted to that sister; Estella's strange misrepresentation

of Esther Brandon's personal appearance, — all these disconnected items went flitting through his troubled mind in a sequence of their own making, hardly thought of at the time, totally uncommented upon in absorbing contemplation of the marvellous fact that he held in his hand, after weary years of vexed pondering, the answer to the question, Had he done right? Her own confession alone could put at rest the doubts that had torn and harassed his soul in spite of Estella's ready assurances that the course he had pursued was "the one course open to him as a gentleman."

And, now that Amy had sent him an answer, — from the grave, as it were, — he was powerless to receive it.

Could he but have that precious letter read to him before he slept! Suspicion is a rank weed of rapid growth. So readily had it taken root in Roger Etheridge's soul, that not for a moment did he entertain the idea of telling Estella any thing of that morning's event. He remembered only too well that never a word of sympathy had she expended upon the wife he had repudiated. He remembered, that, when his own soul had leaned to mercy's side, she had laughed his relenting spirit to scorn, hardening his heart again by her sneers at the "beautiful adventuress who had entrapped him." No: Estella was no friend of his dead Amy's; and he made no doubt that it was but a womanly shrinking from baring her soul before the gaze of another woman, and that other woman not a friend, that had made his wife expressly exclude her sister-in-law from participation in her confession. It pleased her remorseful husband to think that he had it in his power, even at this late day, to comply with a request of hers. Estella should not read her letter. Miss Cally, then — was but an amiable, gossipy little woman, who would make his wife's dying words matter of confidential gossip between herself and her cousin.

Roger Etheridge, you cruelly underrate the strength of that little woman's character, and her own lifetime devotion to your unconscious self.

So who was there left but Frederic? — a good-hearted, boisterous, gay young man of the world. That were desertion indeed!

No: he would place himself under the best opticians in the country. If their boasted skill could give him back the lost blessing of sight, he would feast in secret over the

treasure Esther Brandon had put into his possession: if not, to her — the soft-hearted, gently-sympathetic stranger, whose sweet voice had told his Amy's last wishes with such tender feeling — would he go for help.

The rumbling of the returning carriage startled him from his reverie. With nervous haste he slipped the package into the breast-pocket of his coat; and when his sister came gliding up to him with the grace of a beautiful snake, uttering her hopes that he had not wanted for any thing during her absence, he answered her so calmly and quietly, that it would have taken a keener spirit of divination than belonged even to Estella Somers to fathom the fact that the white hand which she placed so caressingly on the blind man's shoulder almost touched the letter that was to reveal her to her brother for what she was, — a cold, heartless, unprincipled, beautiful schemer, who had trampled ruthlessly upon the laws of God and man to secure to her son, the idol of her life, the unlawful possession of a fortune.

Miss Cally had remained at Belton, in friendly attendance on Alfred Walworth's suffering wife. So it was to Mrs. Somers and Frederic alone that Mr. Etheridge announced the tidings of Esther's departure from the Le-Noir neighborhood.

"Gone!" exclaimed Mrs. Somers, whose plan of restitution was thus seriously endangered. "And did she leave no message for Cally, telling her how she might communicate with her? You know, they were such very great friends!"

"She left a message for Cally to ride over this evening and bid her good-by. But I suppose, now, that is impossible."

"Why?"

"She leaves this afternoon, at three, to take the morning's boat at Briarwood; and, as it is two now, there would be no time to convey her wishes to Cally."

"Uncommonly sorry our poor old neighborhood has lost its one shining light," said Mr. Somers lightly; "but, when Mistress Frederic Somers becomes *un fait accompli*, we'll hunt her up, and bring her back on a visit."

Upon which Mrs. Somers snapped. She did not often lay aside her calm repose of manner; for the provocation must be great that could exalt matter above manner with

this highly-polished dame. But this provocation *was* great.

"I had hoped, Frederic, that constant association with one so lovely and attractive as Esther Brandon would be all that was necessary to obliterate the very memory of that wishy-washy Miss Walworth. But there is no accounting for the miserable taste of a very young man."

Then Fred's handsome face flushed angrily.

"Have a care, mother, how you insult the woman, who, if God spares me, will be your daughter-in-law within the next twelvemonth."

Estella's face was brimful of thunder and lightning; but the game she had to play was too vital to be thrown lightly away: so, remembering that Fortune seldom favors an angry player, she sobered down instantaneously.

"My dear boy, excuse me for not being able to bear always in mind the foolish infatuation that I have too much confidence in your good taste to dread much from. But indeed, my precious son, any one who could judge impartially between the two young ladies would find it hard to understand how a young man who could marry Miss Brandon should choose to marry Miss Walworth."

In wrathful silence Frederic left her presence; and so deeply outraged were his feelings, that when his uncle sent for him to his sleeping-apartment that night, and asked him if he would be his sole companion in a trip he projected, Fred gladly promised to accompany him.

Mrs. Somers was thrown into a state of complete bewilderment the next morning, when Roger Etheridge, the heretofore helplessly-dependent brother, who had been almost like a child in her hands since his affliction had befallen him, informed her of his suddenly-conceived plan to put himself in the hands of an oculist of great note in the city of New York. "I feel," said he, "as if I had acted criminally in yielding supinely to my misery. I felt, at one time, as if I would rather be as I am than again look upon the world that had proved such a delusion and snare to me. It may be that my mad folly will be visited upon me now by the frustration of my new-born desire for restoration to that world; but I shall make the effort nevertheless. If God will bless man's endeavors in my behalf, I shall

once again take my place in the arena of life as a man, and strive, by the active fulfilling of my duties, henceforth to fill up the dead blank of the past seventeen years."

"Dear brother, God grant that this wild hope prove not a new source of misery to you!" said Estella by way of wet-blanketing his enthusiasm.

"That it cannot prove; for I am prepared beforehand for disappointment. But the trial shall be made."

"Then I go with you!" said his sister in a resolute voice.

"I prefer not," answered Mr. Etheridge just as resolutely.

"Roger!" Volumes of reproach found expression in that one word.

"There is no necessity for it. Travelling at this season of the year is far from pleasurable. Frederic has already promised to see me ensconced in the infirmary; after which I shall be better alone until this matter be settled. Your companionship, your expression of opinions, anxieties, and hopes, would be agitating and hurtful: therefore, my sister, with full appreciation of all you have been to me, I shall have to decline your presence at this trying time. I shall need all my calmness, all my manhood, to sustain me through this ordeal; and these I can best retain separated from the nervous influences of a woman who feels almost as acute an interest in the success of the experiment as myself. Are not my reasons cogent?"

"In the extreme," replied his sister in an injured voice. "After such powerful logic, I shall confine my scorned assistance to the humble task of packing your trunk."

"Your resentment is unjust, Estella. I am sorry to seem ungrateful, but must have my own way in this thing."

