

CHAPTER XXV

On the eighth of April we went to London, on the eighth of May I returned, in obedience to Arthur's wish; very much against my own, because I left him behind. If he had come with me, I should have been very glad to get home again, for he led me such a round of restless dissipation while there, that, in that short space of time, I was quite tired out. He seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends and acquaintances in particular, and the public in general, on every possible occasion, and to the greatest possible advantage. It was something to feel that he considered me a worthy object of pride; but I paid dear for the gratification: for, in the first place, to please him I had to violate my cherished predilections, my almost rooted principles in favour of a plain, dark, sober style of dress—I must sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly, just as I had, long since, determined I would never do—and this was no trifling sacrifice; in the second place, I was continually straining to satisfy his sanguine expectations and do honour to his choice by my general conduct and deportment, and fearing to disappoint him by some awkward misdemeanour, or some trait of inexperienced ignorance about the customs of society, especially when I acted the part of hostess, which I was not unfrequently called upon to do; and, in the third place, as I intimated before, I was wearied of the throng and bustle, the restless hurry and ceaseless change of a life so alien to all my previous habits. At last, he suddenly discovered that the London air did not agree with me, and I was languishing for my country home, and must immediately return to Grassdale.

I laughingly assured him that the case was not so urgent as he appeared to think it, but I was quite willing to go home if he was. He replied that he should be obliged to remain a week or two longer, as he had business that required his presence.

“Then I will stay with you,” said I.

“But I can't do with you, Helen,” was his answer: “as long as you stay I shall attend to you and neglect my business.”

“But I won't let you,” I returned; “now that I know you have business to attend to, I shall insist upon your attending to it, and letting me alone; and, to tell the truth, I shall be glad of a little rest. I can take my rides and walks in the Park as usual; and your business cannot occupy all your time: I shall see you at meal-times, and in the evenings at least, and that will be better than being leagues away and never seeing you at all.”

“But, my love, I cannot let you stay. How can I settle my affairs when I know that you are here, neglected—?”

“I shall not feel myself neglected: while you are doing your duty, Arthur, I shall never complain of neglect. If you had told me before, that you had anything to do, it would have been half done before this; and now you must make up for lost time by redoubled exertions. Tell me what it is; and I will be your taskmaster, instead of being a hindrance.”

“No, no,” persisted the impracticable creature; “you must go home, Helen; I must have the satisfaction of knowing that you are safe and well, though far away. Your bright eyes are faded, and that tender, delicate bloom has quite deserted your cheek.”

“That is only with too much gaiety and fatigue.”

“It is not, I tell you; it is the London air: you are pining for the fresh breezes of your country home, and you shall feel them before you are two days older. And remember your situation, dearest Helen; on your health, you know, depends the health, if not the life, of our future hope.”

“Then you really wish to get rid of me?”

“Positively, I do; and I will take you down myself to Grassdale, and then return. I shall not be absent above a week or fortnight at most.”

“But if I must go, I will go alone: if you must stay, it is needless to waste your time in the journey there and back.”

But he did not like the idea of sending me alone.

“Why, what helpless creature do you take me for,” I replied, “that you cannot trust me to go a hundred miles in our own carriage, with our own footman and a maid to attend me? If you come with me I shall assuredly keep you. But tell me, Arthur, what is this tiresome business; and why did you never mention it before?”

“It is only a little business with my lawyer,” said he; and he told me something about a piece of property he wanted to sell, in order to pay off a part of the incumbrances on his estate; but either the account was a little confused, or I was rather dull of comprehension, for I could not clearly understand how that should keep him in town a fortnight after me. Still less can I now comprehend how it should keep him a month, for it is nearly that time since I left him, and no signs of his return as yet. In every letter he promises to be with me in a few days, and every time deceives me, or deceives himself. His excuses are vague and insufficient. I cannot doubt that he has got among

his former companions again. Oh, why did I leave him! I wish—I do intensely wish he would return!

June 29th.—No Arthur yet; and for many days I have been looking and longing in vain for a letter. His letters, when they come, are kind, if fair words and endearing epithets can give them a claim to the title—but very short, and full of trivial excuses and promises that I cannot trust; and yet how anxiously I look forward to them! how eagerly I open and devour one of those little, hastily-scribbled returns for the three or four long letters, hitherto unanswered, he has had from me!

Oh, it is cruel to leave me so long alone! He knows I have no one but Rachel to speak to, for we have no neighbours here, except the Hargraves, whose residence I can dimly descry from these upper windows embosomed among those low, woody hills beyond the Dale. I was glad when I learnt that Milicent was so near us; and her company would be a soothing solace to me now; but she is still in town with her mother; there is no one at the Grove but little Esther and her French governess, for Walter is always away. I saw that paragon of manly perfections in London: he seemed scarcely to merit the eulogiums of his mother and sister, though he certainly appeared more conversable and agreeable than Lord Lowborough, more candid and high-minded than Mr. Grimsby, and more polished and gentlemanly than Mr. Hattersley, Arthur's only other friend whom he judged fit to introduce to me.—Oh, Arthur, why won't you come? why won't you write to me at least? You talked about my health: how can you expect me to gather bloom and vigour here, pining in solitude and restless anxiety from day to day?—It would serve you right to come back and find my good looks entirely wasted away. I would beg my uncle and aunt, or my brother, to come and see me, but I do not like to complain of my loneliness to them, and indeed loneliness is the least of my sufferings. But what is he doing—what is it that keeps him away? It is this ever-recurring question, and the horrible suggestions it raises, that distract me.

July 3rd.—My last bitter letter has wrung from him an answer at last, and a rather longer one than usual; but still I don't know what to make of it. He playfully abuses me for the gall and vinegar of my latest effusion, tells me I can have no conception of the multitudinous engagements that keep him away, but avers that, in spite of them all, he will assuredly be with me before the close of next week; though it is impossible for a man so circumstanced as he is to fix the precise day of his return: meantime he exhorts me to the exercise of patience, "that first of woman's virtues," and desires me to remember the saying, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," and comfort myself with the assurance that the longer he stays away the better he shall love me when he returns; and till he does return, he begs I will continue to write to him constantly, for, though he is sometimes too idle and often too busy to answer my letters as they

come, he likes to receive them daily; and if I fulfil my threat of punishing his seeming neglect by ceasing to write, he shall be so angry that he will do his utmost to forget me. He adds this piece of intelligence respecting poor Milicent Hargrave:

“Your little friend Milicent is likely, before long, to follow your example, and take upon her the yoke of matrimony in conjunction with a friend of mine. Hattersley, you know, has not yet fulfilled his direful threat of throwing his precious person away on the first old maid that chose to evince a tenderness for him; but he still preserves a resolute determination to see himself a married man before the year is out. ‘Only,’ said he to me, ‘I must have somebody that will let me have my own way in everything—not like your wife, Huntingdon: she is a charming creature, but she looks as if she had a will of her own, and could play the vixen upon occasion’ (I thought ‘you’re right there, man,’ but I didn’t say so). ‘I must have some good, quiet soul that will let me just do what I like and go where I like, keep at home or stay away, without a word of reproach or complaint; for I can’t do with being bothered.’ ‘Well,’ said I, ‘I know somebody that will suit you to a tee, if you don’t care for money, and that’s Hargrave’s sister, Milicent.’ He desired to be introduced to her forthwith, for he said he had plenty of the needful himself, or should have when his old governor chose to quit the stage. So you see, Helen, I have managed pretty well, both for your friend and mine.”

Poor Milicent! But I cannot imagine she will ever be led to accept such a suitor—one so repugnant to all her ideas of a man to be honoured and loved.

5th.—Alas! I was mistaken. I have got a long letter from her this morning, telling me she is already engaged, and expects to be married before the close of the month.

“I hardly know what to say about it,” she writes, “or what to think. To tell you the truth, Helen, I don’t like the thoughts of it at all. If I am to be Mr. Hattersley’s wife, I must try to love him; and I do try with all my might; but I have made very little progress yet; and the worst symptom of the case is, that the further he is from me the better I like him: he frightens me with his abrupt manners and strange hectoring ways, and I dread the thoughts of marrying him. ‘Then why have you accepted him?’ you will ask; and I didn’t know I had accepted him; but mamma tells me I have, and he seems to think so too. I certainly didn’t mean to do so; but I did not like to give him a flat refusal, for fear mamma should be grieved and angry (for I knew she wished me to marry him), and I wanted to talk to her first about it: so I gave him what I thought was an evasive, half negative answer; but she says it was as good as an acceptance, and he would think me very capricious if I were to attempt to draw back—and indeed I was so confused and frightened at the moment, I can hardly tell what I said. And next time I saw him, he accosted me in all confidence as his affianced bride, and immediately began to settle

matters with mamma. I had not courage to contradict them then, and how can I do it now? I cannot; they would think me mad. Besides, mamma is so delighted with the idea of the match; she thinks she has managed so well for me; and I cannot bear to disappoint her. I do object sometimes, and tell her what I feel, but you don't know how she talks. Mr. Hattersley, you know, is the son of a rich banker, and as Esther and I have no fortunes, and Walter very little, our dear mamma is very anxious to see us all well married, that is, united to rich partners. It is not my idea of being well married, but she means it all for the best. She says when I am safe off her hands it will be such a relief to her mind; and she assures me it will be a good thing for the family as well as for me. Even Walter is pleased at the prospect, and when I confessed my reluctance to him, he said it was all childish nonsense. Do you think it nonsense, Helen? I should not care if I could see any prospect of being able to love and admire him, but I can't. There is nothing about him to hang one's esteem and affection upon; he is so diametrically opposite to what I imagined my husband should be. Do write to me, and say all you can to encourage me. Don't attempt to dissuade me, for my fate is fixed: preparations for the important event are already going on around me; and don't say a word against Mr. Hattersley, for I want to think well of him; and though I have spoken against him myself, it is for the last time: hereafter, I shall never permit myself to utter a word in his dispraise, however he may seem to deserve it; and whoever ventures to speak slightly of the man I have promised to love, to honour, and obey, must expect my serious displeasure. After all, I think he is quite as good as Mr. Huntingdon, if not better; and yet you love him, and seem to be happy and contented; and perhaps I may manage as well. You must tell me, if you can, that Mr. Hattersley is better than he seems—that he is upright, honourable, and open-hearted—in fact, a perfect diamond in the rough. He may be all this, but I don't know him. I know only the exterior, and what, I trust, is the worst part of him.”

She concludes with “Good-by, dear Helen. I am waiting anxiously for your advice—but mind you let it be all on the right side.”

Alas! poor Milicent, what encouragement can I give you? or what advice—except that it is better to make a bold stand now, though at the expense of disappointing and angering both mother and brother and lover, than to devote your whole life, hereafter, to misery and vain regret?

Saturday, 13th.—The week is over, and he is not come. All the sweet summer is passing away without one breath of pleasure to me or benefit to him. And I had all along been looking forward to this season with the fond, delusive hope that we should enjoy it so sweetly together; and that, with God's help and my exertions, it would be the means of elevating his mind, and refining his taste to a due appreciation of the

salutary and pure delights of nature, and peace, and holy love. But now—at evening, when I see the round red sun sink quietly down behind those woody hills, leaving them sleeping in a warm, red, golden haze, I only think another lovely day is lost to him and me; and at morning, when roused by the flutter and chirp of the sparrows, and the gleeful twitter of the swallows—all intent upon feeding their young, and full of life and joy in their own little frames—I open the window to inhale the balmy, soul-reviving air, and look out upon the lovely landscape, laughing in dew and sunshine—I too often shame that glorious scene with tears of thankless misery, because he cannot feel its freshening influence; and when I wander in the ancient woods, and meet the little wild flowers smiling in my path, or sit in the shadow of our noble ash-trees by the water-side, with their branches gently swaying in the light summer breeze that murmurs through their feathery foliage—my ears full of that low music mingled with the dreamy hum of insects, my eyes abstractedly gazing on the glassy surface of the little lake before me, with the trees that crowd about its bank, some gracefully bending to kiss its waters, some rearing their stately heads high above, but stretching their wide arms over its margin, all faithfully mirrored far, far down in its glassy depth—though sometimes the images are partially broken by the sport of aquatic insects, and sometimes, for a moment, the whole is shivered into trembling fragments by a transient breeze that sweeps the surface too roughly—still I have no pleasure; for the greater the happiness that nature sets before me, the more I lament that he is not here to taste it: the greater the bliss we might enjoy together, the more I feel our present wretchedness apart (yes, ours; he must be wretched, though he may not know it); and the more my senses are pleased, the more my heart is oppressed; for he keeps it with him confined amid the dust and smoke of London—perhaps shut up within the walls of his own abominable club.

But most of all, at night, when I enter my lonely chamber, and look out upon the summer moon, “sweet regent of the sky,” floating above me in the “black blue vault of heaven,” shedding a flood of silver radiance over park, and wood, and water, so pure, so peaceful, so divine—and think, Where is he now?—what is he doing at this moment? wholly unconscious of this heavenly scene—perhaps revelling with his boon companions, perhaps—God help me, it is too—too much!

23rd.—Thank heaven, he is come at last! But how altered! flushed and feverish, listless and languid, his beauty strangely diminished, his vigour and vivacity quite departed. I have not upbraided him by word or look; I have not even asked him what he has been doing. I have not the heart to do it, for I think he is ashamed of himself—he must be so indeed, and such inquiries could not fail to be painful to both. My forbearance pleases him—touches him even, I am inclined to think. He says he is glad

to be home again, and God knows how glad I am to get him back, even as he is. He lies on the sofa, nearly all day long; and I play and sing to him for hours together. I write his letters for him, and get him everything he wants; and sometimes I read to him, and sometimes I talk, and sometimes only sit by him and soothe him with silent caresses. I know he does not deserve it; and I fear I am spoiling him; but this once, I will forgive him, freely and entirely. I will shame him into virtue if I can, and I will never let him leave me again.

He is pleased with my attentions—it may be, grateful for them. He likes to have me near him: and though he is peevish and testy with his servants and his dogs, he is gentle and kind to me. What he would be, if I did not so watchfully anticipate his wants, and so carefully avoid, or immediately desist from doing anything that has a tendency to irritate or disturb him, with however little reason, I cannot tell. How intensely I wish he were worthy of all this care! Last night, as I sat beside him, with his head in my lap, passing my fingers through his beautiful curls, this thought made my eyes overflow with sorrowful tears—as it often does; but this time, a tear fell on his face and made him look up. He smiled, but not insultingly.

“Dear Helen!” he said—“why do you cry? you know that I love you” (and he pressed my hand to his feverish lips), “and what more could you desire?”

“Only, Arthur, that you would love yourself as truly and as faithfully as you are loved by me.”

“That would be hard, indeed!” he replied, tenderly squeezing my hand.

August 24th.—Arthur is himself again, as lusty and reckless, as light of heart and head as ever, and as restless and hard to amuse as a spoilt child, and almost as full of mischief too, especially when wet weather keeps him within doors. I wish he had something to do, some useful trade, or profession, or employment—anything to occupy his head or his hands for a few hours a day, and give him something besides his own pleasure to think about. If he would play the country gentleman and attend to the farm—but that he knows nothing about, and won’t give his mind to consider,—or if he would take up with some literary study, or learn to draw or to play—as he is so fond of music, I often try to persuade him to learn the piano, but he is far too idle for such an undertaking: he has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles than he has of restraining his natural appetites; and these two things are the ruin of him. I lay them both to the charge of his harsh yet careless father, and his madly indulgent mother.—If ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this crime of over-indulgence. I can hardly give it a milder name when I think of the evils it brings.

Happily, it will soon be the shooting season, and then, if the weather permit, he will find occupation enough in the pursuit and destruction of the partridges and pheasants: we have no grouse, or he might have been similarly occupied at this moment, instead of lying under the acacia-tree pulling poor Dash's ears. But he says it is dull work shooting alone; he must have a friend or two to help him.

"Let them be tolerably decent then, Arthur," said I. The word "friend" in his mouth makes me shudder: I know it was some of his "friends" that induced him to stay behind me in London, and kept him away so long: indeed, from what he has unguardedly told me, or hinted from time to time, I cannot doubt that he frequently showed them my letters, to let them see how fondly his wife watched over his interests, and how keenly she regretted his absence; and that they induced him to remain week after week, and to plunge into all manner of excesses, to avoid being laughed at for a wife-ridden fool, and, perhaps, to show how far he could venture to go without danger of shaking the fond creature's devoted attachment. It is a hateful idea, but I cannot believe it is a false one.