There was nothing more to be said; and when, a few days later, Mrs. Somers stood upon the veranda, and watched the carriage winding its way through the grand old oaks, conveying her brother and son on the first stage of this empirical journey, she communed thoughtfully with herself:—

"Should he recover, I am safe from detection, now that this girl has betaken herself out of our world again. But, to one chance for success, there are a thousand against it; for which—Hush! was I about to thank God? He does very well as he is. I would not have him less dependent on me.

If he should ever see that girl! But he will not; and why should I disquiet myself in vain? Has Fortune befriended me so long to turn her back upon me now? I believe I grow timorous as I grow older. I must not flag now, now that the game is so nearly won. His will must be made as soon as he comes home,—that will by which, Frederic Somers, you are to reap the fruits of your mother's sacrifice of honor, peace, and conscience."

CHAPTER XLV.

MURMURING HEARTS.

As patiently and as tenderly as a mother, Miss Cally nursed Alfred Walworth's fading wife through a six-weeks' illness, during a part of which time reason had been absent from her throne, and Maggie had raved in the most pitiful fashion about her wrongs, mingling Esther Brandon's, her husband's, her own, and her baby's name together in a delirious jumble. But she was convalescent now; and the wild light was all gone from her eyes, the frenzied anger from her lips. She looked very wan and weak and patient; never uttering an impatient word; thanking her attendants in a low, sweet voice for their slightest service; quietly acquiescent under the gentle attentions which Alfred, stung to the quick by the just reproaches of her delirium, persistently showered upon her.

He wished, now that she was herself, she would speak out boldly and pettishly after the manner of the old Maggie, and afford him an opportunity of explaining away what was evidently a painful misapprehension on her part. He longed for this more for Esther's sake than for his own. But she would not speak. She was uniformly quiet, gentle, and undemonstrative when he talked to her, or sat by her, toying with her little wasted hand; for that pity which is akin to love had entered into his heart, and filled it full of tender thoughtfulness for his child-wife.

The day had come on which Miss Cally considered her services could be dispensed with. She bade her sweet patient an affectionate farewell, and, accompanied by Alfred,

proceeded to the carriage that had been sent for her. Turning abruptly to the young man as soon as Maggie's door closed upon them, she bestowed upon him a bit of friendly advice.

"Mr. Walworth, will you give an old woman who hasn't lived in this troublesome world fifty years for nought the privilege of speaking a few very plain words?"

Alfred readily accorded the desired permission.

"Something ails that little woman in yonder that all Dr. Sparks's pills and plasters cannot reach. In her delirium she has uttered some wild charges against a girl whom I believe to be almost too good for this earth. She is evidently laboring under a mistake that is crushing the life out of her. Go back to her, and win her trouble from her, as you alone can; and if you have done any thing to take the bloom from that sweet young face, and the light from her wistful eyes, beg her pardon before it is too late. 'A sin confessed is half redressed:' that's my philosophy."

Mr. Walworth's face flushed darkly.

"I have no sins against my wife to confess. I believe you are right about a misapprehension on her part, for which she alone is responsible."

"You are angry with me: I see that plainly. And now I am going to make you angrier. I ask this not more for your wife's sake than for my dear Esther's."

But she had not made him angrier. His face brightened; and he held out his hand frankly.

"Any one who knows and appreciates Esther Brandon is an object of admiration and affection to me."

But Miss Cally did not like this speech: so she said grimly, "Esther Brandon is a noble girl; and the man who would find favor in her eyes must be every inch a man, brimful of honor, truth, and chivalry. But we are chattering about the absent, when the present needs us most. Good-by! and remember that 'a candid confession is good for the soul:' that's my philosophy."

And she was gone.

Alfred re-opened his wife's door very softly. Possibly she might have fallen asleep. She lay there with very wide-open eyes fixed upon the little picture over the mantle that contained Mira's face and her solemn-looking school-mate's.

Mr. Walworth resumed his seat close by her lounge.

Then the wide-open eyes travelled from the picture to his face.

"I think I know who it is now, Alfred," she said presently in the quietest of voices.

"Who, little wife?"

"The sad-faced girl in the picture with Sister Mira. It is Miss Brandon."

"Yes, it is Miss Brandon," answered Alfred. But there was no confusion in face or voice; which Maggie considered a sad indication of heartless indifference to her sufferings.

"She is very beautiful; far handsomer now than she was in that picture." Poor little woman! how she felicitated herself upon the calm heroism requisite for this bold discussion of her rival's charms!

"I think Esther Brandon's beauty is the smallest of her claims to the admiration of the world."

Maggie winced. She was not yet prepared for wholesale eulogy: so she said never a word. But she had broken the ice. Alfred, hastily concluding that a candid confession might be good for Maggie's soul, if not for his own, boldly followed up the subject.

"Little wife, I want to talk to you about Esther Brandon. Will you listen to me? It is for your sake; for at present I know you are harboring in your poor little heart the harshest of feelings toward that noble girl."

"How do you know it?" flashed the old-time wife.

"By the ravings of your delirium."

"People should not be held responsible for what they say in delirium. It is unkind to remind one of words spoken at such times."

"Then there is no bitterness in your heart against this girl?"

"It is monstrous to talk to me in this way."

"I only ask you to listen to me, my wife, for a little while patiently. I ask it for your own sake primarily, and then for hers. You will not think me monstrous when I get through. May I go on?"

"Yes, please," was the unexpectedly gentle reply.

Then, touching lightly upon the old-time love, Alfred Walworth portrayed in glowing words the trials, the strug-

gles, the triumphs, of the lonely woman, who was an object of jealousy to her, the petted child of Fortune; adding boldly and manfully, —

"At one time I would have married Esther Brandon: but Fate interposed an insuperable obstacle; and that obstacle will divide us through all time and into eternity. I fancy, Margaret, that your trouble has sprung from a gross misunderstanding of something that passed between us the other morning. It had been better, little wife, had you heard more. The tenderest friendship must always subsist between Esther and myself; but, to use her own words, 'there is no treason to you in that feeling, or in our hearts.' Were you sick or suffering, no truer, fonder nurse could you find than Esther Brandon. Did you need a friend, fearlessly, with a heart void of offence toward you and her God, would she come to you. Is your conception of love so gross, so narrow, as to exclude from its sacred compass all claimants but our own two wedded selves and the small man yonder? Call it by what name you will, — friendship in its truest, warmest, widest sense, — and join with me, little wife, in bestowing it heartily upon one who is as worthy of it at your hands as at mine."

"You will marry her when I am gone?"

"Never! Did I not say that the obstacle which separated us before I ever knew you would last through time into eternity?"

Then two emaciated hands were laid upon Alfred's.

"Husband, I think one's perceptions grow truer and clearer as one nears the shores eternal; and the gloss fades from earthly desire, revealing its nothingness. I don't think I shall be with you and son very much longer: I feel so helpless, so listless, and as if there was no health in me! I am glad you have spoken to me to-day just as you have. I have been unhappy, oh! so very unhappy, Alfred dear, since that morning, that cruel morning, when, passing the parlor-door on my way to rejoin you, I caught the ardent glance of your eye, and saw you kiss her fair hand. They tell me she has gone away from here. I am not sorry; for, if she came back with her glorious beauty and stately manners, I am afraid I could not be sensible and quiet, as I want to be."

"I know, I see now, Alfred, what has been the trouble in our married life. I have been a spoiled child, who failed to

put away from her childish things when she became a woman. She would have helped you onward, upward, where I have kept you down. But grand and stately and beautiful as she is, O my Alfred! she has not loved you one whit more fondly and faithfully than have I. She does not need you as do I. Her heart would not break (for it is a strong, firm heart) as would mine without you and your love, Alfred, my own, my all!"

Then in the tenderest embrace of all their wedded life did Alfred Walworth infold the soft little form, gently smoothing back the hair from her pale, wan forehead.

"Will you try and believe me, my wife, when I tell you, in solemn truthfulness, that the heart upon which you are resting is fuller than I knew myself, until this glad moment, of pure and loyal affection for yourself? And that I can say this much truthfully; that my soul is purified from the mad, wild, passionate love of my youth,—is due alone to the exalted nature of the woman who inspired that love four years ago, and rebuked it grandly when it became a sin."

"Then can I, too, join in lauding her name, in that she has given me in whole what heretofore I have only shared,—my husband's heart."

"And you are no longer jealous of Esther Brandon?" asked Alfred, lifting her face from his shoulder, so that he could look straight into her eyes.

"I hope I am not," was the cautious rejoinder.

"And you will try to be a happy wife, in spite of your knowledge that I once did love her, and would gladly have made her my wife, resting in the belief that time and the resolute struggles of two determined souls have eliminated from that old-time love all disquieting elements?"

"I will try to."

"And you will accept in good faith your husband's solemn promise, that, so long as God shall spare us both, your claims, your rights, your desires, and your happiness, shall be considered the first law of his life?"

A tender kiss was all his answer.

"Do these things, Maggie, my little wife, and you will prove yourself a wise woman in your generation."

And I think from that day dated the union of these two.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A GENERAL SUMMARY.

CHESTER.

A STATELY old house, sombre with its lurking shadows of sorrow and remorse; its occupants a suffering, querulous paralytic, whose prison-life gives full scope for the stings of conscience and the gnawings of remorse; a sweet-faced, gentle-browed girl, whose loving heart grows sick with its burden of hope deferred, pathetically patient under the petty trials and wearing duties of her daily life, always striving, never murmuring; and a motherless boy, whose small heart has already transferred its loving allegiance from the dead to the living.

BELTON.

Silence and emptiness. Under a trailing white clematis down in the old-fashioned garden nestles a two-months-old grave. In it sleeps the child-wife of the master, and around her last resting-place the Southern summer roses fling their sweetest bloom. Very gently and peacefully had she died, her arms around her husband's neck, her failing breath exhaling in prayers for him and baby Felix. Then the master of Belton had closed its doors against the sunshine, had placed his orphaned boy under the tender guardianship of his sister, and, turning his back upon the past, had thrown himself resolutely into the vortex of political life, where his fine talents readily commanded the attention and respect of his compeers.

THE OAKS.

Proverbial Miss Cally flits about like a sunbeam, uttering quaint bits of wisdom; wondering almost daily what has become of that dear girl Esther; wishing Estella were a degree more companionable, and several degrees less stately; praying fervently in her gentle soul that God will bless the efforts of the man who promises so confidently that the blind shall see again.

Mrs. Somers calmly self-possessed, in a state of schemeless quiescence since the disappearance of Esther Brandon has frustrated her plan of poetical justice; rejoicing in that disappearance before Roger's promised restoration to sight should have revealed to him this girl's marvellous resemblance to his dead wife, and set him to mischievous investigations. Fred very boisterously unhappy because of Mira's persistent refusal to let him become the head of what she calls "her helpless family;" and, of a truth, even the ardor of a lover could not blind him to the fact that a paralytic father and a two-year-old child were something of drawbacks to their promised felicity. Notwithstanding which, he manfully declared his readiness to assume his share of her family responsibilities; to which Mira resolutely and unselfishly answered "No."

LOCUST GROVE.

Blessed are the sons of men who have no history: in comfortable monotony, in eventless happiness, their days pass on. "Give us this day our daily bread" is the one prayer of their life; and, that bread (for bread read universal creature-comforts) being granted, what reck they of the outside, restless world, where hearts burn, and brains labor, and souls yearn—for what? To hoard up treasure for the moth and rust.

NEWPORT.

Newport's sensation is Miss Brandon, the fair dramatic reader, who, with her lady-companion (a widow advanced in years, provided for her by motherly Madame Celestine), has flitted from city to city, winning golden opinions from the press, making warm friends wherever she stopped, charming more by her stately beauty and magnificent talents than by her gentle reserve and superb dignity.

THE INFIRMARY.

Six months of alternate hope and despair; and now the day has come when the wise men promised Roger Etheridge he should look once more upon the face of his fellow-man.

The bandages were about to be removed. Were those men, with serious voices and deliberate steps advancing toward his chair, come as the executioners of his last hope, or messengers of peace and joy? They touched him; and one said kindly and gravely, —

"We have come, Mr. Etheridge, for the final experiment. May God in his mercy bless our efforts! We are not over-confident. Are you prepared for the worst?"

A silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of the blind man, who recognized this moment as the supreme one of his life. In that pause, a prayer for mercy and for pity floated upward to the great white throne from Roger Etheridge's quivering lips; and it pleases me to fancy that Amy, the redeemed, bore it onward to the feet of the mighty Judge of heaven and earth, adding her own angelic petitions for mercy to the father of her child.

"I am ready; but wait." And from his breast-pocket he extracted Amy's letter, holding it where it should be the first object to impress itself upon his restored retina.

A few more seconds of breathless silence as the men of science unbandaged his longing eyes.

"Well, sir?" in voices of anxious interest from the doctors.

"I can see the folded letter in my hand; the writing is but a blur; my own hand is plainly visible. Is this success?" And no pen-and-ink description can do justice to the ringing anxiety in the intense tones of his voice.

"Thank God! this is success; and you will improve daily."

Then again the eyes were bandaged; and Roger Etheridge submitted peacefully to a period of longer probation: for what were a few more days of placid waiting, now that the glad certainty of restoration was his?