"Well," replied he, "I thought of Lord Lowborough for one; but there is no possibility of getting him without his better half, our mutual friend, Annabella; so we must ask them both. You're not afraid of her, are you, Helen?" he asked, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"Of course not," I answered: "why should I? And who besides?"

"Hargrave for one. He will be glad to come, though his own place is so near, for he has little enough land of his own to shoot over, and we can extend our depredations into it, if we like; and he is thoroughly respectable, you know, Helen—quite a lady's man: and I think, Grimsby for another: he's a decent, quiet fellow enough. You'll not object to Grimsby?"

"I hate him: but, however, if you wish it, I'll try to endure his presence for a while."

"All a prejudice, Helen, a mere woman's antipathy."

"No; I have solid grounds for my dislike. And is that all?"

"Why, yes, I think so. Hattersley will be too busy billing and cooing, with his bride to have much time to spare for guns and dogs at present," he replied. And that reminds me, that I have had several letters from Milicent since her marriage, and that she either is, or pretends to be, quite reconciled to her lot. She professes to have discovered numberless virtues and perfections in her husband, some of which, I fear, less partial eyes would fail to distinguish, though they sought them carefully with

tears; and now that she is accustomed to his loud voice, and abrupt, uncourteous manners, she affirms she finds no difficulty in loving him as a wife should do, and begs I will burn that letter wherein she spoke so unadvisedly against him. So that I trust she may yet be happy; but, if she is, it will be entirely the reward of her own goodness of heart; for had she chosen to consider herself the victim of fate, or of her mother's worldly wisdom, she might have been thoroughly miserable; and if, for duty's sake, she had not made every effort to love her husband, she would, doubtless, have hated him to the end of her days.

CHAPTER XXVI

Sept. 23rd.—Our guests arrived about three weeks ago. Lord and Lady Lowborough have now been married above eight months; and I will do the lady the credit to say that her husband is quite an altered man; his looks, his spirits, and his temper, are all perceptibly changed for the better since I last saw him. But there is room for improvement still. He is not always cheerful, nor always contented, and she often complains of his ill-humour, which, however, of all persons, she ought to be the last to accuse him of, as he never displays it against her, except for such conduct as would provoke a saint. He adores her still, and would go to the world's end to please her. She knows her power, and she uses it too; but well knowing that to wheedle and coax is safer than to command, she judiciously tempers her despotism with flattery and blandishments enough to make him deem himself a favoured and a happy man.

But she has a way of tormenting him, in which I am a fellow-sufferer, or might be, if I chose to regard myself as such. This is by openly, but not too glaringly, coquetting with Mr. Huntingdon, who is quite willing to be her partner in the game; but I don't care for it, because, with him, I know there is nothing but personal vanity, and a mischievous desire to excite my jealousy, and, perhaps, to torment his friend; and she, no doubt, is actuated by much the same motives; only, there is more of malice and less of playfulness in her manœuvres. It is obviously, therefore, my interest to disappoint them both, as far as I am concerned, by preserving a cheerful, undisturbed serenity throughout; and, accordingly, I endeavour to show the fullest confidence in my husband, and the greatest indifference to the arts of my attractive guest. I have never reproached the former but once, and that was for laughing at Lord Lowborough's depressed and anxious countenance one evening, when they had both been particularly provoking; and then, indeed, I said a good deal on the subject, and rebuked him sternly enough; but he only laughed, and said,—“You can feel for him, Helen, can't you?”

“I can feel for anyone that is unjustly treated,” I replied, “and I can feel for those that injure them too.”

“Why, Helen, you are as jealous as he is!” cried he, laughing still more; and I found it impossible to convince him of his mistake. So, from that time, I have carefully refrained from any notice of the subject whatever, and left Lord Lowborough to take care of himself. He either has not the sense or the power to follow my example, though he does try to conceal his uneasiness as well as he can; but still, it will appear in his face, and his ill-humour will peep out at intervals, though not in the expression of open resentment—they never go far enough for that. But I confess I do feel jealous at times, most painfully, bitterly so; when she sings and plays to him, and he hangs over the instrument, and dwells upon her voice with no affected interest; for then I know he is really delighted, and I have no power to awaken similar fervour. I can amuse and please him with my simple songs, but not delight him thus.

28th.—Yesterday, we all went to the Grove, Mr. Hargrave’s much-neglected home. His mother frequently asks us over, that she may have the pleasure of her dear Walter’s company; and this time she had invited us to a dinner-party, and got together as many of the country gentry as were within reach to meet us. The entertainment was very well got up; but I could not help thinking about the cost of it all the time. I don’t like Mrs. Hargrave; she is a hard, pretentious, worldly-minded woman. She has money enough to live very comfortably, if she only knew how to use it judiciously, and had taught her son to do the same; but she is ever straining to keep up appearances, with that despicable pride that shuns the semblance of poverty as of a shameful crime. She grinds her dependents, pinches her servants, and deprives even her daughters and herself of the real comforts of life, because she will not consent to yield the palm in outward show to those who have three times her wealth; and, above all, because she is determined her cherished son shall be enabled to “hold up his head with the highest gentlemen in the land.” This same son, I imagine, is a man of expensive habits, no reckless spendthrift and no abandoned sensualist, but one who likes to have “everything handsome about him,” and to go to a certain length in youthful indulgences, not so much to gratify his own tastes as to maintain his reputation as a man of fashion in the world, and a respectable fellow among his own lawless companions; while he is too selfish to consider how many comforts might be obtained for his fond mother and sisters with the money he thus wastes upon himself: as long as they can contrive to make a respectable appearance once a year, when they come to town, he gives himself little concern about their private stintings and struggles at home. This is a harsh judgment to form of “dear, noble-minded, generous-hearted Walter,” but I fear it is too just.

Mrs. Hargrave's anxiety to make good matches for her daughters is partly the cause, and partly the result, of these errors: by making a figure in the world, and showing them off to advantage, she hopes to obtain better chances for them; and by thus living beyond her legitimate means, and lavishing so much on their brother, she renders them portionless, and makes them burdens on her hands. Poor Milicent, I fear, has already fallen a sacrifice to the manœuvrings of this mistaken mother, who congratulates herself on having so satisfactorily discharged her maternal duty, and hopes to do as well for Esther. But Esther is a child as yet, a little merry romp of fourteen: as honest-hearted, and as guileless and simple as her sister, but with a fearless spirit of her own, that I fancy her mother will find some difficulty in bending to her purposes.

CHAPTER XXVII

October 9th.—It was on the night of the 4th, a little after tea, that Annabella had been singing and playing, with Arthur as usual at her side: she had ended her song, but still she sat at the instrument; and he stood leaning on the back of her chair, conversing in scarcely audible tones, with his face in very close proximity with hers. I looked at Lord Lowborough. He was at the other end of the room, talking with Messrs. Hargrave and Grimsby; but I saw him dart towards his lady and his host a quick, impatient glance, expressive of intense disquietude, at which Grimsby smiled. Determined to interrupt the tête-à-tête, I rose, and, selecting a piece of music from the music stand, stepped up to the piano, intending to ask the lady to play it; but I stood transfixed and speechless on seeing her seated there, listening, with what seemed an exultant smile on her flushed face to his soft murmurings, with her hand quietly surrendered to his clasp. The blood rushed first to my heart, and then to my head; for there was more than this: almost at the moment of my approach, he cast a hurried glance over his shoulder towards the other occupants of the room, and then ardently pressed the unresisting hand to his lips. On raising his eyes, he beheld me, and dropped them again, confounded and dismayed. She saw me too, and confronted me with a look of hard defiance. I laid the music on the piano, and retired. I felt ill; but I did not leave the room: happily, it was getting late, and could not be long before the company dispersed.

I went to the fire, and leant my head against the chimney-piece. In a minute or two, some one asked me if I felt unwell. I did not answer; indeed, at the time, I knew not what was said; but I mechanically looked up, and saw Mr. Hargrave standing beside me on the rug.

“Shall I get you a glass of wine?” said he.

“No, thank you,” I replied; and, turning from him, I looked round. Lady Lowborough was beside her husband, bending over him as he sat, with her hand on his shoulder, softly talking and smiling in his face; and Arthur was at the table, turning over a book of engravings. I seated myself in the nearest chair; and Mr. Hargrave, finding his services were not desired, judiciously withdrew. Shortly after, the company broke up, and, as the guests were retiring to their rooms, Arthur approached me, smiling with the utmost assurance.

“Are you very angry, Helen?” murmured he.

“This is no jest, Arthur,” said I, seriously, but as calmly as I could—“unless you think it a jest to lose my affection for ever.”

“What! so bitter?” he exclaimed, laughingly, clasping my hand between both his; but I snatched it away, in indignation—almost in disgust, for he was obviously affected with wine.

“Then I must go down on my knees,” said he; and kneeling before me, with clasped hands, uplifted in mock humiliation, he continued imploringly—“Forgive me, Helen—dear Helen, forgive me, and I’ll never do it again!” and, burying his face in his handkerchief, he affected to sob aloud.

Leaving him thus employed, I took my candle, and, slipping quietly from the room, hastened up-stairs as fast as I could. But he soon discovered that I had left him, and, rushing up after me, caught me in his arms, just as I had entered the chamber, and was about to shut the door in his face.

“No, no, by heaven, you sha’n’t escape me so!” he cried. Then, alarmed at my agitation, he begged me not to put myself in such a passion, telling me I was white in the face, and should kill myself if I did so.

“Let me go, then,” I murmured; and immediately he released me—and it was well he did, for I was really in a passion. I sank into the easy-chair and endeavoured to compose myself, for I wanted to speak to him calmly. He stood beside me, but did not venture to touch me or to speak for a few seconds; then, approaching a little nearer, he dropped on one knee—not in mock humility, but to bring himself nearer my level, and leaning his hand on the arm of the chair, he began in a low voice: “It is all nonsense, Helen—a jest, a mere nothing—not worth a thought. Will you never learn,” he continued more boldly, “that you have nothing to fear from me? that I love you wholly and entirely?—or if,” he added with a lurking smile, “I ever give a thought to another, you may well spare it, for those fancies are here and gone like a flash of

lightning, while my love for you burns on steadily, and for ever, like the sun. You little exorbitant tyrant, will not that—”

“Be quiet a moment, will you, Arthur?” said I, “and listen to me—and don’t think I’m in a jealous fury: I am perfectly calm. Feel my hand.” And I gravely extended it towards him—but closed it upon his with an energy that seemed to disprove the assertion, and made him smile. “You needn’t smile, sir,” said I, still tightening my grasp, and looking steadfastly on him till he almost quailed before me. “You may think it all very fine, Mr. Huntingdon, to amuse yourself with rousing my jealousy; but take care you don’t rouse my hate instead. And when you have once extinguished my love, you will find it no easy matter to kindle it again.”

“Well, Helen, I won’t repeat the offence. But I meant nothing by it, I assure you. I had taken too much wine, and I was scarcely myself at the time.”

“You often take too much; and that is another practice I detest.” He looked up astonished at my warmth. “Yes,” I continued; “I never mentioned it before, because I was ashamed to do so; but now I’ll tell you that it distresses me, and may disgust me, if you go on and suffer the habit to grow upon you, as it will if you don’t check it in time. But the whole system of your conduct to Lady Lowborough is not referable to wine; and this night you knew perfectly well what you were doing.”

“Well, I’m sorry for it,” replied he, with more of sulkiness than contrition: “what more would you have?”

“You are sorry that I saw you, no doubt,” I answered coldly.

“If you had not seen me,” he muttered, fixing his eyes on the carpet, “it would have done no harm.”

My heart felt ready to burst; but I resolutely swallowed back my emotion, and answered calmly,

“You think not?”

“No,” replied he, boldly. “After all, what have I done? It’s nothing—except as you choose to make it a subject of accusation and distress.”

“What would Lord Lowborough, your friend, think, if he knew all? or what would you yourself think, if he or any other had acted the same part to me, throughout, as you have to Annabella?”

“I would blow his brains out.”

“Well, then, Arthur, how can you call it nothing—an offence for which you would think yourself justified in blowing another man’s brains out? Is it nothing to trifle with your friend’s feelings and mine—to endeavour to steal a woman’s affections from her husband—what he values more than his gold, and therefore what it is more dishonest to take? Are the marriage vows a jest; and is it nothing to make it your sport to break them, and to tempt another to do the same? Can I love a man that does such things, and coolly maintains it is nothing?”

“You are breaking your marriage vows yourself,” said he, indignantly rising and pacing to and fro. “You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me, and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.”

“What will you do then? Will you go on till I hate you, and then accuse me of breaking my vows?”

He was silent a moment, and then replied: “You never will hate me.” Returning and resuming his former position at my feet, he repeated more vehemently—“You cannot hate me as long as I love you.”

“But how can I believe that you love me, if you continue to act in this way? Just imagine yourself in my place: would you think I loved you, if I did so? Would you believe my protestations, and honour and trust me under such circumstances?”

“The cases are different,” he replied. “It is a woman’s nature to be constant—to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever—bless them, dear creatures! and you above them all; but you must have some commiseration for us, Helen; you must give us a little more licence, for, as Shakespeare has it—

However we do praise ourselves,

Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,

More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won

Than women’s are.”

“Do you mean by that, that your fancies are lost to me, and won by Lady Lowborough?”

“No! heaven is my witness that I think her mere dust and ashes in comparison with you, and shall continue to think so, unless you drive me from you by too much severity. She is a daughter of earth; you are an angel of heaven; only be not too austere

in your divinity, and remember that I am a poor, fallible mortal. Come now, Helen; won't you forgive me?" he said, gently taking my hand, and looking up with an innocent smile.

"If I do, you will repeat the offence."

"I swear by—"

"Don't swear; I'll believe your word as well as your oath. I wish I could have confidence in either."

"Try me, then, Helen: only trust and pardon me this once, and you shall see! Come, I am in hell's torments till you speak the word."

I did not speak it, but I put my hand on his shoulder and kissed his forehead, and then burst into tears. He embraced me tenderly; and we have been good friends ever since. He has been decently temperate at table, and well-conducted towards Lady Lowborough. The first day he held himself aloof from her, as far as he could without any flagrant breach of hospitality: since that he has been friendly and civil, but nothing more—in my presence, at least, nor, I think, at any other time; for she seems haughty and displeased, and Lord Lowborough is manifestly more cheerful, and more cordial towards his host than before. But I shall be glad when they are gone, for I have so little love for Annabella that it is quite a task to be civil to her, and as she is the only woman here besides myself, we are necessarily thrown so much together. Next time Mrs. Hargrave calls I shall hail her advent as quite a relief. I have a good mind to ask Arthur's leave to invite the old lady to stay with us till our guests depart. I think I will. She will take it as a kind attention, and, though I have little relish for her society, she will be truly welcome as a third to stand between Lady Lowborough and me.

The first time the latter and I were alone together, after that unhappy evening, was an hour or two after breakfast on the following day, when the gentlemen were gone out, after the usual time spent in the writing of letters, the reading of newspapers, and desultory conversation. We sat silent for two or three minutes. She was busy with her work, and I was running over the columns of a paper from which I had extracted all the pith some twenty minutes before. It was a moment of painful embarrassment to me, and I thought it must be infinitely more so to her; but it seems I was mistaken. She was the first to speak; and, smiling with the coolest assurance, she began,—

"Your husband was merry last night, Helen: is he often so?"

My blood boiled in my face; but it was better she should seem to attribute his conduct to this than to anything else.

“No,” replied I, “and never will be so again, I trust.”

“You gave him a curtain lecture, did you?”

“No! but I told him I disliked such conduct, and he promised me not to repeat it.”

“I thought he looked rather subdued this morning,” she continued; “and you, Helen? you’ve been weeping, I see—that’s our grand resource, you know. But doesn’t it make your eyes smart? and do you always find it to answer?”

“I never cry for effect; nor can I conceive how any one can.”