Every day the bandages were taken off for a short period of time; every day the period was lengthened; and every succeeding day's experiment proved more satisfactory; until, from a plain white parallelogram whose surface was blurred

by a faint black line, his treasure took distinct form, and with his own glad eyes Roger Etheridge read this superscription in faded-ink characters:—

“TO ROGER ETHERIDGE. — *Private.*”

Then was the sad story of Amy Wharton's wrongs, and the strange story of Esther Brandon's childhood, revealed by the hand that had long since gone to dust.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE LETTER.

“MY HUSBAND, — As I take my pen in a sadly feeble grasp to write my dying confession to you, I am solemnly impressed with the wisdom of the injunction, ‘to take no thought for the morrow.’ I have taken thought, pondered on, and planned for the morrow; and here, in a strange place, with no one near me but my faithful Dinah, my death-warrant has gone out, and my plans have come to nought. I know that never again shall I look upon your dear face, nor upon my baby-girl's. God bless her, and care for her until you take her back to your bosom! which will be soon now, I know; for her unhappy mother will have found rest in the grave by the time this has been conveyed to you by my one true friend, my slave Dinah, and will no more stand between you and your child.

“Do I write very calmly for a woman who has so much to say, and such a short, short while to say it? I feel calm, — so calm, that I wonder at myself. And then I cease to wonder; for I know that it is the calm of a soul that is almost done with life's unrest, and can look forward without a tremor to the blessed certainty of a home with the redeemed. ‘For I know that my Redeemer liveth.’

“Before I write of myself, before I tell you the miserable story that you refused to listen to, when on my bended knees, Roger, I prayed you to hear me, I must tell you about our child; for, if God should see fit to call me hence before my task is done, I shudder to think that you would be possessed of no clew to her identity or whereabouts.

"When you spurned me from you, my husband, of all the cruel things you said to me, the most crushing was your solemn declaration, that, when my baby—our baby, Roger—was six years old, you would claim her: until then she should be mine. Your words haunted, they maddened me. I could take no joy in my beautiful baby for thinking that each day that unfolded new charms, and endeared her more to my lonely heart, was but bringing nearer and nearer the fatal one on which your terrible threat would be put into execution.

"At last, from my half-maddened brain I evolved a plan of action. I would go to you (it yet wanted some six months of her sixth birthday); I would compel you to listen to me; I would beseech you, now that God had taken to himself the child that was my reproach, to forgive the past; I would pray to be taken back to your home; for our little one's sake, not mine, Roger, to be received, on sufferance, in the home where I had once been an honored mistress; to live there, and watch over my child, and see to it that her girlhood should have two things that mine lacked,—a mother's prayerful guardianship and a father's mighty protection. But, when I remembered your fierce wrath, I dared not put my all to the risk by going to you with my baby in my arms, and perchance have her torn from me, and myself turned from your doors with fresh curses upon my desolate head. So I took my child, Roger, to the good woman who had given me all of a mother's care while under her charge; and I told her I wanted to leave my little one with her while I took an arduous journey. In my mad fear that you might trace my child from the place where we had been living,—whence I had written repeatedly to Estella,—I manufactured a name for her; for I dared not run the risk of your robbing me of her while I was on my way to find you to plead my cause. I left her with Madame Celestine, who keeps a girl's school twenty miles from Chester, Penn.; and I left her there under the false name of 'Esther Brandon.'

"And now, if I never complete another sheet of this letter, my baby is safe. Old Dinah has sworn to me to hasten on to the Oaks, and place this in your hands, as soon as she shall have seen me decently buried. And I know she will do it; for she is faithful and true.

"And now, Roger Etheridge, the one true love of my life, let me, in dying, try to remove from me the burden of your contempt, not all deserved, my husband, as I could have convinced you in the long-ago, would you have but listened to me.

"I will go no farther back than to the time when I, a dependent orphan, was domesticated in the house of my uncle Richard Walworth's widow. It was in accordance with his death-bed request, that I was taken, on the completion of my education, into his own family; for my mother had been a dear relative of his. But his widow, though complying with the letter of his request, failed in the spirit. I tried to make my life seem less dependent by doing all in my power for my haughty benefactress; and I believe, as a useful companion, she fully appreciated me.

"When I had been with her some few months only, her son, the idol of her life, Philip Walworth, returned from college. Proximity and constant association were followed by the usual results. We became attached to each other; and he asked me to marry him. I consented; and we became engaged. He announced to his mother his intention of marrying me; and her wrath was terrible to behold. I was driven from her protection with scorn and contumely. I found refuge with a maiden aunt in most reduced circumstances. Philip found me out, and prosecuted his suit with ardor. He pleaded for a private marriage. I was young, weak, and very much in love. I yielded. He returned with a young clergyman (a college chum, he said), who donned the white robes of a priest, and made me the wife of Philip Walworth.

"My husband staid with me a month that time; then left me, returning at various intervals to see me; always holding out to me hopes and promises of soon taking me honorably into his mother's home. Then his visits grew rarer and rarer; the intervals between, longer and longer; then ceased, leaving me maddened by the knowledge that I was about to become a mother. I travelled to Chester to plead for mercy at his hands. My life was very nearly the forfeit for that journey. I sent for him. He came, not knowing who it was that wished to see him.

"My treacherous brain refused its office in the supreme moment; and, after greeting him by name, I but muttered

in the incoherence of delirium. When I again became conscious, they told me two weeks had elapsed. I sent for him again: he had gone to Europe. Back to my home with my aunt I journeyed so soon as I dared. A few months afterward my child was born. In my agony I sought out the clergyman who had performed the ceremony. Pity my horror-stricken soul, when, with brutal levity, he apologized for having assumed the sacred office of priest for that one occasion only. But he had felt sure, he said, 'that Philip would have made it all right.' Then I heard for the first time that Philip Walworth had taken a wife with him to Europe. I tore myself loose from all old associations; and, in a far-distant State, Mrs. Wharton the widow, with her little child, found occupation as a teacher, and won friends by the conscientious performance of her duties and the blamelessness of her life. When you came across my path, Roger Etheridge, and, with your noble face and courteous manners, won my sad heart so completely, it never entered into my wildest dreamings that the poor gift of beauty that was still mine could prove an attraction in your eyes: but it did; and, when you asked me to become your wife, you will remember I asked for three days in which to consider my reply. Those three days, my Roger, were spent by my most wretched self in frenzied strivings after strength to tell you the whole truth. But the strength was not granted me; and when you came again, offering me the blessed shelter of your love, I could not refuse: O Roger! I could not. It was not in me to put from me you, your love, and the blessed shelter of a home. Therein I sinned, and my sin found me out. The angels of heaven were not happier than was I those five blissful years of our union. Then that fiend, the man who had mocked God's holy ministry for my confusion, found out that I had married a man of wealth; and the letter that in my ignorance I gave you to read was a threatening demand from him for money.

"Oh the wild agony of that time! But I dreamed of winning your pardon even then; for in my own stricken soul I knew that I had been more sinned against than sinning. And I knew that you had loved me; and, where we love much, we can forgive much. So, when you thrust me away from you, I sought Estella Somers, knowing her great influence with you, and bowed myself in supplica-

tion before her, begging her to intercede for me; but her heart was as a stone. And then I went back to the aunt who had been a friend to me through all my desolate life. And soon it pleased God to take back to himself that child,—his child: and I could not grieve, Roger; for the wild hope sprang up in my heart, that now it would be easier to win your pardon for the hideous past. I wrote to Estella, telling her the child was dead, once more pleading with her to obtain me a hearing. Once more she coldly refused the office of mediator; and I was forced to think that old Dinah was right when she said, 'Mistress, Miss Stella's not the one to help you back to your home. If you and master was to be joined together again, every child you had would lessen her son's chance of the property: now one little life is all that's 'twixt him and the property.' The old woman's words were a revelation to me; and she has sworn to me most solemnly that this letter shall never pass into the hands of my unnatural sister-in-law, Estella Somers.

"All the rest you know. My plan of finding you out, and kneeling before you until you uttered the words of pardon I have so yearned to hear, has been frustrated by God. So let it be. 'He doeth all things well.' My hand trembles; my strength fails me. Hasten, my beloved Roger, to take home to your heart and protection our daughter; and when you press her to your heart, when you recognize in her beauty and angelic disposition the promise of a bright future, when the home you prepared for your undeserving wife shall be crowned with the light of her daughter's purer presence, may you find it in your heart to forgive the unhappy woman who has made her peace with God, and who but asks 'that man shall not be more just than his Maker'!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IN WHICH ESSIE GIVES HER MOST EFFECTIVE READING.

FOR an hour, or more maybe, Esther Brandon's father (or rather "Estella Etheridge's," to call her at last by the name given her by her sponsors in baptism) continued in a sort of rapt revery, with his wife's letter open on the table before him, while the past, dating from his wedding-morning up to this wonderful hour, passed in shadowy panorama before him, — a long succession of sorrow-burdened days, joy-gilded seconds; a sad array of mistakes, of rash action, of pride-born mercilessness; and, last of all, the marvellous workings of over-ruling destiny, that had brought to him the knowledge that his declining years were to be blessed by a daughter's love, by the hand of that daughter herself.

"To think I have held my darling's hand in my own! I have heard her sweet voice; and all my heart went out to her with the directness of instinct!"

And it pleased him to think he had been good to his child, and aided her in her struggles against the world, when she was to him but a friendless stranger. But the time for misty brooding was over. He must hasten to bring his beautiful child into the shelter of his heart and home. He entertained not a misgiving as to the possibility of finding her; for he rightly divined, that, on leaving Le Noir, she would have returned to her old-time friend, Madame Celestine. Thither sped Roger Etheridge, his heart full of longing love.

Did she know Miss Brandon's present whereabouts?

Most assuredly. Was she not in constant correspondence with her dear Esther? and was she not following her old pupil's triumphant march with proud joy and affectionate appreciation? Monsieur should have her address, of course.

Miss Brandon had just completed a series of readings at Newport.

She had won fame and money. She had done more: she had carried out, in the smallest particular, the plan of life mapped out for herself by herself.

Once, in bitterness and loneliness, sore and smarting, she had sworn that the wise world should yet offer her the meed of its valuable respect and homage; and then she would show the wise world how she scorned its homage, how she spat upon its wisdom.

The world had offered her its meed of respect and homage; and had she scorned it?

No: she had learned the true philosophy of life at last, — to live, and let live; and she had gracefully received the flattering homage of the Newport world on this, the night of her last appearance in its midst; had bowed her farewells; and, entering her carriage, had whirled toward her hotel apartments, little wotting that her dramatic readings for that night were not yet over.

She entered her private parlor, *en route* for the sleeping-apartments that lay beyond.

A tall, commanding form rose up from an arm-chair at the extreme end of the long parlor; and Roger Etheridge advanced eagerly toward the beautiful woman, who stood transfixed with surprise and indignation at this invasion of her privacy.

"You do not know me," said a low, rich voice; and a thin, nervous hand was laid upon Essie's arm, while a pair of hungry eyes scanned her sweet face eagerly, adoringly.

"Is it, can it be, Mr. Etheridge?" she asked slowly and incredulously; for, though the rich voice sounded familiar, the splendid eyes, so full of soul and feeling, were all unknown to her.

"It is; and, by the help of God, he no longer needs the aid of other eyes or other lips to portray this lovely face for him."

And very lovely did his daughter look in his eyes as she

stood there before him, her graceful form draped in a shimmering lilac satin, a trailing white flower fastened to her bosom, another in the rich braids of her dark hair, while soft falls of rich lace enhanced the dazzling whiteness of her neck and arms.

"And the letter?" said Essie eagerly, anxious to give his words a less personal tendency.

"I have read it myself, dear child; and it is that letter that brought me here to-night. They tell me you read divinely: I have a fancy to hear her letter read by you."

But Essie shrank back. "Oh, no, no, no! I begged you not to let it be profaned by other eyes."

"You have heard her story and mine; have you not?"

"Yes, sir," said Essie meekly.

"Then, if I tell you that it is for her sake I ask this thing of you, will you do it?"

"Can any good come of it?"

"Incalculable."

"Would she have wished me to see it?"

"Most undoubtedly."

Then, standing beneath the bright gaslight, Essie took in her reverential hands the time-stained letter of the mother who she knew must be dead, else she would have come back to her lonely child, she had told Philip Walworth, who had made the fatal mistake of claiming her as his own.

She read on until the mystery of her own life lay bare before her. Then the yellow sheet fluttered from her nerveless grasp; and, sinking humbly on the floor by Roger Etheridge, she bowed her beautiful head before him, murmuring in a low, glad voice, "Bless me, my father, and help me to thank God for this proud moment, in which he has removed far from me the fearful burden of a mother's shame."

"Home to-morrow, quite restored." Mrs. Somers read this telegram aloud to Miss Cally and Frederic as she joined them at the breakfast-table on a certain morning two weeks after Essie's last dramatic reading.

"Good news indeed!" cried Miss Cally enthusiastically; "and now, since Cousin Roger's wonderful restoration, 'Never say die' shall be my philosophy."

And Frederic expressed his hearty delight at his uncle's

good fortune. Estella alone remained mute: there was nothing to say. She could not say that she was sorry her brother was no longer helplessly dependent on her; and yet that was the main feeling in her heart.

The telegram was so quiet in its tone, so unsuggestive in tenor, that the announcement of the master's arrival on the morrow bore but one result; namely, ordering the sheets that were to be put on his bed to be well aired, and suggesting to Miss Cally the propriety of making Roger's favorite desert for dinner.