“Well, I don’t know: I never had occasion to try it; but I think if Lowborough were to commit such improprieties, I’d make him cry. I don’t wonder at your being angry, for I’m sure I’d give my husband a lesson he would not soon forget for a lighter offence than that. But then he never will do anything of the kind; for I keep him in too good order for that.”

“Are you sure you don’t arrogate too much of the credit to yourself. Lord Lowborough was quite as remarkable for his abstemiousness for some time before you married him, as he is now, I have heard.”

“Oh, about the wine you mean—yes, he’s safe enough for that. And as to looking askance to another woman, he’s safe enough for that too, while I live, for he worships the very ground I tread on.”

“Indeed! and are you sure you deserve it?”

“Why, as to that, I can’t say: you know we’re all fallible creatures, Helen; we none of us deserve to be worshipped. But are you sure your darling Huntingdon deserves all the love you give to him?”

I knew not what to answer to this. I was burning with anger; but I suppressed all outward manifestations of it, and only bit my lip and pretended to arrange my work.

“At any rate,” resumed she, pursuing her advantage, “you can console yourself with the assurance that you are worthy of all the love he gives to you.”

“You flatter me,” said I; “but, at least, I can try to be worthy of it.” And then I turned the conversation.

CHAPTER XXVIII

December 25th.—Last Christmas I was a bride, with a heart overflowing with present bliss, and full of ardent hopes for the future, though not unmingled with foreboding

fears. Now I am a wife: my bliss is sobered, but not destroyed; my hopes diminished, but not departed; my fears increased, but not yet thoroughly confirmed; and, thank heaven, I am a mother too. God has sent me a soul to educate for heaven, and give me a new and calmer bliss, and stronger hopes to comfort me.

Dec. 25th, 1823.—Another year is gone. My little Arthur lives and thrives. He is healthy, but not robust, full of gentle playfulness and vivacity, already affectionate, and susceptible of passions and emotions it will be long ere he can find words to express. He has won his father's heart at last; and now my constant terror is, lest he should be ruined by that father's thoughtless indulgence. But I must beware of my own weakness too, for I never knew till now how strong are a parent's temptations to spoil an only child.

I have need of consolation in my son, for (to this silent paper I may confess it) I have but little in my husband. I love him still; and he loves me, in his own way—but oh, how different from the love I could have given, and once had hoped to receive! How little real sympathy there exists between us; how many of my thoughts and feelings are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried—doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil! But, I repeat, I have no right to complain; only let me state the truth—some of the truth, at least,—and see hereafter if any darker truths will blot these pages. We have now been full two years united; the “romance” of our attachment must be worn away. Surely I have now got down to the lowest gradation in Arthur's affection, and discovered all the evils of his nature: if there be any further change, it must be for the better, as we become still more accustomed to each other; surely we shall find no lower depth than this. And, if so, I can bear it well—as well, at least, as I have borne it hitherto.

Arthur is not what is commonly called a bad man: he has many good qualities; but he is a man without self-restraint or lofty aspirations, a lover of pleasure, given up to animal enjoyments: he is not a bad husband, but his notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not my notions. Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly, and to stay at home to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return, no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime.

Early in spring he announced his intention of going to London: his affairs there demanded his attendance, he said, and he could refuse it no longer. He expressed his

regret at having to leave me, but hoped I would amuse myself with the baby till he returned.

“But why leave me?” I said. “I can go with you: I can be ready at any time.”

“You would not take that child to town?”

“Yes; why not?”

The thing was absurd: the air of the town would be certain to disagree with him, and with me as a nurse; the late hours and London habits would not suit me under such circumstances; and altogether he assured me that it would be excessively troublesome, injurious, and unsafe. I over-ruled his objections as well as I could, for I trembled at the thoughts of his going alone, and would sacrifice almost anything for myself, much even for my child, to prevent it; but at length he told me, plainly, and somewhat testily, that he could not do with me: he was worn out with the baby’s restless nights, and must have some repose. I proposed separate apartments; but it would not do.

“The truth is, Arthur,” I said at last, “you are weary of my company, and determined not to have me with you. You might as well have said so at once.”

He denied it; but I immediately left the room, and flew to the nursery, to hide my feelings, if I could not soothe them, there.

I was too much hurt to express any further dissatisfaction with his plans, or at all to refer to the subject again, except for the necessary arrangements concerning his departure and the conduct of affairs during his absence, till the day before he went, when I earnestly exhorted him to take care of himself and keep out of the way of temptation. He laughed at my anxiety, but assured me there was no cause for it, and promised to attend to my advice.

“I suppose it is no use asking you to fix a day for your return?” said I.

“Why, no; I hardly can, under the circumstances; but be assured, love, I shall not be long away.”

“I don’t wish to keep you a prisoner at home,” I replied; “I should not grumble at your staying whole months away—if you can be happy so long without me—provided I knew you were safe; but I don’t like the idea of your being there among your friends, as you call them.”

“Pooh, pooh, you silly girl! Do you think I can’t take care of myself?”

“You didn’t last time. But THIS time, Arthur,” I added, earnestly, “show me that you can, and teach me that I need not fear to trust you!”

He promised fair, but in such a manner as we seek to soothe a child. And did he keep his promise? No; and henceforth I can never trust his word. Bitter, bitter confession! Tears blind me while I write. It was early in March that he went, and he did not return till July. This time he did not trouble himself to make excuses as before, and his letters were less frequent, and shorter and less affectionate, especially after the first few weeks: they came slower and slower, and more terse and careless every time. But still, when I omitted writing, he complained of my neglect. When I wrote sternly and coldly, as I confess I frequently did at the last, he blamed my harshness, and said it was enough to scare him from his home: when I tried mild persuasion, he was a little more gentle in his replies, and promised to return; but I had learnt, at last, to disregard his promises.

CHAPTER XXIX

Those were four miserable months, alternating between intense anxiety, despair, and indignation, pity for him and pity for myself. And yet, through all, I was not wholly comfortless: I had my darling, sinless, inoffensive little one to console me; but even this consolation was embittered by the constantly-recurring thought, “How shall I teach him hereafter to respect his father, and yet to avoid his example?”

But I remembered that I had brought all these afflictions, in a manner wilfully, upon myself; and I determined to bear them without a murmur. At the same time I resolved not to give myself up to misery for the transgressions of another, and endeavoured to divert myself as much as I could; and besides the companionship of my child, and my dear, faithful Rachel, who evidently guessed my sorrows and felt for them, though she was too discreet to allude to them, I had my books and pencil, my domestic affairs, and the welfare and comfort of Arthur’s poor tenants and labourers to attend to: and I sometimes sought and obtained amusement in the company of my young friend Esther Hargrave: occasionally I rode over to see her, and once or twice I had her to spend the day with me at the Manor. Mrs. Hargrave did not visit London that season: having no daughter to marry, she thought it as well to stay at home and economise; and, for a wonder, Walter came down to join her in the beginning of June, and stayed till near the close of August.

The first time I saw him was on a sweet, warm evening, when I was sauntering in the park with little Arthur and Rachel, who is head-nurse and lady’s-maid in one—for, with my secluded life and tolerably active habits, I require but little attendance, and as she had nursed me and coveted to nurse my child, and was moreover so very trustworthy,

I preferred committing the important charge to her, with a young nursery-maid under her directions, to engaging any one else: besides, it saves money; and since I have made acquaintance with Arthur's affairs, I have learnt to regard that as no trifling recommendation; for, by my own desire, nearly the whole of the income of my fortune is devoted, for years to come, to the paying off of his debts, and the money he contrives to squander away in London is incomprehensible. But to return to Mr. Hargrave. I was standing with Rachel beside the water, amusing the laughing baby in her arms with a twig of willow laden with golden catkins, when, greatly to my surprise, he entered the park, mounted on his costly black hunter, and crossed over the grass to meet me. He saluted me with a very fine compliment, delicately worded, and modestly delivered withal, which he had doubtless concocted as he rode along. He told me he had brought a message from his mother, who, as he was riding that way, had desired him to call at the Manor and beg the pleasure of my company to a friendly family dinner to-morrow.

"There is no one to meet but ourselves," said he; "but Esther is very anxious to see you; and my mother fears you will feel solitary in this great house so much alone, and wishes she could persuade you to give her the pleasure of your company more frequently, and make yourself at home in our more humble dwelling, till Mr. Huntingdon's return shall render this a little more conducive to your comfort."

"She is very kind," I answered, "but I am not alone, you see;—and those whose time is fully occupied seldom complain of solitude."

"Will you not come to-morrow, then? She will be sadly disappointed if you refuse."

I did not relish being thus compassionated for my loneliness; but, however, I promised to come.

"What a sweet evening this is!" observed he, looking round upon the sunny park, with its imposing swell and slope, its placid water, and majestic clumps of trees. "And what a paradise you live in!"

"It is a lovely evening," answered I; and I sighed to think how little I had felt its loveliness, and how little of a paradise sweet Grassdale was to me—how still less to the voluntary exile from its scenes. Whether Mr. Hargrave divined my thoughts, I cannot tell, but, with a half-hesitating, sympathising seriousness of tone and manner, he asked if I had lately heard from Mr. Huntingdon.

"Not lately," I replied.

"I thought not," he muttered, as if to himself, looking thoughtfully on the ground.

“Are you not lately returned from London?” I asked.

“Only yesterday.”

“And did you see him there?”

“Yes—I saw him.”

“Was he well?”

“Yes—that is,” said he, with increasing hesitation and an appearance of suppressed indignation, “he was as well as—as he deserved to be, but under circumstances I should have deemed incredible for a man so favoured as he is.” He here looked up and pointed the sentence with a serious bow to me. I suppose my face was crimson.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Huntingdon,” he continued, “but I cannot suppress my indignation when I behold such infatuated blindness and perversion of taste;—but, perhaps, you are not aware—” He paused.

“I am aware of nothing, sir—except that he delays his coming longer than I expected; and if, at present, he prefers the society of his friends to that of his wife, and the dissipations of the town to the quiet of country life, I suppose I have those friends to thank for it. Their tastes and occupations are similar to his, and I don’t see why his conduct should awaken either their indignation or surprise.”

“You wrong me cruelly,” answered he. “I have shared but little of Mr. Huntingdon’s society for the last few weeks; and as for his tastes and occupations, they are quite beyond me—lonely wanderer as I am. Where I have but sipped and tasted, he drains the cup to the dregs; and if ever for a moment I have sought to drown the voice of reflection in madness and folly, or if I have wasted too much of my time and talents among reckless and dissipated companions, God knows I would gladly renounce them entirely and for ever, if I had but half the blessings that man so thanklessly casts behind his back—but half the inducements to virtue and domestic, orderly habits that he despises—but such a home, and such a partner to share it! It is infamous!” he muttered, between his teeth. “And don’t think, Mrs. Huntingdon,” he added aloud, “that I could be guilty of inciting him to persevere in his present pursuits: on the contrary, I have remonstrated with him again and again; I have frequently expressed my surprise at his conduct, and reminded him of his duties and his privileges—but to no purpose; he only—”

“Enough, Mr. Hargrave; you ought to be aware that whatever my husband’s faults may be, it can only aggravate the evil for me to hear them from a stranger’s lips.”

“Am I then a stranger?” said he in a sorrowful tone. “I am your nearest neighbour, your son’s godfather, and your husband’s friend; may I not be yours also?”

“Intimate acquaintance must precede real friendship; I know but little of you, Mr. Hargrave, except from report.”

“Have you then forgotten the six or seven weeks I spent under your roof last autumn? I have not forgotten them. And I know enough of you, Mrs. Huntingdon, to think that your husband is the most enviable man in the world, and I should be the next if you would deem me worthy of your friendship.”

“If you knew more of me, you would not think it, or if you did you would not say it, and expect me to be flattered by the compliment.”

I stepped backward as I spoke. He saw that I wished the conversation to end; and immediately taking the hint, he gravely bowed, wished me good-evening, and turned his horse towards the road. He appeared grieved and hurt at my unkind reception of his sympathising overtures. I was not sure that I had done right in speaking so harshly to him; but, at the time, I had felt irritated—almost insulted by his conduct; it seemed as if he was presuming upon the absence and neglect of my husband, and insinuating even more than the truth against him.

Rachel had moved on, during our conversation, to some yards’ distance. He rode up to her, and asked to see the child. He took it carefully into his arms, looked upon it with an almost paternal smile, and I heard him say, as I approached,—

“And this, too, he has forsaken!”

He then tenderly kissed it, and restored it to the gratified nurse.

“Are you fond of children, Mr. Hargrave?” said I, a little softened towards him.

“Not in general,” he replied, “but that is such a sweet child, and so like its mother,” he added in a lower tone.

“You are mistaken there; it is its father it resembles.”

“Am I not right, nurse?” said he, appealing to Rachel.

“I think, sir, there’s a bit of both,” she replied.

He departed; and Rachel pronounced him a very nice gentleman. I had still my doubts on the subject.

In the course of the following six weeks I met him several times, but always, save once, in company with his mother, or his sister, or both. When I called on them, he always happened to be at home, and, when they called on me, it was always he that drove them over in the phaeton. His mother, evidently, was quite delighted with his dutiful attentions and newly-acquired domestic habits.

The time that I met him alone was on a bright, but not oppressively hot day, in the beginning of July: I had taken little Arthur into the wood that skirts the park, and there seated him on the moss-cushioned roots of an old oak; and, having gathered a handful of bluebells and wild-roses, I was kneeling before him, and presenting them, one by one, to the grasp of his tiny fingers; enjoying the heavenly beauty of the flowers, through the medium of his smiling eyes: forgetting, for the moment, all my cares, laughing at his gleeful laughter, and delighting myself with his delight,—when a shadow suddenly eclipsed the little space of sunshine on the grass before us; and looking up, I beheld Walter Hargrave standing and gazing upon us.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Huntingdon,” said he, “but I was spell-bound; I had neither the power to come forward and interrupt you, nor to withdraw from the contemplation of such a scene. How vigorous my little godson grows! and how merry he is this morning!” He approached the child, and stooped to take his hand; but, on seeing that his caresses were likely to produce tears and lamentations, instead of a reciprocation of friendly demonstrations, he prudently drew back.

“What a pleasure and comfort that little creature must be to you, Mrs. Huntingdon!” he observed, with a touch of sadness in his intonation, as he admiringly contemplated the infant.

“It is,” replied I; and then I asked after his mother and sister.

He politely answered my inquiries, and then returned again to the subject I wished to avoid; though with a degree of timidity that witnessed his fear to offend.

“You have not heard from Huntingdon lately?” he said.

“Not this week,” I replied. Not these three weeks, I might have said.

“I had a letter from him this morning. I wish it were such a one as I could show to his lady.” He half drew from his waistcoat-pocket a letter with Arthur’s still beloved hand on the address, scowled at it, and put it back again, adding—“But he tells me he is about to return next week.”

“He tells me so every time he writes.”

“Indeed! well, it is like him. But to me he always avowed it his intention to stay till the present month.”

It struck me like a blow, this proof of premeditated transgression and systematic disregard of truth.

“It is only of a piece with the rest of his conduct,” observed Mr. Hargrave, thoughtfully regarding me, and reading, I suppose, my feelings in my face.

“Then he is really coming next week?” said I, after a pause.

“You may rely upon it, if the assurance can give you any pleasure. And is it possible, Mrs. Huntingdon, that you can rejoice at his return?” he exclaimed, attentively perusing my features again.

“Of course, Mr. Hargrave; is he not my husband?”

“Oh, Huntingdon; you know not what you slight!” he passionately murmured.

I took up my baby, and, wishing him good-morning, departed, to indulge my thoughts unscrutinized, within the sanctum of my home.

And was I glad? Yes, delighted; though I was angered by Arthur’s conduct, and though I felt that he had wronged me, and was determined he should feel it too.

CHAPTER XXX

On the following morning I received a few lines from him myself, confirming Hargrave’s intimations respecting his approaching return. And he did come next week, but in a condition of body and mind even worse than before. I did not, however, intend to pass over his derelictions this time without a remark; I found it would not do. But the first day he was weary with his journey, and I was glad to get him back: I would not upbraid him then; I would wait till to-morrow. Next morning he was weary still: I would wait a little longer. But at dinner, when, after breakfasting at twelve o’clock on a bottle of soda-water and a cup of strong coffee, and lunching at two on another bottle of soda-water mingled with brandy, he was finding fault with everything on the table, and declaring we must change our cook, I thought the time was come.