The morrow came; and with it came Roger Etheridge and the new-found heiress of the Oaks.

When the rumbling of the carriage was heard, Miss Cally hastily dusted the flour from her plump white arms; Mrs. Somers calmly laid aside the handkerchief she was hemming; and Fred boisterously banged "The Complete Sportsman" down on the table, — the three moving by one impulse toward the veranda to welcome the returned traveller.

From the carriage stepped Roger Etheridge; then turned, and assisted his daughter to alight.

Very white and still she looked, following her father into the presence of these new relatives; for her womanly heart shrank from witnessing the confusion with which her aunt was about to be overwhelmed.

Very white and still Estella Somers looked as father and daughter advanced toward her; and she knew then, as well as she was ever to know, that her sin had found her out. But she carried it with a brave front. Surely they would not abase her before her boy: that was the anguished fear of the moment. But there was a coldly determined look about Roger's face that chilled the blood in her throbbing heart.

"Estella," (how cold and harsh his voice sounded!) "let me make known to you your niece, my daughter, Estella Etheridge, whose identity, by some fatal mistake on your part, was confounded with my wife's other daughter; in consequence of which my child has been deprived through the tenderest years of her girlhood of my love and protection. A lifetime will not be long enough to atone for the foul wrong we all have done her."

Then reckless, and maddened by shame and the frustra-

tion of all her schemes, Estella Somers threw her last die, — threw, and gave up the game.

"That is *not* your daughter! I charge that woman by your side — Esther Brandon, if that be her name — with trading upon her marvellous likeness to your dead wife, and with fabricating this monstrous lie to rob my son Frederic Somers of his rightful inheritance!" Her glittering eyes were fixed, glowing with hatred, upon the pale face of her niece; one long, slender finger was pointed at her in scornful repudiation; and her words came hissing from between compressed lips.

"Hold!" cried her brother, "and do not heap insult upon injury until you have read the dying words of the sister-in-law toward whom you acted a most treacherous part."

Then the anguish of the mother's heart found utterance: "My boy, my boy, do not listen to them! Do not believe them when they thus assail your mother's fair name!"

And, clinging convulsively to Frederic's arm, she strove to draw him away from their midst.

White and motionless, wondering in his honest heart what it might all mean, Frederic Somers had stood. But now a stern look of resolution came into his face as he shook off his mother's frantic clasp, and answered her in a strangely cold voice: —

"Mother, what all this means I cannot guess: but, when your name is assailed, my honor is assailed too; and, by the Eternal! good cause and just must be shown by any man for so doing. But if you have done wrong to any one, my mother, then your shame is my shame, your degradation mine.

"That letter, sir, — give it to me, please. I think I have a right to know its contents; for, if it concerns my mother, it touches me most nearly. May I read it?" And he held out his hand.

"Dear father, no, please!" murmured a pleading voice in Roger's ear.

"My boy," he began.

"I ask no quarter, uncle. I think I have a right to know what this all means. I am no child; and I refuse to be treated as such. Once more, may I read that letter?"

"Your mother shall have the decision of that question;" and Mr. Etheridge laid his wife's letter within his sister's hand.

Quivering with frightened emotion, she dashed it to the ground with a cry of pain.

Her son stooped, and possessed himself of it.

"Frederic, Frederic! I conjure, I command you not to read that base fraud!" Then her stately form shivered and swayed; and into frightened Miss Cally's arms she fell pale and rigid.

To his own room Frederic proceeded, his handsome face wearing an expression of gloomy bitterness altogether foreign to it; and, before he emerged from his privacy, Estella Somers had ceased to be the idol of her boy's pure soul.

The day had waned into late evening when he entered the library where Mr. Etheridge and his daughter were sitting, the latter deprecating in words of tender remonstrance the merciless course her father had seen fit to pursue.

"Pardon me, darling; but when, in addition to the wrongs she had inflicted upon my innocent child, she added the charge of imposture, I forgot the promise I had given you, — forgot every thing but my own just wrath."

"But poor Frederic, father!"

"Thank you, sweet cousin, for the gentle pity you express for poor Frederic, the pitiful impostor who has been enjoying your inheritance while you battled for existence in an unfriendly world. This is more than I deserve at your hands, my cousin; and the plea of profound ignorance is all the claim I have to your mercy."

He was standing before Essie's chair as he spoke, his fine face crimson with shame, his eyes dark with gloom.

"Your manly words are claims to my sincerest affection, dear innocent cousin!" and, rising up from her chair, Miss Etheridge offered her sweet lips for a cousinly caress.

"You are an angel!" cried Fred enthusiastically.

"I'm nothing of the kind," said Essie with a bright smile. "I am only a woman, who is so very happy that she can find no room in her heart for resentment."

"And now, sweet cousin, once more your pardon; then a farewell kiss."

"A farewell kiss, Frederic!" said father and daughter in a breath.

"Yes: it is late in the day; for I've been but an idle scamp all my life. But Cousin Cally would tell you it is never too late to mend."

"Where do you go, my boy?"

"To work, sir," answered Fred resolutely; "where, I know not myself, as yet. Shelter my unhappy mother until I procure a home for her, uncle; and try of your great clemency, and out of the full measure of your own content, to spare her a share of the pity you so generously bestow on me. Tell her I thought best to go without bidding her good-by; for I am not quite sure I could keep from adding my reproaches to your well-deserved ones. It's hard lines on a man to have to pity the mother he has always thought a saint. She had better have let me live and die a beggar than have brought this shame upon us both. It was a huge mistake she made; and may God forgive her for it!—Maybe, if you ask him, he will, sweet cousin. Tell her I will come back for her soon, — just as soon as I've found a place for us both, it matters not how poor. I think uncle's right when he says that a lifetime would be too short to atone for the foul wrong we've all done you."

Sternly refusing all offers of assistance from his uncle, Frederic Somers heroically turned his back upon the slothful life he had led as heir-expectant to his uncle's immense fortune, and bravely took his place in the ranks of the laborers in the world's great workshop.

When he turned his back on the Oaks, he went as straight as steam could carry him into the presence of Mira Walworth.

Poor Fred! He wanted comfort; and who else was there now to give it him?

CHAPTER XLIX.

INCONSISTENT CONDUCT.

"MIRA darling, I've come to tell you, that, of all the sensible things you ever did in your sensible life, the most sensible was your refusal to marry me when I begged you so hard a while back; for, in addition to being a loafer all my life, it suddenly transpires that I am an impostor and a thief."

The honest thief was sitting on the same sofa with his gentle *fiancée* as he made this startling confession; and surely never before was an impostor dealt with after such a loving fashion.

Circumstances had made a loafer of him; but what combination of circumstances *could* make an impostor or a thief of her beloved? So Mira just nestled closer to the handsome sinner, flashed a little incredulous smile up into his face, and asked quietly, —

"What now, Frederic dear?"

Confession seemed sweet and easy with her so close to him, her eyes full of gentle pity, her small mouth dropping pearls of wisdom every few moments, her loving heart dictating words of comfort for his extremity. He told her the strange story of his cousin's restoration to her own, suppressing only his mother's guilty share in the wrongs that had been inflicted upon her. For what would it profit his pure Mira to know those shameful details?

A most absorbed auditor he had in Miss Walworth; but, when he came to tell who this new-found cousin was, — her old schoolmate, Esther Brandon! — Mira interrupted him with a truly feminine comment: —

"Oh, how romantic!"

"Well," said Fred bravely, brightening up considerably now that Mira didn't seem to mind much that he was a thievish impostor, "let's be sensible, and call it romantic: that's about as good a name as any for it."

"And I'm so glad dear Essie has fallen upon such pleasant places!"

"Essie is an angel!" exclaimed Fred, persistently maintaining the opinion his fair cousin had gainsaid.

Oh the quick jealousy of a loving woman's heart! Another woman would have detected the falling inflection in Mira's sweet voice as she answered, —

"You already love your beautiful cousin, Fred?"

"Of course I do. I should be a monster else."

"And you'll love her better and better every day you spend with her," in a sad little minor. "I know you will; for I know Essie. Nobody can help loving her."

"I, for one, don't want to help it," said Fred stoutly. "But I expect to see very little of her, or of the Oaks, in future."

"What do you mean, dear?" And jealousy gave way before the anxious fear that Fred was going to run away.

"I mean that I am going to work; and I came here to release you from bondage before I settled down to the novel undertaking of doing something."

"You don't love me any more," murmured his *fiancée* in a reproachful undertone.

"I do: I love you so well, that I don't want to see you marry a beggar."

"But suppose I love that beggar?"

"So much the better for the beggar."

"And suppose I say I don't want to be released from bondage?"

"Then you shall remain in bondage."

"And suppose I say that my highest ambition on earth is to marry a loafer, an impostor, a thief, and a beggar?"

"Then you shall become Mrs. Frederic Somers just so soon as your L. I. T. B. lover has earned enough filthy lucre to provide you a home, and himself a suit of wedding-clothes."

"I am going to find something to do in Chester, Mi darling, so I can run out here and imbibe strength and courage from your dear eyes."

And he did. Aided by Mr. Walworth's influence, he readily obtained employment in a large mercantile establishment as confidential clerk; the responsibility of his post rendering it highly remunerative.

As soon as he was fairly established in this position, he wrote a bravely cheerful letter back to the Oaks, full of kindly affection for his uncle and cousin.

In compliance with this letter, Estella Somers turned her back upon the Oaks, and joined her son in Chester.

A storm of bitter emotion surged up in her passionate soul as she was ushered into the plain lodgings, which were the best Fred's limited means could provide; and sinking upon the hard horse-hair sofa, which formed the most luxurious appurtenance of their small sitting-room, she gave vent to all the pent-up misery of the past month.

"Mother," said Frederic gravely when the first violence of her grief had spent itself, "I am sorry for you: from the depths of my soul, I pity you; for I know that poverty will gall your haughty soul to the quick. But, whenever we have to deny ourselves any thing (and it's what we'll have to do pretty often for some time to come, I guess), I think it will do us good to bring to mind the many years that my gentle cousin, a frail girl, battled with poverty alone against the world. What she could bear without repining or failing either, I think you and I ought to be equal to."

That was all, in the way of reproach, Estella Somers ever heard from her son's lips. He could not forget that it was for love of him she had sinned; and, though the passionate adoration he had once bestowed upon her no longer filled his soul, he treated her with manly tenderness and gentle consideration that knew no change.

Repeatedly had Miss Etheridge, through Miss Cally as mediator, extended offers of reconciliation to the aunt who had wronged her. She had even persuaded her father to visit his sister in her rooms (where she led the life of a cloistered nun, awaiting her son's summons to join him) with words of kindness and pardon, and proffers of a home at the Oaks if she chose to remain.

But her stubborn soul refused the olive-branch so lovingly extended; and, when she finally took her departure, even her brother's outraged heart melted into something very much akin to pity at her care-worn and joyless aspect.

"Poor Estella!" sighed Miss Cally, wiping a tear of womanly pity from her bright eyes as she turned from the carriage-door. "How wretched she does look! 'Be virtuous, and you will be happy,' is most excellent philosophy."

The object of her pity would have scorned such goodish philosophy, preferring to indulge in the luxury of woe.

Thus the whirligig of Time brings around retribution.

Estella Somers's new life offered but few attractions; her new duties, performed in not the cheerfulest fashion, consisting in making one dollar go as far as two, in saving candle-ends, and in darning the most unconscionable holes in poor Fred's socks; while her "sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier days."

Fred's new life did not bear quite so hardly on him as it did upon his haughty mother.

Every evening or two, after the day's work was over, he might be seen trudging on foot toward the suburbs of the town where stood Philip Walworth's mansion.

And when the front-door opened quickly in answer to his well-known knock, and a loving look of recognition greeted him from a pair of well-beloved eyes, and a soft white hand drew him quickly into the precincts of the old parlor, and Mira's dear voice spoke his glad welcome, what cared he for Time or its revenges?

It was upon one of those tri-weekly visits that Mr. Somers was led to reflect upon the paradoxical nature of a woman's heart.

And, of a truth, for faithfulness and fickleness, for certain uncertainty, for bold coyness, for unselfish selfishness, commend me to that same organ.

When Frederic Somers, the heir-expectant to the Oaks, had come a-wooing her, Mira Walworth had told him with gentle stubbornness that their marriage was an impossibility; and she had brought forward such a formidable array of what she pronounced insuperable obstacles, that he had been forced to yield the point. But Fred was poor now, and needed her; and, behold! the insuperable obstacles dwindled into utter insignificance.

When, handsome, and petted of the fashionable world, he had been able to choose whom he would, it was but chary acknowledgment of her love Fred could win from her coy lips; for, if he knew how very devoted she was to him, he

would never look for happiness elsewhere. But penniless Fred Somers could not choose whom he would; and now she would not wrong him by withholding the knowledge of the fulness of her love. He needed it now to sustain and comfort him.

Her loving audacity reached its climax one evening when Fred came to her, looking more than usually depressed; for the poor fellow had passed a sorry day with his imbibed mother.

"Fred dear, you are very, very poor now; aren't you, dearest?"

"The most prolific imagination could hardly conceive of a more poverty-stricken wretch, my darling."

"You haven't any thing in the world?"

"Nothing but you, my treasure."

"Not even enough to buy a wedding-coat?"

"Not a real broadcloth one."