“It is the same cook as we had before you went, Arthur,” said I. “You were generally pretty well satisfied with her then.”

“You must have been letting her get into slovenly habits, then, while I was away. It is enough to poison one, eating such a disgusting mess!” And he pettishly pushed away his plate, and leant back despairingly in his chair.

“I think it is you that are changed, not she,” said I, but with the utmost gentleness, for I did not wish to irritate him.

“It may be so,” he replied carelessly, as he seized a tumbler of wine and water, adding, when he had tossed it off, “for I have an infernal fire in my veins, that all the waters of the ocean cannot quench!”

“What kindled it?” I was about to ask, but at that moment the butler entered and began to take away the things.

“Be quick, Benson; do have done with that infernal clatter!” cried his master. “And don’t bring the cheese, unless you want to make me sick outright!”

Benson, in some surprise, removed the cheese, and did his best to effect a quiet and speedy clearance of the rest; but, unfortunately, there was a rumple in the carpet, caused by the hasty pushing back of his master’s chair, at which he tripped and stumbled, causing a rather alarming concussion with the trayful of crockery in his hands, but no positive damage, save the fall and breaking of a sauce tureen; but, to my unspeakable shame and dismay, Arthur turned furiously around upon him, and swore at him with savage coarseness. The poor man turned pale, and visibly trembled as he stooped to pick up the fragments.

“He couldn’t help it, Arthur,” said I; “the carpet caught his foot, and there’s no great harm done. Never mind the pieces now, Benson; you can clear them away afterwards.”

Glad to be released, Benson expeditiously set out the dessert and withdrew.

“What could you mean, Helen, by taking the servant’s part against me,” said Arthur, as soon as the door was closed, “when you knew I was distracted?”

“I did not know you were distracted, Arthur: and the poor man was quite frightened and hurt at your sudden explosion.”

“Poor man, indeed! and do you think I could stop to consider the feelings of an insensate brute like that, when my own nerves were racked and torn to pieces by his confounded blunders?”

“I never heard you complain of your nerves before.”

“And why shouldn’t I have nerves as well as you?”

“Oh, I don’t dispute your claim to their possession, but I never complain of mine.”

“No, how should you, when you never do anything to try them?”

“Then why do you try yours, Arthur?”

“Do you think I have nothing to do but to stay at home and take care of myself like a woman?”

“Is it impossible, then, to take care of yourself like a man when you go abroad? You told me that you could, and would too; and you promised—”

“Come, come, Helen, don’t begin with that nonsense now; I can’t bear it.”

“Can’t bear what?—to be reminded of the promises you have broken?”

“Helen, you are cruel. If you knew how my heart throbbed, and how every nerve thrilled through me while you spoke, you would spare me. You can pity a dolt of a servant for breaking a dish; but you have no compassion for me when my head is split in two and all on fire with this consuming fever.”

He leant his head on his hand, and sighed. I went to him and put my hand on his forehead. It was burning indeed.

“Then come with me into the drawing-room, Arthur; and don’t take any more wine: you have taken several glasses since dinner, and eaten next to nothing all the day. How can that make you better?”

With some coaxing and persuasion, I got him to leave the table. When the baby was brought I tried to amuse him with that; but poor little Arthur was cutting his teeth, and his father could not bear his complaints: sentence of immediate banishment was passed upon him on the first indication of fretfulness; and because, in the course of the evening, I went to share his exile for a little while, I was reproached, on my return, for preferring my child to my husband. I found the latter reclining on the sofa just as I had left him.

“Well!” exclaimed the injured man, in a tone of pseudo-resignation. “I thought I wouldn’t send for you; I thought I’d just see how long it would please you to leave me alone.”

“I have not been very long, have I, Arthur? I have not been an hour, I’m sure.”

“Oh, of course, an hour is nothing to you, so pleasantly employed; but to me—”

“It has not been pleasantly employed,” interrupted I. “I have been nursing our poor little baby, who is very far from well, and I could not leave him till I got him to sleep.”

“Oh, to be sure, you’re overflowing with kindness and pity for everything but me.”

“And why should I pity you? What is the matter with you?”

“Well! that passes everything! After all the wear and tear that I’ve had, when I come home sick and weary, longing for comfort, and expecting to find attention and kindness, at least from my wife, she calmly asks what is the matter with me!”

“There is nothing the matter with you,” returned I, “except what you have wilfully brought upon yourself, against my earnest exhortation and entreaty.”

“Now, Helen,” said he emphatically, half rising from his recumbent posture, “if you bother me with another word, I’ll ring the bell and order six bottles of wine, and, by heaven, I’ll drink them dry before I stir from this place!”

I said no more, but sat down before the table and drew a book towards me.

“Do let me have quietness at least!” continued he, “if you deny me every other comfort;” and sinking back into his former position, with an impatient expiration between a sigh and a groan, he languidly closed his eyes, as if to sleep.

What the book was that lay open on the table before me, I cannot tell, for I never looked at it. With an elbow on each side of it, and my hands clasped before my eyes, I delivered myself up to silent weeping. But Arthur was not asleep: at the first slight sob, he raised his head and looked round, impatiently exclaiming, “What are you crying for, Helen? What the deuce is the matter now?”

“I’m crying for you, Arthur,” I replied, speedily drying my tears; and starting up, I threw myself on my knees before him, and clasping his nerveless hand between my own, continued: “Don’t you know that you are a part of myself? And do you think you can injure and degrade yourself, and I not feel it?”

“Degrade myself, Helen?”

“Yes, degrade! What have you been doing all this time?”

“You’d better not ask,” said he, with a faint smile.

“And you had better not tell; but you cannot deny that you have degraded yourself miserably. You have shamefully wronged yourself, body and soul, and me too; and I can’t endure it quietly, and I won’t!”

“Well, don’t squeeze my hand so frantically, and don’t agitate me so, for heaven’s sake! Oh, Hattersley! you were right: this woman will be the death of me, with her keen feelings and her interesting force of character. There, there, do spare me a little.”

“Arthur, you must repent!” cried I, in a frenzy of desperation, throwing my arms around him and burying my face in his bosom. “You shall say you are sorry for what you have done!”

“Well, well, I am.”

“You are not! you’ll do it again.”

“I shall never live to do it again if you treat me so savagely,” replied he, pushing me from him. “You’ve nearly squeezed the breath out of my body.” He pressed his hand to his heart, and looked really agitated and ill.

“Now get me a glass of wine,” said he, “to remedy what you’ve done, you she tiger! I’m almost ready to faint.”

I flew to get the required remedy. It seemed to revive him considerably.

“What a shame it is,” said I, as I took the empty glass from his hand, “for a strong young man like you to reduce yourself to such a state!”

“If you knew all, my girl, you’d say rather, ‘What a wonder it is you can bear it so well as you do!’ I’ve lived more in these four months, Helen, than you have in the whole course of your existence, or will to the end of your days, if they numbered a hundred years; so I must expect to pay for it in some shape.”

“You will have to pay a higher price than you anticipate, if you don’t take care: there will be the total loss of your own health, and of my affection too, if that is of any value to you.”

“What! you’re at that game of threatening me with the loss of your affection again, are you? I think it couldn’t have been very genuine stuff to begin with, if it’s so easily demolished. If you don’t mind, my pretty tyrant, you’ll make me regret my choice in good earnest, and envy my friend Hattersley his meek little wife: she’s quite a pattern to her sex, Helen. He had her with him in London all the season, and she was no trouble at all. He might amuse himself just as he pleased, in regular bachelor style, and she never complained of neglect; he might come home at any hour of the night or morning, or not come home at all; be sullen, sober, or glorious drunk; and play the fool or the madman to his own heart’s desire, without any fear or botheration. She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will. He says there’s not such a jewel in all England, and swears he wouldn’t take a kingdom for her.”

“But he makes her life a curse to her.”

“Not he! She has no will but his, and is always contented and happy as long as he is enjoying himself.”

“In that case she is as great a fool as he is; but it is not so. I have several letters from her, expressing the greatest anxiety about his proceedings, and complaining that you incite him to commit those extravagances—one especially, in which she implores me to use my influence with you to get you away from London, and affirms that her husband never did such things before you came, and would certainly discontinue them as soon as you departed and left him to the guidance of his own good sense.”

“The detestable little traitor! Give me the letter, and he shall see it as sure as I’m a living man.”

“No, he shall not see it without her consent; but if he did, there is nothing there to anger him, nor in any of the others. She never speaks a word against him: it is only anxiety for him that she expresses. She only alludes to his conduct in the most delicate terms, and makes every excuse for him that she can possibly think of; and as for her own misery, I rather feel it than see it expressed in her letters.”

“But she abuses me; and no doubt you helped her.”

“No; I told her she over-rated my influence with you, that I would gladly draw you away from the temptations of the town if I could, but had little hope of success, and that I thought she was wrong in supposing that you enticed Mr. Hattersley or any one else into error. I had myself held the contrary opinion at one time, but I now believed that you mutually corrupted each other; and, perhaps, if she used a little gentle but serious remonstrance with her husband, it might be of some service; as, though he was more rough-hewn than mine, I believed he was of a less impenetrable material.”

“And so that is the way you go on—heartening each other up to mutiny, and abusing each other’s partners, and throwing out implications against your own, to the mutual gratification of both!”

“According to your own account,” said I, “my evil counsel has had but little effect upon her. And as to abuse and aspersions, we are both of us far too deeply ashamed of the errors and vices of our other halves, to make them the common subject of our correspondence. Friends as we are, we would willingly keep your failings to ourselves—even from ourselves if we could, unless by knowing them we could deliver you from them.”

“Well, well! don’t worry me about them: you’ll never effect any good by that. Have patience with me, and bear with my languor and crossness a little while, till I get this

cursed low fever out of my veins, and then you'll find me cheerful and kind as ever. Why can't you be gentle and good, as you were last time?—I'm sure I was very grateful for it.”

“And what good did your gratitude do? I deluded myself with the idea that you were ashamed of your transgressions, and hoped you would never repeat them again; but now you have left me nothing to hope!”

“My case is quite desperate, is it? A very blessed consideration, if it will only secure me from the pain and worry of my dear anxious wife's efforts to convert me, and her from the toil and trouble of such exertions, and her sweet face and silver accents from the ruinous effects of the same. A burst of passion is a fine rousing thing upon occasion, Helen, and a flood of tears is marvellously affecting, but, when indulged too often, they are both deuced plaguy things for spoiling one's beauty and tiring out one's friends.”

Thenceforth I restrained my tears and passions as much as I could. I spared him my exhortations and fruitless efforts at conversion too, for I saw it was all in vain: God might awaken that heart, supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, and remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not. His injustice and ill-humour towards his inferiors, who could not defend themselves, I still resented and withstood; but when I alone was their object, as was frequently the case, I endured it with calm forbearance, except at times, when my temper, worn out by repeated annoyances, or stung to distraction by some new instance of irrationality, gave way in spite of myself, and exposed me to the imputations of fierceness, cruelty, and impatience. I attended carefully to his wants and amusements, but not, I own, with the same devoted fondness as before, because I could not feel it; besides, I had now another claimant on my time and care—my ailing infant, for whose sake I frequently braved and suffered the reproaches and complaints of his unreasonably exacting father.

But Arthur is not naturally a peevish or irritable man; so far from it, that there was something almost ludicrous in the incongruity of this adventitious fretfulness and nervous irritability, rather calculated to excite laughter than anger, if it were not for the intensely painful considerations attendant upon those symptoms of a disordered frame, and his temper gradually improved as his bodily health was restored, which was much sooner than would have been the case but for my strenuous exertions; for there was still one thing about him that I did not give up in despair, and one effort for his preservation that I would not remit. His appetite for the stimulus of wine had increased upon him, as I had too well foreseen. It was now something more to him than an accessory to social enjoyment: it was an important source of enjoyment in

itself. In this time of weakness and depression he would have made it his medicine and support, his comforter, his recreation, and his friend, and thereby sunk deeper and deeper, and bound himself down for ever in the bathos whereinto he had fallen. But I determined this should never be, as long as I had any influence left; and though I could not prevent him from taking more than was good for him, still, by incessant perseverance, by kindness, and firmness, and vigilance, by coaxing, and daring, and determination, I succeeded in preserving him from absolute bondage to that detestable propensity, so insidious in its advances, so inexorable in its tyranny, so disastrous in its effects.

And here I must not forget that I am not a little indebted to his friend Mr. Hargrave. About that time he frequently called at Grassdale, and often dined with us, on which occasions I fear Arthur would willingly have cast prudence and decorum to the winds, and made "a night of it," as often as his friend would have consented to join him in that exalted pastime; and if the latter had chosen to comply, he might, in a night or two, have ruined the labour of weeks, and overthrown with a touch the frail bulwark it had cost me such trouble and toil to construct. I was so fearful of this at first, that I humbled myself to intimate to him, in private, my apprehensions of Arthur's proneness to these excesses, and to express a hope that he would not encourage it. He was pleased with this mark of confidence, and certainly did not betray it. On that and every subsequent occasion his presence served rather as a check upon his host, than an incitement to further acts of intemperance; and he always succeeded in bringing him from the dining-room in good time, and in tolerably good condition; for if Arthur disregarded such intimations as "Well, I must not detain you from your lady," or "We must not forget that Mrs. Huntingdon is alone," he would insist upon leaving the table himself, to join me, and his host, however unwillingly, was obliged to follow.

Hence I learned to welcome Mr. Hargrave as a real friend to the family, a harmless companion for Arthur, to cheer his spirits and preserve him from the tedium of absolute idleness and a total isolation from all society but mine, and a useful ally to me. I could not but feel grateful to him under such circumstances; and I did not scruple to acknowledge my obligation on the first convenient opportunity; yet, as I did so, my heart whispered all was not right, and brought a glow to my face, which he heightened by his steady, serious gaze, while, by his manner of receiving those acknowledgments, he more than doubled my misgivings. His high delight at being able to serve me was chastened by sympathy for me and commiseration for himself—about, I know not what, for I would not stay to inquire, or suffer him to unburden his sorrows to me. His sighs and intimations of suppressed affliction seemed to come from a full heart; but either he must contrive to retain them within it, or breathe them

forth in other ears than mine: there was enough of confidence between us already. It seemed wrong that there should exist a secret understanding between my husband's friend and me, unknown to him, of which he was the object. But my after-thought was, "If it is wrong, surely Arthur's is the fault, not mine."

And indeed I know not whether, at the time, it was not for him rather than myself that I blushed; for, since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own: I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent for him, weep, pray, and feel for him as for myself; but I cannot act for him; and hence I must be, and I am, debased, contaminated by the union, both in my own eyes and in the actual truth. I am so determined to love him, so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and labouring to extenuate the loosest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am familiarised with vice, and almost a partaker in his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which were given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt. Perhaps then I was too severe in my judgments, for I abhorred the sinner as well as the sin; now I flatter myself I am more charitable and considerate; but am I not becoming more indifferent and insensate too? Fool that I was, to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! Such vain presumption would be rightly served, if I should perish with him in the gulf from which I sought to save him! Yet, God preserve me from it, and him too! Yes, poor Arthur, I will still hope and pray for you; and though I write as if you were some abandoned wretch, past hope and past reprieve, it is only my anxious fears, my strong desires that make me do so; one who loved you less would be less bitter, less dissatisfied.

His conduct has, of late, been what the world calls irreproachable; but then I know his heart is still unchanged; and I know that spring is approaching, and deeply dread the consequences.

As he began to recover the tone and vigour of his exhausted frame, and with it something of his former impatience of retirement and repose, I suggested a short residence by the sea-side, for his recreation and further restoration, and for the benefit of our little one as well. But no: watering-places were so intolerably dull; besides, he had been invited by one of his friends to spend a month or two in Scotland for the better recreation of grouse-shooting and deer-stalking, and had promised to go.

"Then you will leave me again, Arthur?" said I.

“Yes, dearest, but only to love you the better when I come back, and make up for all past offences and short-comings; and you needn’t fear me this time: there are no temptations on the mountains. And during my absence you may pay a visit to Staningley, if you like: your uncle and aunt have long been wanting us to go there, you know; but somehow there’s such a repulsion between the good lady and me, that I never could bring myself up to the scratch.”

About the third week in August, Arthur set out for Scotland, and Mr. Hargrave accompanied him thither, to my private satisfaction. Shortly after, I, with little Arthur and Rachel, went to Staningley, my dear old home, which, as well as my dear old friends its inhabitants, I saw again with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain so intimately blended that I could scarcely distinguish the one from the other, or tell to which to attribute the various tears, and smiles, and sighs awakened by those old familiar scenes, and tones, and faces.

Arthur did not come home till several weeks after my return to Grassdale; but I did not feel so anxious about him now; to think of him engaged in active sports among the wild hills of Scotland, was very different from knowing him to be immersed amid the corruptions and temptations of London. His letters now; though neither long nor loverlike, were more regular than ever they had been before; and when he did return, to my great joy, instead of being worse than when he went, he was more cheerful and vigorous, and better in every respect. Since that time I have had little cause to complain. He still has an unfortunate predilection for the pleasures of the table, against which I have to struggle and watch; but he has begun to notice his boy, and that is an increasing source of amusement to him within-doors, while his fox-hunting and coursing are a sufficient occupation for him without, when the ground is not hardened by frost; so that he is not wholly dependent on me for entertainment. But it is now January; spring is approaching; and, I repeat, I dread the consequences of its arrival. That sweet season, I once so joyously welcomed as the time of hope and gladness, awakens now far other anticipations by its return.

CHAPTER XXXI

March 20th, 1824. The dreaded time is come, and Arthur is gone, as I expected. This time he announced it his intention to make but a short stay in London, and pass over to the Continent, where he should probably stay a few weeks; but I shall not expect him till after the lapse of many weeks: I now know that, with him, days signify weeks, and weeks months.

July 30th.—He returned about three weeks ago, rather better in health, certainly, than before, but still worse in temper. And yet, perhaps, I am wrong: it is I that am less

patient and forbearing. I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness and hopeless depravity. I wish a milder word would do; I am no angel, and my corruption rises against it. My poor father died last week: Arthur was vexed to hear of it, because he saw that I was shocked and grieved, and he feared the circumstance would mar his comfort. When I spoke of ordering my mourning, he exclaimed,—

“Oh, I hate black! But, however, I suppose you must wear it awhile, for form’s sake; but I hope, Helen, you won’t think it your bounden duty to compose your face and manners into conformity with your funereal garb. Why should you sigh and groan, and I be made uncomfortable, because an old gentleman in ——shire, a perfect stranger to us both, has thought proper to drink himself to death? There, now, I declare you’re crying! Well, it must be affectation.”

He would not hear of my attending the funeral, or going for a day or two, to cheer poor Frederick’s solitude. It was quite unnecessary, he said, and I was unreasonable to wish it. What was my father to me? I had never seen him but once since I was a baby, and I well knew he had never cared a stiver about me; and my brother, too, was little better than a stranger. “Besides, dear Helen,” said he, embracing me with flattering fondness, “I cannot spare you for a single day.”

“Then how have you managed without me these many days?” said I.

“Ah! then I was knocking about the world, now I am at home, and home without you, my household deity, would be intolerable.”

“Yes, as long as I am necessary to your comfort; but you did not say so before, when you urged me to leave you, in order that you might get away from your home without me,” retorted I; but before the words were well out of my mouth, I regretted having uttered them. It seemed so heavy a charge: if false, too gross an insult; if true, too humiliating a fact to be thus openly cast in his teeth. But I might have spared myself that momentary pang of self-reproach. The accusation awoke neither shame nor indignation in him: he attempted neither denial nor excuse, but only answered with a long, low, chuckling laugh, as if he viewed the whole transaction as a clever, merry jest from beginning to end. Surely that man will make me dislike him at last!

Sine as ye brew, my maiden fair,

Keep mind that ye maun drink the yill.

Yes; and I will drink it to the very dregs: and none but myself shall know how bitter I find it!

August 20th.—We are shaken down again to about our usual position. Arthur has returned to nearly his former condition and habits; and I have found it my wisest plan to shut my eyes against the past and future, as far as he at least is concerned, and live only for the present: to love him when I can; to smile (if possible) when he smiles, be cheerful when he is cheerful, and pleased when he is agreeable; and when he is not, to try to make him so; and if that won't answer, to bear with him, to excuse him, and forgive him as well as I can, and restrain my own evil passions from aggravating his; and yet, while I thus yield and minister to his more harmless propensities to self-indulgence, to do all in my power to save him from the worse.

But we shall not be long alone together. I shall shortly be called upon to entertain the same select body of friends as we had the autumn before last, with the addition of Mr. Hattersley and, at my special request, his wife and child. I long to see Milicent, and her little girl too. The latter is now above a year old; she will be a charming playmate for my little Arthur.

September 30th.—Our guests have been here a week or two; but I have had no leisure to pass any comments upon them till now. I cannot get over my dislike to Lady Lowborough. It is not founded on mere personal pique; it is the woman herself that I dislike, because I so thoroughly disapprove of her. I always avoid her company as much as I can without violating the laws of hospitality; but when we do speak or converse together, it is with the utmost civility, even apparent cordiality on her part; but preserve me from such cordiality! It is like handling brier-roses and may-blossoms, bright enough to the eye, and outwardly soft to the touch, but you know there are thorns beneath, and every now and then you feel them too; and perhaps resent the injury by crushing them in till you have destroyed their power, though somewhat to the detriment of your own fingers.

Of late, however, I have seen nothing in her conduct towards Arthur to anger or alarm me. During the first few days I thought she seemed very solicitous to win his admiration. Her efforts were not unnoticed by him: I frequently saw him smiling to himself at her artful manœuvres: but, to his praise be it spoken, her shafts fell powerless by his side. Her most bewitching smiles, her haughtiest frowns were ever received with the same immutable, careless good-humour; till, finding he was indeed impenetrable, she suddenly remitted her efforts, and became, to all appearance, as perfectly indifferent as himself. Nor have I since witnessed any symptom of pique on his part, or renewed attempts at conquest upon hers.

This is as it should be; but Arthur never will let me be satisfied with him. I have never, for a single hour since I married him, known what it is to realise that sweet idea, “In

quietness and confidence shall be your rest." Those two detestable men, Grimsby and Hattersley, have destroyed all my labour against his love of wine. They encourage him daily to overstep the bounds of moderation, and not unfrequently to disgrace himself by positive excess. I shall not soon forget the second night after their arrival. Just as I had retired from the dining-room with the ladies, before the door was closed upon us, Arthur exclaimed,—“Now then, my lads, what say you to a regular jollification?”

Milicent glanced at me with a half-reproachful look, as if I could hinder it; but her countenance changed when she heard Hattersley's voice, shouting through door and wall,—

“I'm your man! Send for more wine: here isn't half enough!”

We had scarcely entered the drawing-room before we were joined by Lord Lowborough.

“What can induce you to come so soon?” exclaimed his lady, with a most ungracious air of dissatisfaction.

“You know I never drink, Annabella,” replied he seriously.

“Well, but you might stay with them a little: it looks so silly to be always dangling after the women; I wonder you can!”

He reproached her with a look of mingled bitterness and surprise, and, sinking into a chair, suppressed a heavy sigh, bit his pale lips, and fixed his eyes upon the floor.

“You did right to leave them, Lord Lowborough,” said I. “I trust you will always continue to honour us so early with your company. And if Annabella knew the value of true wisdom, and the misery of folly and—and intemperance, she would not talk such nonsense—even in jest.”

He raised his eyes while I spoke, and gravely turned them upon me, with a half-surprised, half-abstracted look, and then bent them on his wife.

“At least,” said she, “I know the value of a warm heart and a bold, manly spirit.”

“Well, Annabella,” said he, in a deep and hollow tone, “since my presence is disagreeable to you, I will relieve you of it.”

“Are you going back to them, then?” said she, carelessly.

“No,” exclaimed he, with harsh and startling emphasis. “I will not go back to them! And I will never stay with them one moment longer than I think right, for you or any

other tempter! But you needn't mind that; I shall never trouble you again by intruding my company upon you so unseasonably."

He left the room: I heard the hall-door open and shut, and immediately after, on putting aside the curtain, I saw him pacing down the park, in the comfortless gloom of the damp, cloudy twilight.

"It would serve you right, Annabella," said I, at length, "if Lord Lowborough were to return to his old habits, which had so nearly effected his ruin, and which it cost him such an effort to break: you would then see cause to repent such conduct as this."

"Not at all, my dear! I should not mind if his lordship were to see fit to intoxicate himself every day: I should only the sooner be rid of him."

"Oh, Annabella!" cried Milicent. "How can you say such wicked things! It would, indeed, be a just punishment, as far as you are concerned, if Providence should take you at your word, and make you feel what others feel, that—" She paused as a sudden burst of loud talking and laughter reached us from the dining-room, in which the voice of Hattersley was pre-eminently conspicuous, even to my unpractised ear.

"What you feel at this moment, I suppose?" said Lady Lowborough, with a malicious smile, fixing her eyes upon her cousin's distressed countenance.

The latter offered no reply, but averted her face and brushed away a tear. At that moment the door opened and admitted Mr. Hargrave, just a little flushed, his dark eyes sparkling with unwonted vivacity.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're come, Walter?" cried his sister. "But I wish you could have got Ralph to come too."

"Utterly impossible, dear Milicent," replied he, gaily. "I had much ado to get away myself. Ralph attempted to keep me by violence; Huntingdon threatened me with the eternal loss of his friendship; and Grimsby, worse than all, endeavoured to make me ashamed of my virtue, by such galling sarcasms and innuendoes as he knew would wound me the most. So you see, ladies, you ought to make me welcome when I have braved and suffered so much for the favour of your sweet society." He smilingly turned to me and bowed as he finished the sentence.

"Isn't he handsome now, Helen!" whispered Milicent, her sisterly pride overcoming, for the moment, all other considerations.

"He would be," I returned, "if that brilliance of eye, and lip, and cheek were natural to him; but look again, a few hours hence."

Here the gentleman took a seat near me at the table, and petitioned for a cup of coffee.

“I consider this an apt illustration of heaven taken by storm,” said he, as I handed one to him. “I am in paradise, now; but I have fought my way through flood and fire to win it. Ralph Hattersley’s last resource was to set his back against the door, and swear I should find no passage but through his body (a pretty substantial one too). Happily, however, that was not the only door, and I effected my escape by the side entrance through the butler’s pantry, to the infinite amazement of Benson, who was cleaning the plate.”

Mr. Hargrave laughed, and so did his cousin; but his sister and I remained silent and grave.

“Pardon my levity, Mrs. Huntingdon,” murmured he, more seriously, as he raised his eyes to my face. “You are not used to these things: you suffer them to affect your delicate mind too sensibly. But I thought of you in the midst of those lawless roysterers; and I endeavoured to persuade Mr. Huntingdon to think of you too; but to no purpose: I fear he is fully determined to enjoy himself this night; and it will be no use keeping the coffee waiting for him or his companions; it will be much if they join us at tea. Meantime, I earnestly wish I could banish the thoughts of them from your mind—and my own too, for I hate to think of them—yes—even of my dear friend Huntingdon, when I consider the power he possesses over the happiness of one so immeasurably superior to himself, and the use he makes of it—I positively detest the man!”

“You had better not say so to me, then,” said I; “for, bad as he is, he is part of myself, and you cannot abuse him without offending me.”

“Pardon me, then, for I would sooner die than offend you. But let us say no more of him for the present, if you please.”

At last they came; but not till after ten, when tea, which had been delayed for more than half an hour, was nearly over. Much as I had longed for their coming, my heart failed me at the riotous uproar of their approach; and Milicent turned pale, and almost started from her seat, as Mr. Hattersley burst into the room with a clamorous volley of oaths in his mouth, which Hargrave endeavoured to check by entreating him to remember the ladies.

“Ah! you do well to remind me of the ladies, you dastardly deserter,” cried he, shaking his formidable fist at his brother-in-law. “If it were not for them, you well know, I’d demolish you in the twinkling of an eye, and give your body to the fowls of heaven and

the lilies of the fields!” Then, planting a chair by Lady Lowborough’s side, he stationed himself in it, and began to talk to her with a mixture of absurdity and impudence that seemed rather to amuse than to offend her; though she affected to resent his insolence, and to keep him at bay with sallies of smart and spirited repartee.

Meantime Mr. Grimsby seated himself by me, in the chair vacated by Hargrave as they entered, and gravely stated that he would thank me for a cup of tea: and Arthur placed himself beside poor Milicent, confidentially pushing his head into her face, and drawing in closer to her as she shrank away from him. He was not so noisy as Hattersley, but his face was exceedingly flushed: he laughed incessantly, and while I blushed for all I saw and heard of him, I was glad that he chose to talk to his companion in so low a tone that no one could hear what he said but herself.

“What fools they are!” drawled Mr. Grimsby, who had been talking away, at my elbow, with sententious gravity all the time; but I had been too much absorbed in contemplating the deplorable state of the other two—especially Arthur—to attend to him.

“Did you ever hear such nonsense as they talk, Mrs. Huntingdon?” he continued. “I’m quite ashamed of them for my part: they can’t take so much as a bottle between them without its getting into their heads—”

“You are pouring the cream into your saucer, Mr. Grimsby.”

“Ah! yes, I see, but we’re almost in darkness here. Hargrave, snuff those candles, will you?”

“They’re wax; they don’t require snuffing,” said I.

“The light of the body is the eye,” observed Hargrave, with a sarcastic smile. “If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.”

Grimsby repulsed him with a solemn wave of the hand, and then turning to me, continued, with the same drawling tones and strange uncertainty of utterance and heavy gravity of aspect as before: “But as I was saying, Mrs. Huntingdon, they have no head at all: they can’t take half a bottle without being affected some way; whereas I—well, I’ve taken three times as much as they have to-night, and you see I’m perfectly steady. Now that may strike you as very singular, but I think I can explain it: you see their brains—I mention no names, but you’ll understand to whom I allude—their brains are light to begin with, and the fumes of the fermented liquor render them lighter still, and produce an entire light-headedness, or giddiness, resulting in intoxication; whereas my brains, being composed of more solid materials, will absorb

a considerable quantity of this alcoholic vapour without the production of any sensible result—”

“I think you will find a sensible result produced on that tea,” interrupted Mr. Hargrave, “by the quantity of sugar you have put into it. Instead of your usual complement of one lump, you have put in six.”

“Have I so?” replied the philosopher, diving with his spoon into the cup, and bringing up several half-dissolved pieces in confirmation of the assertion. “Hum! I perceive. Thus, Madam, you see the evil of absence of mind—of thinking too much while engaged in the common concerns of life. Now, if I had had my wits about me, like ordinary men, instead of within me like a philosopher, I should not have spoiled this cup of tea, and been constrained to trouble you for another.”

“That is the sugar-basin, Mr. Grimsby. Now you have spoiled the sugar too; and I’ll thank you to ring for some more, for here is Lord Lowborough at last; and I hope his lordship will condescend to sit down with us, such as we are, and allow me to give him some tea.”

His lordship gravely bowed in answer to my appeal, but said nothing. Meantime, Hargrave volunteered to ring for the sugar, while Grimsby lamented his mistake, and attempted to prove that it was owing to the shadow of the urn and the badness of the lights.

Lord Lowborough had entered a minute or two before, unobserved by anyone but me, and had been standing before the door, grimly surveying the company. He now stepped up to Annabella, who sat with her back towards him, with Hattersley still beside her, though not now attending to her, being occupied in vociferously abusing and bullying his host.

“Well, Annabella,” said her husband, as he leant over the back of her chair, “which of these three ‘bold, manly spirits’ would you have me to resemble?”

“By heaven and earth, you shall resemble us all!” cried Hattersley, starting up and rudely seizing him by the arm. “Hallo, Huntingdon!” he shouted—“I’ve got him! Come, man, and help me! And d—n me, if I don’t make him drunk before I let him go! He shall make up for all past delinquencies as sure as I’m a living soul!”

There followed a disgraceful contest: Lord Lowborough, in desperate earnest, and pale with anger, silently struggling to release himself from the powerful madman that was striving to drag him from the room. I attempted to urge Arthur to interfere in behalf of his outraged guest, but he could do nothing but laugh.