"Then, dearest, we'll have to get married in your old one." And upon the bosom of that old one Mira hid her rosy face.

"Mi darling, what do you mean?" And Fred lifted the sweet face so he could look into her eyes.

"I mean that I want to marry my precious beggar. I cannot wait forever, even for a new broadcloth coat; for O Frederic, my own Frederic! the days when you stay away from me are such dreary blanks! I only live when you come to me, dearest; and this intermittent life is wearing me out. My love, I need you; I want you. Will you take me right now, just as I am, with all my burdens and anxieties? Will you come and help me bear those burdens and anxieties, Frederic, my all? As man and wife, will not my burdens, and yours too, grow lighter when borne by our united shoulders? I think so. And, whether my reasoning be sound or not, this I know, — I love you very dearly, Fred; and I think we'll both be happier for marrying right now."

And Fred took the brave girl at her word. A very quiet marriage-ceremony was performed in the library of the old house in Chester; Frederic's mother being the only person present besides the minister and the family physician. A very quiet *dejeuner* followed the ceremony; and, later on in the day, Mr. Somers conducted his mother back to her lonely lodgings.

Fred still retains his position as confidential clerk in the house of North & Co., whereby he supports his mother and himself.

He says the only thorn in his side is the fact that Mira is the affluent wife of a salaried clerk, upon whom she is dependent — for nothing.

"Nothing but love and happiness, and all that makes up the sum of a woman's life," answers Mira Somers.

CHAPTER L.

THE REWARD OF PATIENCE.

Two quietly peaceful years have passed since the day on which Roger Etheridge brought his beautiful daughter home to be the light and the joy of his declining years.

God's sunlight falls upon no happier home than the Oaks, with its small family of three; for Miss Cally, Essie's first friend, and the unconscious instrument of her restoration to her own, is an honored inmate of the household.

Her loving admiration of her handsome niece is second in intensity only to the father's fond pride in his daughter. Miss Cally declares that she always felt as if Essie was something very near and dear to her from the first moment she laid eyes on her; for "blood is thicker than water" is and always has been her philosophy.

The one break in the gentle monotony of Miss Etheridge's life is the regular reception of bulky letters bearing the post-mark of Vienna.

These letters are long, kindly, interesting letters from Alfred Walworth, who has been the accredited minister of the United States at that court for a longer period than Essie's residence at the Oaks.

She had respected her promise of correspondence made in the breakfast-room at Belton; and together had the husband and wife read her letters, in every line of which breathed the sweet, pure, strong nature of the writer. This interchange of letters had been kept up uninterruptedly ever since. Essie had written to her friend the wonderful revelation contained in her mother's letter simply and with-

out comment. Mr. Walworth had returned her his most fervent congratulations on the finding of a father and a home, earnestly, but without comment. And, since that time, the quiet tenor of their letters had remained unbroken.

She knew, from the public's commendation of his statesmanship, that he had redeemed the promise of his early manhood; that the man of magnificent possibilities was become a man of massive realities: and in that knowledge she rested content. She did not look forward restlessly. Her present was so replete with happy content, — "good measure, pressed down and running over," — that she could well afford to let the things of to-morrow take thought for themselves.

She also maintained a brisk correspondence with her cousin in Chester. Only a slight thrill stirred the placid pulses of her heart when a black-edged letter, written by Frederic Somers, reached her, containing the information of his "dear wife's bereavement in the death of her noble father." With lugubrious pride, Fred forwarded with his letter a newspaper containing a full description of the funereal pomp and ceremony with which all Chester had honored the exit of Philip Walworth's sin-stained soul from its tenement of clay. A whole column was devoted to resolutions setting forth with becoming solemnity the sorrow of the community at the loss of its inestimable citizen. Another column was dedicated to a categorical summary of the virtues of the deceased, and consolatory declarations of his ripeness for heaven, his fitness for the reward awaiting the righteous, &c.

"It is the way of the world," murmured Estella Etheridge as she leaned forward and consigned the laudatory columns to the flames; while something very near akin to scorn curled the corners of her sweet mouth.

November, with its wailing winds and naked woods, had followed upon the footsteps of an unusually bright October. It was the gloaming of one of its saddest days. Miss Etheridge was the sole occupant of the little room where she had first listened to the story of her mother's exile from home, as told by Miss Cally.

No ghostly shadows now, as then, peopled the alcove, Essie's favorite retreat. The white shrouds had all been stripped from the furniture; and, in the light of the wood-fire, the crimson brocatelle chairs and sofas glistened with

rich warmth. Fresh damask curtains shaded the windows, and draped the arched cornice that divided the recess from the library. Tasteful pictures, scattered vases of fall flowers, a centre-table full of new periodicals, and an open writing-desk, all betokened a living and refined occupancy of this spot, that had for such weary long years been given over to gloom and silence.

Near the fire, which had been kindled more for cheer than warmth, Estella Etheridge — the quickening spirit that had wrought all these improvements — was sitting, indulging in the bitter-sweet luxury of idle dreaming. Her thoughts had wandered far away into the past, lingering in tender contemplation over what might have been. It was not often she allowed fancy to stray in that direction: there were pitfalls in that by-trodden path, near which it was not well to linger; there, too, were smouldering volcanoes, that a breath from the living present might kindle into fierce activity. But she was alone. Her father had been summoned to the drawing-room to see a visitor; Miss Cally was busy with her household affairs; the lamps were not yet lighted; and not a sound from the present came to disturb her dream of the past.

And, as she dreamed, the light of a love that slept, but would not die, came welling up in her tender eyes; and over her full rich lips fluttered a couplet from an exquisite waif of poesy that had touched an answering chord in her own impassioned soul: —

"Is it a sin to love thee?
Then my soul is deeply dyed."

A quick, firm tread, an eager parting of the damask curtains, a silken rustle, and Essie's startled upward glance fell upon the form and face of Alfred Walworth!

Framed upon the threshold of the alcove he stood; not the boyishly handsome, bright-faced Alfred Walworth, the impetuous lover of her youth; not the cold-faced, sneering sceptic, Alfred Walworth, that had meted out such tender homage to womankind in his later years; but a bronzed and bearded man, calm of voice, dignified of demeanor, in whose glorious eyes shone the light of victory.

A low, glad cry from Essie's lips, two white hands stretched out in eager welcome, and he was by her side.

"Esther, my queen, my own! I have come to demand at your dear hands the reward that surely you will no longer refuse to a love so true, so patient, so loyal, as that which fills my heart for you, darling. What is existence worth if we two remain apart to the bitter end? My soul cries out for something more than friendship can impart. Shall it cry in vain, Essie, the idol of my faithful heart?"

In the dark uplifted eyes that met his own with a fearless gaze, full of love and trust divine, Alfred Walworth read the bright fulfilment of his dearest earthly hope.

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