“Huntingdon, you fool, come and help me, can’t you!” cried Hattersley, himself somewhat weakened by his excesses.

“I’m wishing you God-speed, Hattersley,” cried Arthur, “and aiding you with my prayers: I can’t do anything else if my life depended on it! I’m quite used up. Oh—oh!” and leaning back in his seat, he clapped his hands on his sides and groaned aloud.

“Annabella, give me a candle!” said Lowborough, whose antagonist had now got him round the waist and was endeavouring to root him from the door-post, to which he madly clung with all the energy of desperation.

“I shall take no part in your rude sports!” replied the lady coldly drawing back. “I wonder you can expect it.”

But I snatched up a candle and brought it to him. He took it and held the flame to Hattersley’s hands, till, roaring like a wild beast, the latter unclasped them and let him go. He vanished, I suppose to his own apartment, for nothing more was seen of him till the morning. Swearing and cursing like a maniac, Hattersley threw himself on to the ottoman beside the window. The door being now free, Milicent attempted to make her escape from the scene of her husband’s disgrace; but he called her back, and insisted upon her coming to him.

“What do you want, Ralph?” murmured she, reluctantly approaching him.

“I want to know what’s the matter with you,” said he, pulling her on to his knee like a child. “What are you crying for, Milicent?—Tell me!”

“I’m not crying.”

“You are,” persisted he, rudely pulling her hands from her face. “How dare you tell such a lie!”

“I’m not crying now,” pleaded she.

“But you have been, and just this minute too; and I will know what for. Come, now, you shall tell me!”

“Do let me alone, Ralph! Remember, we are not at home.”

“No matter: you shall answer my question!” exclaimed her tormentor; and he attempted to extort the confession by shaking her, and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the gripe of his powerful fingers.

“Don’t let him treat your sister in that way,” said I to Mr. Hargrave.

“Come now, Hattersley, I can’t allow that,” said that gentleman, stepping up to the ill-assorted couple. “Let my sister alone, if you please.”

And he made an effort to unclasp the ruffian’s fingers from her arm, but was suddenly driven backward, and nearly laid upon the floor by a violent blow on the chest, accompanied with the admonition, “Take that for your insolence! and learn to interfere between me and mine again.”

“If you were not drunk, I’d have satisfaction for that!” gasped Hargrave, white and breathless as much from passion as from the immediate effects of the blow.

“Go to the devil!” responded his brother-in-law. “Now, Milicent, tell me what you were crying for.”

“I’ll tell you some other time,” murmured she, “when we are alone.”

“Tell me now!” said he, with another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain.

“I’ll tell you, Mr. Hattersley,” said I. “She was crying from pure shame and humiliation for you; because she could not bear to see you conduct yourself so disgracefully.”

“Confound you, Madam!” muttered he, with a stare of stupid amazement at my “impudence.” “It was not that—was it, Milicent?”

She was silent.

“Come, speak up, child!”

“I can’t tell now,” sobbed she.

“But you can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as well as ‘I can’t tell.’—Come!”

“Yes,” she whispered, hanging her head, and blushing at the awful acknowledgment.

“Curse you for an impertinent hussy, then!” cried he, throwing her from him with such violence that she fell on her side; but she was up again before either I or her brother could come to her assistance, and made the best of her way out of the room, and, I suppose, up-stairs, without loss of time.

The next object of assault was Arthur, who sat opposite, and had, no doubt, richly enjoyed the whole scene.

“Now, Huntingdon,” exclaimed his irascible friend, “I WILL NOT have you sitting there and laughing like an idiot!”

“Oh, Hattersley,” cried he, wiping his swimming eyes—“you’ll be the death of me.”

“Yes, I will, but not as you suppose: I’ll have the heart out of your body, man, if you irritate me with any more of that imbecile laughter!—What! are you at it yet?—There! see if that’ll settle you!” cried Hattersley, snatching up a footstool and hurting it at the head of his host; but he as well as missed his aim, and the latter still sat collapsed and quaking with feeble laughter, with tears running down his face: a deplorable spectacle indeed.

Hattersley tried cursing and swearing, but it would not do: he then took a number of books from the table beside him, and threw them, one by one, at the object of his wrath; but Arthur only laughed the more; and, finally, Hattersley rushed upon him in a frenzy and seizing him by the shoulders, gave him a violent shaking, under which he laughed and shrieked alarmingly. But I saw no more: I thought I had witnessed enough of my husband’s degradation; and leaving Annabella and the rest to follow when they pleased, I withdrew, but not to bed. Dismissing Rachel to her rest, I walked up and down my room, in an agony of misery for what had been done, and suspense, not knowing what might further happen, or how or when that unhappy creature would come up to bed.

At last he came, slowly and stumblingly ascending the stairs, supported by Grimsby and Hattersley, who neither of them walked quite steadily themselves, but were both laughing and joking at him, and making noise enough for all the servants to hear. He himself was no longer laughing now, but sick and stupid. I will write no more about that.

Such disgraceful scenes (or nearly such) have been repeated more than once. I don’t say much to Arthur about it, for, if I did, it would do more harm than good; but I let him know that I intensely dislike such exhibitions; and each time he has promised they should never again be repeated. But I fear he is losing the little self-command and self-respect he once possessed: formerly, he would have been ashamed to act thus—at least, before any other witnesses than his boon companions, or such as they. His friend Hargrave, with a prudence and self-government that I envy for him, never disgraces himself by taking more than sufficient to render him a little “elevated,” and is always the first to leave the table after Lord Lowborough, who, wiser still, perseveres in vacating the dining-room immediately after us: but never once, since Annabella offended him so deeply, has he entered the drawing-room before the rest; always spending the interim in the library, which I take care to have lighted for his accommodation; or, on fine moonlight nights, in roaming about the grounds. But I think she regrets her misconduct, for she has never repeated it since, and of late she

has comported herself with wonderful propriety towards him, treating him with more uniform kindness and consideration than ever I have observed her to do before. I date the time of this improvement from the period when she ceased to hope and strive for Arthur's admiration.

CHAPTER XXXII

October 5th.—Esther Hargrave is getting a fine girl. She is not out of the school-room yet, but her mother frequently brings her over to call in the mornings when the gentlemen are out, and sometimes she spends an hour or two in company with her sister and me, and the children; and when we go to the Grove, I always contrive to see her, and talk more to her than to any one else, for I am very much attached to my little friend, and so is she to me. I wonder what she can see to like in me though, for I am no longer the happy, lively girl I used to be; but she has no other society, save that of her uncongenial mother, and her governess (as artificial and conventional a person as that prudent mother could procure to rectify the pupil's natural qualities), and, now and then, her subdued, quiet sister. I often wonder what will be her lot in life, and so does she; but her speculations on the future are full of buoyant hope; so were mine once. I shudder to think of her being awakened, like me, to a sense of their delusive vanity. It seems as if I should feel her disappointment, even more deeply than my own. I feel almost as if I were born for such a fate, but she is so joyous and fresh, so light of heart and free of spirit, and so guileless and unsuspecting too. Oh, it would be cruel to make her feel as I feel now, and know what I have known!

Her sister trembles for her too. Yesterday morning, one of October's brightest, loveliest days, Milicent and I were in the garden enjoying a brief half-hour together with our children, while Annabella was lying on the drawing-room sofa, deep in the last new novel. We had been romping with the little creatures, almost as merry and wild as themselves, and now paused in the shade of the tall copper beech, to recover breath and rectify our hair, disordered by the rough play and the frolicsome breeze, while they toddled together along the broad, sunny walk; my Arthur supporting the feebler steps of her little Helen, and sagaciously pointing out to her the brightest beauties of the border as they passed, with semi-articulate prattle, that did as well for her as any other mode of discourse. From laughing at the pretty sight, we began to talk of the children's future life; and that made us thoughtful. We both relapsed into silent musing as we slowly proceeded up the walk; and I suppose Milicent, by a train of associations, was led to think of her sister.

"Helen," said she, "you often see Esther, don't you?"

"Not very often."

“But you have more frequent opportunities of meeting her than I have; and she loves you, I know, and reverences you too: there is nobody’s opinion she thinks so much of; and she says you have more sense than mamma.”

“That is because she is self-willed, and my opinions more generally coincide with her own than your mamma’s. But what then, Milicent?”

“Well, since you have so much influence with her, I wish you would seriously impress it upon her, never, on any account, or for anybody’s persuasion, to marry for the sake of money, or rank, or establishment, or any earthly thing, but true affection and well-grounded esteem.”

“There is no necessity for that,” said I, “for we have had some discourse on that subject already, and I assure you her ideas of love and matrimony are as romantic as any one could desire.”

“But romantic notions will not do: I want her to have true notions.”

“Very right: but in my judgment, what the world stigmatises as romantic, is often more nearly allied to the truth than is commonly supposed; for, if the generous ideas of youth are too often over-clouded by the sordid views of after-life, that scarcely proves them to be false.”

“Well, but if you think her ideas are what they ought to be, strengthen them, will you? and confirm them, as far as you can; for I had romantic notions once, and—I don’t mean to say that I regret my lot, for I am quite sure I don’t, but—”

“I understand you,” said I; “you are contented for yourself, but you would not have your sister to suffer the same as you.”

“No—or worse. She might have far worse to suffer than I, for I am really contented, Helen, though you mayn’t think it: I speak the solemn truth in saying that I would not exchange my husband for any man on earth, if I might do it by the plucking of this leaf.”

“Well, I believe you: now that you have him, you would not exchange him for another; but then you would gladly exchange some of his qualities for those of better men.”

“Yes: just as I would gladly exchange some of my own qualities for those of better women; for neither he nor I are perfect, and I desire his improvement as earnestly as my own. And he will improve, don’t you think so, Helen? he’s only six-and-twenty yet.”

“He may,” I answered,

“He will, he WILL!” repeated she.

“Excuse the faintness of my acquiescence, Milicent, I would not discourage your hopes for the world, but mine have been so often disappointed, that I am become as cold and doubtful in my expectations as the flattest of octogenarians.”

“And yet you do hope, still, even for Mr. Huntingdon?”

“I do, I confess, ‘even’ for him; for it seems as if life and hope must cease together. And is he so much worse, Milicent, than Mr. Hattersley?”

“Well, to give you my candid opinion, I think there is no comparison between them. But you mustn’t be offended, Helen, for you know I always speak my mind, and you may speak yours too. I sha’n’t care.”

“I am not offended, love; and my opinion is, that if there be a comparison made between the two, the difference, for the most part, is certainly in Hattersley’s favour.”

Milicent’s own heart told her how much it cost me to make this acknowledgment; and, with a childlike impulse, she expressed her sympathy by suddenly kissing my cheek, without a word of reply, and then turning quickly away, caught up her baby, and hid her face in its frock. How odd it is that we so often weep for each other’s distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own! Her heart had been full enough of her own sorrows, but it overflowed at the idea of mine; and I, too, shed tears at the sight of her sympathetic emotion, though I had not wept for myself for many a week.

It was one rainy day last week; most of the company were killing time in the billiard-room, but Milicent and I were with little Arthur and Helen in the library, and between our books, our children, and each other, we expected to make out a very agreeable morning. We had not been thus secluded above two hours, however, when Mr. Hattersley came in, attracted, I suppose, by the voice of his child, as he was crossing the hall, for he is prodigiously fond of her, and she of him.

He was redolent of the stables, where he had been regaling himself with the company of his fellow-creatures the horses ever since breakfast. But that was no matter to my little namesake; as soon as the colossal person of her father darkened the door, she uttered a shrill scream of delight, and, quitting her mother’s side, ran crowing towards him, balancing her course with outstretched arms, and embracing his knee, threw back her head and laughed in his face. He might well look smilingly down upon those small, fair features, radiant with innocent mirth, those clear blue shining eyes, and that soft flaxen hair cast back upon the little ivory neck and shoulders. Did he not think how unworthy he was of such a possession? I fear no such idea crossed his

mind. He caught her up, and there followed some minutes of very rough play, during which it is difficult to say whether the father or the daughter laughed and shouted the loudest. At length, however, the boisterous pastime terminated, suddenly, as might be expected: the little one was hurt, and began to cry; and the ungentle play-fellow tossed it into its mother's lap, bidding her "make all straight." As happy to return to that gentle comforter as it had been to leave her, the child nestled in her arms, and hushed its cries in a moment; and sinking its little weary head on her bosom, soon dropped asleep.

Meantime Mr. Hattersley strode up to the fire, and interposing his height and breadth between us and it, stood with arms akimbo, expanding his chest, and gazing round him as if the house and all its appurtenances and contents were his own undisputed possessions.

"Deuced bad weather this!" he began. "There'll be no shooting to-day, I guess." Then, suddenly lifting up his voice, he regaled us with a few bars of a rollicking song, which abruptly ceasing, he finished the tune with a whistle, and then continued:—"I say, Mrs. Huntingdon, what a fine stud your husband has! not large, but good. I've been looking at them a bit this morning; and upon my word, Black Boss, and Grey Tom, and that young Nimrod are the finest animals I've seen for many a day!" Then followed a particular discussion of their various merits, succeeded by a sketch of the great things he intended to do in the horse-jockey line, when his old governor thought proper to quit the stage. "Not that I wish him to close his accounts," added he: "the old Trojan is welcome to keep his books open as long as he pleases for me."

"I hope so, indeed, Mr. Hattersley."

"Oh, yes! It's only my way of talking. The event must come some time, and so I look to the bright side of it: that's the right plan—isn't it, Mrs. H.? What are you two doing here? By-the-by, where's Lady Lowborough?"

"In the billiard-room."

"What a splendid creature she is!" continued he, fixing his eyes on his wife, who changed colour, and looked more and more disconcerted as he proceeded. "What a noble figure she has; and what magnificent black eyes; and what a fine spirit of her own; and what a tongue of her own, too, when she likes to use it. I perfectly adore her! But never mind, Milicent: I wouldn't have her for my wife, not if she'd a kingdom for her dowry! I'm better satisfied with the one I have. Now then! what do you look so sulky for? don't you believe me?"

“Yes, I believe you,” murmured she, in a tone of half sad, half sullen resignation, as she turned away to stroke the hair of her sleeping infant, that she had laid on the sofa beside her.

“Well, then, what makes you so cross? Come here, Milly, and tell me why you can’t be satisfied with my assurance.”

She went, and putting her little hand within his arm, looked up in his face, and said softly,—

“What does it amount to, Ralph? Only to this, that though you admire Annabella so much, and for qualities that I don’t possess, you would still rather have me than her for your wife, which merely proves that you don’t think it necessary to love your wife; you are satisfied if she can keep your house, and take care of your child. But I’m not cross; I’m only sorry; for,” added she, in a low, tremulous accent, withdrawing her hand from his arm, and bending her looks on the rug, “if you don’t love me, you don’t, and it can’t be helped.”

“Very true; but who told you I didn’t? Did I say I loved Annabella?”

“You said you adored her.”

“True, but adoration isn’t love. I adore Annabella, but I don’t love her; and I love thee, Millicent, but I don’t adore thee.” In proof of his affection, he clutched a handful of her light brown ringlets, and appeared to twist them unmercifully.

“Do you really, Ralph?” murmured she, with a faint smile beaming through her tears, just putting up her hand to his, in token that he pulled rather too hard.

“To be sure I do,” responded he: “only you bother me rather, sometimes.”

“I bother you!” cried she, in very natural surprise.

“Yes, you—but only by your exceeding goodness. When a boy has been eating raisins and sugar-plums all day, he longs for a squeeze of sour orange by way of a change. And did you never, Milly, observe the sands on the sea-shore; how nice and smooth they look, and how soft and easy they feel to the foot? But if you plod along, for half an hour, over this soft, easy carpet—giving way at every step, yielding the more the harder you press,—you’ll find it rather wearisome work, and be glad enough to come to a bit of good, firm rock, that won’t budge an inch whether you stand, walk, or stamp upon it; and, though it be hard as the nether millstone, you’ll find it the easier footing after all.”

“I know what you mean, Ralph,” said she, nervously playing with her watchguard and tracing the figure on the rug with the point of her tiny foot—“I know what you mean: but I thought you always liked to be yielded to, and I can’t alter now.”

“I do like it,” replied he, bringing her to him by another tug at her hair. “You mustn’t mind my talk, Milly. A man must have something to grumble about; and if he can’t complain that his wife harries him to death with her perversity and ill-humour, he must complain that she wears him out with her kindness and gentleness.”

“But why complain at all, unless because you are tired and dissatisfied?”

“To excuse my own failings, to be sure. Do you think I’ll bear all the burden of my sins on my own shoulders, as long as there’s another ready to help me, with none of her own to carry?”

“There is no such one on earth,” said she seriously; and then, taking his hand from her head, she kissed it with an air of genuine devotion, and tripped away to the door.

“What now?” said he. “Where are you going?”

“To tidy my hair,” she answered, smiling through her disordered locks; “you’ve made it all come down.”

“Off with you then!—An excellent little woman,” he remarked when she was gone, “but a thought too soft—she almost melts in one’s hands. I positively think I ill-use her sometimes, when I’ve taken too much—but I can’t help it, for she never complains, either at the time or after. I suppose she doesn’t mind it.”

“I can enlighten you on that subject, Mr. Hattersley,” said I: “she does mind it; and some other things she minds still more, which yet you may never hear her complain of.”

“How do you know?—does she complain to you?” demanded he, with a sudden spark of fury ready to burst into a flame if I should answer ‘yes.’

“No,” I replied; “but I have known her longer and studied her more closely than you have done.—And I can tell you, Mr. Hattersley, that Millicent loves you more than you deserve, and that you have it in your power to make her very happy, instead of which you are her evil genius, and, I will venture to say, there is not a single day passes in which you do not inflict upon her some pang that you might spare her if you would.”

“Well—it’s not my fault,” said he, gazing carelessly up at the ceiling and plunging his hands into his pockets: “if my ongoings don’t suit her, she should tell me so.”

“Is she not exactly the wife you wanted? Did you not tell Mr. Huntingdon you must have one that would submit to anything without a murmur, and never blame you, whatever you did?”

“True, but we shouldn’t always have what we want: it spoils the best of us, doesn’t it? How can I help playing the deuce when I see it’s all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel, such as nature made me? and how can I help teasing her when she’s so invitingly meek and mim, when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that’s enough?”

“If you are a tyrant by nature, the temptation is strong, I allow; but no generous mind delights to oppress the weak, but rather to cherish and protect.”

“I don’t oppress her; but it’s so confounded flat to be always cherishing and protecting; and then, how can I tell that I am oppressing her when she ‘melts away and makes no sign’? I sometimes think she has no feeling at all; and then I go on till she cries, and that satisfies me.”

“Then you do delight to oppress her?”

“I don’t, I tell you! only when I’m in a bad humour, or a particularly good one, and want to afflict for the pleasure of comforting; or when she looks flat and wants shaking up a bit. And sometimes she provokes me by crying for nothing, and won’t tell me what it’s for; and then, I allow, it enrages me past bearing, especially when I’m not my own man.”

“As is no doubt generally the case on such occasions,” said I. “But in future, Mr. Hattersley, when you see her looking flat, or crying for ‘nothing’ (as you call it), ascribe it all to yourself: be assured it is something you have done amiss, or your general misconduct, that distresses her.”

“I don’t believe it. If it were, she should tell me so: I don’t like that way of moping and fretting in silence, and saying nothing: it’s not honest. How can she expect me to mend my ways at that rate?”

“Perhaps she gives you credit for having more sense than you possess, and deludes herself with the hope that you will one day see your own errors and repair them, if left to your own reflection.”

“None of your sneers, Mrs. Huntingdon. I have the sense to see that I’m not always quite correct, but sometimes I think that’s no great matter, as long as I injure nobody but myself—”

“It is a great matter,” interrupted I, “both to yourself (as you will hereafter find to your cost) and to all connected with you, most especially your wife. But, indeed, it is nonsense to talk about injuring no one but yourself: it is impossible to injure yourself, especially by such acts as we allude to, without injuring hundreds, if not thousands, besides, in a greater or less, degree, either by the evil you do or the good you leave undone.”

“And as I was saying,” continued he, “or would have said if you hadn’t taken me up so short, I sometimes think I should do better if I were joined to one that would always remind me when I was wrong, and give me a motive for doing good and eschewing evil, by decidedly showing her approval of the one and disapproval of the other.”

“If you had no higher motive than the approval of your fellow-mortal, it would do you little good.”

“Well, but if I had a mate that would not always be yielding, and always equally kind, but that would have the spirit to stand at bay now and then, and honestly tell me her mind at all times, such a one as yourself for instance. Now, if I went on with you as I do with her when I’m in London, you’d make the house too hot to hold me at times, I’ll be sworn.”

“You mistake me: I’m no termagant.”

“Well, all the better for that, for I can’t stand contradiction, in a general way, and I’m as fond of my own will as another; only I think too much of it doesn’t answer for any man.”

“Well, I would never contradict you without a cause, but certainly I would always let you know what I thought of your conduct; and if you oppressed me, in body, mind, or estate, you should at least have no reason to suppose ‘I didn’t mind it.’”

“I know that, my lady; and I think if my little wife were to follow the same plan, it would be better for us both.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“No, no, let her be; there’s much to be said on both sides, and, now I think upon it, Huntingdon often regrets that you are not more like her, scoundrelly dog that he is, and you see, after all, you can’t reform him: he’s ten times worse than I. He’s afraid of you, to be sure; that is, he’s always on his best behaviour in your presence—but—”

“I wonder what his worst behaviour is like, then?” I could not forbear observing.

“Why, to tell you the truth, it’s very bad indeed—isn’t it, Hargrave?” said he, addressing that gentleman, who had entered the room unperceived by me, for I was now standing near the fire, with my back to the door. “Isn’t Huntingdon,” he continued, “as great a reprobate as ever was d—d?”

“His lady will not hear him censured with impunity,” replied Mr. Hargrave, coming forward; “but I must say, I thank God I am not such another.”

“Perhaps it would become you better,” said I, “to look at what you are, and say, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’”

“You are severe,” returned he, bowing slightly and drawing himself up with a proud yet injured air. Hattersley laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. Moving from under his hand with a gesture of insulted dignity, Mr. Hargrave took himself away to the other end of the rug.

“Isn’t it a shame, Mrs. Huntingdon?” cried his brother-in-law; “I struck Walter Hargrave when I was drunk, the second night after we came, and he’s turned a cold shoulder on me ever since; though I asked his pardon the very morning after it was done!”

“Your manner of asking it,” returned the other, “and the clearness with which you remembered the whole transaction, showed you were not too drunk to be fully conscious of what you were about, and quite responsible for the deed.”

“You wanted to interfere between me and my wife,” grumbled Hattersley, “and that is enough to provoke any man.”

“You justify it, then?” said his opponent, darting upon him a most vindictive glance.

“No, I tell you I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been under excitement; and if you choose to bear malice for it after all the handsome things I’ve said, do so and be d—d!”

“I would refrain from such language in a lady’s presence, at least,” said Mr. Hargrave, hiding his anger under a mask of disgust.

“What have I said?” returned Hattersley: “nothing but heaven’s truth. He will be damned, won’t he, Mrs. Huntingdon, if he doesn’t forgive his brother’s trespasses?”

“You ought to forgive him, Mr. Hargrave, since he asks you,” said I.

“Do you say so? Then I will!” And, smiling almost frankly, he stepped forward and offered his hand. It was immediately clasped in that of his relative, and the reconciliation was apparently cordial on both sides.

“The affront,” continued Hargrave, turning to me, “owed half its bitterness to the fact of its being offered in your presence; and since you bid me forgive it, I will, and forget it too.”

“I guess the best return I can make will be to take myself off,” muttered Hattersley, with a broad grin. His companion smiled, and he left the room. This put me on my guard. Mr. Hargrave turned seriously to me, and earnestly began,—

“Dear Mrs. Huntingdon, how I have longed for, yet dreaded, this hour! Do not be alarmed,” he added, for my face was crimson with anger: “I am not about to offend you with any useless entreaties or complaints. I am not going to presume to trouble you with the mention of my own feelings or your perfections, but I have something to reveal to you which you ought to know, and which, yet, it pains me inexpressibly—”

“Then don’t trouble yourself to reveal it!”

“But it is of importance—”

“If so I shall hear it soon enough, especially if it is bad news, as you seem to consider it. At present I am going to take the children to the nursery.”

“But can’t you ring and send them?”

“No; I want the exercise of a run to the top of the house. Come, Arthur.”

“But you will return?”

“Not yet; don’t wait.”

“Then when may I see you again?”

“At lunch,” said I, departing with little Helen in one arm and leading Arthur by the hand.

He turned away, muttering some sentence of impatient censure or complaint, in which “heartless” was the only distinguishable word.

“What nonsense is this, Mr. Hargrave?” said I, pausing in the doorway. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing; I did not intend you should hear my soliloquy. But the fact is, Mrs. Huntingdon, I have a disclosure to make, painful for me to offer as for you to hear; and I want you to give me a few minutes of your attention in private at any time and place you like to appoint. It is from no selfish motive that I ask it, and not for any cause that could alarm your superhuman purity: therefore you need not kill me with that look of

cold and pitiless disdain. I know too well the feelings with which the bearers of bad tidings are commonly regarded not to—”

“What is this wonderful piece of intelligence?” said I, impatiently interrupting him. “If it is anything of real importance, speak it in three words before I go.”

“In three words I cannot. Send those children away and stay with me.”

“No; keep your bad tidings to yourself. I know it is something I don’t want to hear, and something you would displease me by telling.”

“You have divined too truly, I fear; but still, since I know it, I feel it my duty to disclose it to you.”

“Oh, spare us both the infliction, and I will exonerate you from the duty. You have offered to tell; I have refused to hear: my ignorance will not be charged on you.”

“Be it so: you shall not hear it from me. But if the blow fall too suddenly upon you when it comes, remember I wished to soften it!”

I left him. I was determined his words should not alarm me. What could he, of all men, have to reveal that was of importance for me to hear? It was no doubt some exaggerated tale about my unfortunate husband that he wished to make the most of to serve his own bad purposes.

6th.—He has not alluded to this momentous mystery since, and I have seen no reason to repent of my unwillingness to hear it. The threatened blow has not been struck yet, and I do not greatly fear it. At present I am pleased with Arthur: he has not positively disgraced himself for upwards of a fortnight, and all this last week has been so very moderate in his indulgence at table that I can perceive a marked difference in his general temper and appearance. Dare I hope this will continue?

CHAPTER XXXIII

Seventh.—Yes, I will hope! To-night I heard Grimsby and Hattersley grumbling together about the inhospitality of their host. They did not know I was near, for I happened to be standing behind the curtain in the bow of the window, watching the moon rising over the clump of tall dark elm-trees below the lawn, and wondering why Arthur was so sentimental as to stand without, leaning against the outer pillar of the portico, apparently watching it too.

“So, I suppose we’ve seen the last of our merry carousals in this house,” said Mr. Hattersley; “I thought his good-fellowship wouldn’t last long. But,” added he, laughing, “I didn’t expect it would meet its end this way. I rather thought our pretty hostess

would be setting up her porcupine quills, and threatening to turn us out of the house if we didn't mind our manners."

"You didn't foresee this, then?" answered Grimsby, with a guttural chuckle. "But he'll change again when he's sick of her. If we come here a year or two hence, we shall have all our own way, you'll see."

"I don't know," replied the other: "she's not the style of woman you soon tire of. But be that as it may, it's devilish provoking now that we can't be jolly, because he chooses to be on his good behaviour."

"It's all these cursed women!" muttered Grimsby: "they're the very bane of the world! They bring trouble and discomfort wherever they come, with their false, fair faces and their deceitful tongues."

At this juncture I issued from my retreat, and smiling on Mr. Grimsby as I passed, left the room and went out in search of Arthur. Having seen him bend his course towards the shrubbery, I followed him thither, and found him just entering the shadowy walk. I was so light of heart, so overflowing with affection, that I sprang upon him and clasped him in my arms. This startling conduct had a singular effect upon him: first, he murmured, "Bless you, darling!" and returned my close embrace with a fervour like old times, and then he started, and, in a tone of absolute terror, exclaimed,

"Helen! what the devil is this?" and I saw, by the faint light gleaming through the overshadowing tree, that he was positively pale with the shock.

How strange that the instinctive impulse of affection should come first, and then the shock of the surprise! It shows, at least, that the affection is genuine: he is not sick of me yet.

"I startled you, Arthur," said I, laughing in my glee. "How nervous you are!"

"What the deuce did you do it for?" cried he, quite testily, extricating himself from my arms, and wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. "Go back, Helen—go back directly! You'll get your death of cold!"

"I won't, till I've told you what I came for. They are blaming you, Arthur, for your temperance and sobriety, and I'm come to thank you for it. They say it is all 'these cursed women,' and that we are the bane of the world; but don't let them laugh or grumble you out of your good resolutions, or your affection for me."

He laughed. I squeezed him in my arms again, and cried in tearful earnest, "Do, do persevere! and I'll love you better than ever I did before!"

“Well, well, I will!” said he, hastily kissing me. “There, now, go. You mad creature, how could you come out in your light evening dress this chill autumn night?”

“It is a glorious night,” said I.

“It is a night that will give you your death, in another minute. Run away, do!”

“Do you see my death among those trees, Arthur?” said I, for he was gazing intently at the shrubs, as if he saw it coming, and I was reluctant to leave him, in my new-found happiness and revival of hope and love. But he grew angry at my delay, so I kissed him and ran back to the house.

I was in such a good humour that night: Milicent told me I was the life of the party, and whispered she had never seen me so brilliant. Certainly, I talked enough for twenty, and smiled upon them all. Grimsby, Hattersley, Hargrave, Lady Lowborough, all shared my sisterly kindness. Grimsby stared and wondered; Hattersley laughed and jested (in spite of the little wine he had been suffered to imbibe), but still behaved as well as he knew how. Hargrave and Annabella, from different motives and in different ways, emulated me, and doubtless both surpassed me, the former in his discursive versatility and eloquence, the latter in boldness and animation at least. Milicent, delighted to see her husband, her brother, and her over-estimated friend acquitting themselves so well, was lively and gay too, in her quiet way. Even Lord Lowborough caught the general contagion: his dark greenish eyes were lighted up beneath their moody brows; his sombre countenance was beautified by smiles; all traces of gloom and proud or cold reserve had vanished for the time; and he astonished us all, not only by his general cheerfulness and animation, but by the positive flashes of true force and brilliance he emitted from time to time. Arthur did not talk much, but he laughed, and listened to the rest, and was in perfect good-humour, though not excited by wine. So that, altogether, we made a very merry, innocent, and entertaining party.

9th.—Yesterday, when Rachel came to dress me for dinner, I saw that she had been crying. I wanted to know the cause of it, but she seemed reluctant to tell. Was she unwell? No. Had she heard bad news from her friends? No. Had any of the servants vexed her?

“Oh, no, ma’am!” she answered; “it’s not for myself.”

“What then, Rachel? Have you been reading novels?”

“Bless you, no!” said she, with a sorrowful shake of the head; and then she sighed and continued: “But to tell you the truth, ma’am, I don’t like master’s ways of going on.”

“What do you mean, Rachel? He’s going on very properly at present.”

“Well, ma’am, if you think so, it’s right.”

And she went on dressing my hair, in a hurried way, quite unlike her usual calm, collected manner, murmuring, half to herself, she was sure it was beautiful hair: she “could like to see ’em match it.” When it was done, she fondly stroked it, and gently patted my head.

“Is that affectionate ebullition intended for my hair, or myself, nurse?” said I, laughingly turning round upon her; but a tear was even now in her eye.

“What do you mean, Rachel?” I exclaimed.

“Well, ma’am, I don’t know; but if—”

“If what?”

“Well, if I was you, I wouldn’t have that Lady Lowborough in the house another minute—not another minute I wouldn’t!

I was thunderstruck; but before I could recover from the shock sufficiently to demand an explanation, Milicent entered my room, as she frequently does when she is dressed before me; and she stayed with me till it was time to go down. She must have found me a very unsociable companion this time, for Rachel’s last words rang in my ears. But still I hoped, I trusted they had no foundation but in some idle rumour of the servants from what they had seen in Lady Lowborough’s manner last month; or perhaps from something that had passed between their master and her during her former visit. At dinner I narrowly observed both her and Arthur, and saw nothing extraordinary in the conduct of either, nothing calculated to excite suspicion, except in distrustful minds, which mine was not, and therefore I would not suspect.

Almost immediately after dinner Annabella went out with her husband to share his moonlight ramble, for it was a splendid evening like the last. Mr. Hargrave entered the drawing-room a little before the others, and challenged me to a game of chess. He did it without any of that sad but proud humility he usually assumes in addressing me, unless he is excited with wine. I looked at his face to see if that was the case now. His eye met mine keenly, but steadily: there was something about him I did not understand, but he seemed sober enough. Not choosing to engage with him, I referred him to Milicent.

“She plays badly,” said he, “I want to match my skill with yours. Come now! you can’t pretend you are reluctant to lay down your work. I know you never take it up except to pass an idle hour, when there is nothing better you can do.”

“But chess-players are so unsociable,” I objected; “they are no company for any but themselves.”

“There is no one here but Milicent, and she—”

“Oh, I shall be delighted to watch you!” cried our mutual friend. “Two such players—it will be quite a treat! I wonder which will conquer.”

I consented.

“Now, Mrs. Huntingdon,” said Hargrave, as he arranged the men on the board, speaking distinctly, and with a peculiar emphasis, as if he had a double meaning to all his words, “you are a good player, but I am a better: we shall have a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but I can be as patient as you, and in the end I shall certainly win.” He fixed his eyes upon me with a glance I did not like, keen, crafty, bold, and almost impudent;—already half triumphant in his anticipated success.

“I hope not, Mr. Hargrave!” returned I, with vehemence that must have startled Milicent at least; but he only smiled and murmured, “Time will show.”

We set to work: he sufficiently interested in the game, but calm and fearless in the consciousness of superior skill: I, intensely eager to disappoint his expectations, for I considered this the type of a more serious contest, as I imagined he did, and I felt an almost superstitious dread of being beaten: at all events, I could ill endure that present success should add one tittle to his conscious power (his insolent self-confidence I ought to say), or encourage for a moment his dream of future conquest. His play was cautious and deep, but I struggled hard against him. For some time the combat was doubtful: at length, to my joy, the victory seemed inclining to my side: I had taken several of his best pieces, and manifestly baffled his projects. He put his hand to his brow and paused, in evident perplexity. I rejoiced in my advantage, but dared not glory in it yet. At length, he lifted his head, and quietly making his move, looked at me and said, calmly, “Now you think you will win, don’t you?”

“I hope so,” replied I, taking his pawn that he had pushed into the way of my bishop with so careless an air that I thought it was an oversight, but was not generous enough, under the circumstances, to direct his attention to it, and too heedless, at the moment, to foresee the after-consequences of my move. “It is those bishops that trouble me,” said he; “but the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentlemen,” taking my last bishop with his knight; “and now, those sacred persons once removed, I shall carry all before me.”

“Oh, Walter, how you talk!” cried Milicent; “she has far more pieces than you still.”

“I intend to give you some trouble yet,” said I; “and perhaps, sir, you will find yourself checkmated before you are aware. Look to your queen.”

The combat deepened. The game was a long one, and I did give him some trouble: but he was a better player than I.

“What keen gamesters you are!” said Mr. Hattersley, who had now entered, and been watching us for some time. “Why, Mrs. Huntingdon, your hand trembles as if you had staked your all upon it! and, Walter, you dog, you look as deep and cool as if you were certain of success, and as keen and cruel as if you would drain her heart’s blood! But if I were you, I wouldn’t beat her, for very fear: she’ll hate you if you do—she will, by heaven! I see it in her eye.”

“Hold your tongue, will you?” said I: his talk distracted me, for I was driven to extremities. A few more moves, and I was inextricably entangled in the snare of my antagonist.

“Check,” cried he: I sought in agony some means of escape. “Mate!” he added, quietly, but with evident delight. He had suspended the utterance of that last fatal syllable the better to enjoy my dismay. I was foolishly disconcerted by the event. Hattersley laughed; Milicent was troubled to see me so disturbed. Hargrave placed his hand on mine that rested on the table, and squeezing it with a firm but gentle pressure, murmured, “Beaten, beaten!” and gazed into my face with a look where exultation was blended with an expression of ardour and tenderness yet more insulting.

“No, never, Mr. Hargrave!” exclaimed I, quickly withdrawing my hand.

“Do you deny?” replied he, smilingly pointing to the board. “No, no,” I answered, recollecting how strange my conduct must appear: “you have beaten me in that game.”

“Will you try another, then?”

“No.”

“You acknowledge my superiority?”

“Yes, as a chess-player.”

I rose to resume my work.

“Where is Annabella?” said Hargrave, gravely, after glancing round the room.

“Gone out with Lord Lowborough,” answered I, for he looked at me for a reply.

“And not yet returned!” he said, seriously.

“I suppose not.”

“Where is Huntingdon?” looking round again.

“Gone out with Grimsby, as you know,” said Hattersley, suppressing a laugh, which broke forth as he concluded the sentence. Why did he laugh? Why did Hargrave connect them thus together? Was it true, then? And was this the dreadful secret he had wished to reveal to me? I must know, and that quickly. I instantly rose and left the room to go in search of Rachel and demand an explanation of her words; but Mr. Hargrave followed me into the anteroom, and before I could open its outer door, gently laid his hand upon the lock. “May I tell you something, Mrs. Huntingdon?” said he, in a subdued tone, with serious, downcast eyes.

“If it be anything worth hearing,” replied I, struggling to be composed, for I trembled in every limb.

He quietly pushed a chair towards me. I merely leant my hand upon it, and bid him go on.

“Do not be alarmed,” said he: “what I wish to say is nothing in itself; and I will leave you to draw your own inferences from it. You say that Annabella is not yet returned?”

“Yes, yes—go on!” said I, impatiently; for I feared my forced calmness would leave me before the end of his disclosure, whatever it might be.

“And you hear,” continued he, “that Huntingdon is gone out with Grimsby?”

“Well?”

“I heard the latter say to your husband—or the man who calls himself so—”

“Go on, sir!”

He bowed submissively, and continued: “I heard him say,—‘I shall manage it, you’ll see! They’re gone down by the water; I shall meet them there, and tell him I want a bit of talk with him about some things that we needn’t trouble the lady with; and she’ll say she can be walking back to the house; and then I shall apologise, you know, and all that, and tip her a wink to take the way of the shrubbery. I’ll keep him talking there, about those matters I mentioned, and anything else I can think of, as long as I can, and then bring him round the other way, stopping to look at the trees, the fields, and anything else I can find to discourse of.’” Mr. Hargrave paused, and looked at me.

Without a word of comment or further questioning, I rose, and darted from the room and out of the house. The torment of suspense was not to be endured: I would not suspect my husband falsely, on this man's accusation, and I would not trust him unworthily—I must know the truth at once. I flew to the shrubbery. Scarcely had I reached it, when a sound of voices arrested my breathless speed.

“We have lingered too long; he will be back,” said Lady Lowborough's voice.

“Surely not, dearest!” was his reply; “but you can run across the lawn, and get in as quietly as you can; I'll follow in a while.”

My knees trembled under me; my brain swam round. I was ready to faint. She must not see me thus. I shrunk among the bushes, and leant against the trunk of a tree to let her pass.

“Ah, Huntingdon!” said she reproachfully, pausing where I had stood with him the night before—“it was here you kissed that woman!” she looked back into the leafy shade. Advancing thence, he answered, with a careless laugh,—

“Well, dearest, I couldn't help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can. Haven't I seen you kiss your dolt of a husband scores of times?—and do I ever complain?”

“But tell me, don't you love her still—a little?” said she, placing her hand on his arm, looking earnestly in his face—for I could see them, plainly, the moon shining full upon them from between the branches of the tree that sheltered me.

“Not one bit, by all that's sacred!” he replied, kissing her glowing cheek.

“Good heavens, I must be gone!” cried she, suddenly breaking from him, and away she flew.

There he stood before me; but I had not strength to confront him now: my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth; I was well-nigh sinking to the earth, and I almost wondered he did not hear the beating of my heart above the low sighing of the wind and the fitful rustle of the falling leaves. My senses seemed to fail me, but still I saw his shadowy form pass before me, and through the rushing sound in my ears I distinctly heard him say, as he stood looking up the lawn,—“There goes the fool! Run, Annabella, run! There—in with you! Ah,—he didn't see! That's right, Grimsby, keep him back!” And even his low laugh reached me as he walked away.

“God help me now!” I murmured, sinking on my knees among the damp weeds and brushwood that surrounded me, and looking up at the moonlit sky, through the scant

foliage above. It seemed all dim and quivering now to my darkened sight. My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer; until a gust of wind swept over me, which, while it scattered the dead leaves, like blighted hopes, around, cooled my forehead, and seemed a little to revive my sinking frame. Then, while I lifted up my soul in speechless, earnest supplication, some heavenly influence seemed to strengthen me within: I breathed more freely; my vision cleared; I saw distinctly the pure moon shining on, and the light clouds skimming the clear, dark sky; and then I saw the eternal stars twinkling down upon me; I knew their God was mine, and He was strong to save and swift to hear. "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," seemed whispered from above their myriad orbs. No, no; I felt He would not leave me comfortless: in spite of earth and hell I should have strength for all my trials, and win a glorious rest at last!

Refreshed, invigorated, if not composed, I rose and returned to the house. Much of my new-born strength and courage forsook me, I confess, as I entered it, and shut out the fresh wind and the glorious sky: everything I saw and heard seemed to sicken my heart—the hall, the lamp, the staircase, the doors of the different apartments, the social sound of talk and laughter from the drawing-room. How could I bear my future life! In this house, among those people—oh, how could I endure to live! John just then entered the hall, and seeing me, told me he had been sent in search of me, adding that he had taken in the tea, and master wished to know if I were coming.

"Ask Mrs. Hattersley to be so kind as to make the tea, John," said I. "Say I am not well to-night, and wish to be excused."

I retired into the large, empty dining-room, where all was silence and darkness, but for the soft sighing of the wind without, and the faint gleam of moonlight that pierced the blinds and curtains; and there I walked rapidly up and down, thinking of my bitter thoughts alone. How different was this from the evening of yesterday! That, it seems, was the last expiring flash of my life's happiness. Poor, blinded fool that I was to be so happy! I could now see the reason of Arthur's strange reception of me in the shrubbery; the burst of kindness was for his paramour, the start of horror for his wife. Now, too, I could better understand the conversation between Hattersley and Grimsby; it was doubtless of his love for her they spoke, not for me.

I heard the drawing-room door open: a light quick step came out of the ante-room, crossed the hall, and ascended the stairs. It was Milicent, poor Milicent, gone to see how I was—no one else cared for me; but she still was kind. I shed no tears before, but now they came, fast and free. Thus she did me good, without approaching me. Disappointed in her search, I heard her come down, more slowly than she had

ascended. Would she come in there, and find me out? No, she turned in the opposite direction and re-entered the drawing-room. I was glad, for I knew not how to meet her, or what to say. I wanted no confidante in my distress. I deserved none, and I wanted none. I had taken the burden upon myself; let me bear it alone.

As the usual hour of retirement approached I dried my eyes, and tried to clear my voice and calm my mind. I must see Arthur to-night, and speak to him; but I would do it calmly: there should be no scene—nothing to complain or to boast of to his companions—nothing to laugh at with his lady-love. When the company were retiring to their chambers I gently opened the door, and just as he passed, beckoned him in.

“What’s to do with you, Helen?” said he. “Why couldn’t you come to make tea for us? and what the deuce are you here for, in the dark? What ails you, young woman: you look like a ghost!” he continued, surveying me by the light of his candle.

“No matter,” I answered, “to you; you have no longer any regard for me it appears; and I have no longer any for you.”

“Hal-lo! what the devil is this?” he muttered.

“I would leave you to-morrow,” continued I, “and never again come under this roof, but for my child”—I paused a moment to steady, my voice.

“What in the devil’s name is this, Helen?” cried he. “What can you be driving at?”

“You know perfectly well. Let us waste no time in useless explanation, but tell me, will you—?”

He vehemently swore he knew nothing about it, and insisted upon hearing what poisonous old woman had been blackening his name, and what infamous lies I had been fool enough to believe.

“Spare yourself the trouble of forswearing yourself and racking your brains to stifle truth with falsehood,” I coldly replied. “I have trusted to the testimony of no third person. I was in the shrubbery this evening, and I saw and heard for myself.”

This was enough. He uttered a suppressed exclamation of consternation and dismay, and muttering, “I shall catch it now!” set down his candle on the nearest chair, and rearing his back against the wall, stood confronting me with folded arms.

“Well, what then?” said he, with the calm insolence of mingled shamelessness and desperation.

“Only this,” returned I; “will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go?”

“Go where?”

“Anywhere, where he will be safe from your contaminating influence, and I shall be delivered from your presence, and you from mine.”

“No.”

“Will you let me have the child then, without the money?”

“No, nor yourself without the child. Do you think I’m going to be made the talk of the country for your fastidious caprices?”

“Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. But henceforth we are husband and wife only in the name.”

“Very good.”

“I am your child’s mother, and your housekeeper, nothing more. So you need not trouble yourself any longer to feign the love you cannot feel: I will exact no more heartless caresses from you, nor offer nor endure them either. I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another!”

“Very good, if you please. We shall see who will tire first, my lady.”

“If I tire, it will be of living in the world with you: not of living without your mockery of love. When you tire of your sinful ways, and show yourself truly repentant, I will forgive you, and, perhaps, try to love you again, though that will be hard indeed.”

“Humph! and meantime you will go and talk me over to Mrs. Hargrave, and write long letters to aunt Maxwell to complain of the wicked wretch you have married?”

“I shall complain to no one. Hitherto I have struggled hard to hide your vices from every eye, and invest you with virtues you never possessed; but now you must look to yourself.”

I left him muttering bad language to himself, and went up-stairs.

“You are poorly, ma’am,” said Rachel, surveying me with deep anxiety.

“It is too true, Rachel,” said I, answering her sad looks rather than her words.

“I knew it, or I wouldn’t have mentioned such a thing.”

“But don’t you trouble yourself about it,” said I, kissing her pale, time-wasted cheek. “I can bear it better than you imagine.”

“Yes, you were always for ‘bearing.’ But if I was you I wouldn’t bear it; I’d give way to it, and cry right hard! and I’d talk too, I just would—I’d let him know what it was to—”

“I have talked,” said I; “I’ve said enough.”

“Then I’d cry,” persisted she. “I wouldn’t look so white and so calm, and burst my heart with keeping it in.”

“I have cried,” said I, smiling, in spite of my misery; “and I am calm now, really: so don’t discompose me again, nurse: let us say no more about it, and don’t mention it to the servants. There, you may go now. Good-night; and don’t disturb your rest for me: I shall sleep well—if I can.”

Notwithstanding this resolution, I found my bed so intolerable that, before two o’clock, I rose, and lighting my candle by the rushlight that was still burning, I got my desk and sat down in my dressing-gown to recount the events of the past evening. It was better to be so occupied than to be lying in bed torturing my brain with recollections of the far past and anticipations of the dreadful future. I have found relief in describing the very circumstances that have destroyed my peace, as well as the little trivial details attendant upon their discovery. No sleep I could have got this night would have done so much towards composing my mind, and preparing me to meet the trials of the day. I fancy so, at least; and yet, when I cease writing, I find my head aches terribly; and when I look into the glass, I am startled at my haggard, worn appearance.

Rachel has been to dress me, and says I have had a sad night of it, she can see. Milicent has just looked in to ask me how I was. I told her I was better, but to excuse my appearance admitted I had had a restless night. I wish this day were over! I shudder at the thoughts of going down to breakfast. How shall I encounter them all? Yet let me remember it is not I that am guilty: I have no cause to fear; and if they scorn me as a victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Evening.—Breakfast passed well over: I was calm and cool throughout. I answered composedly all inquiries respecting my health; and whatever was unusual in my look or manner was generally attributed to the trifling indisposition that had occasioned my early retirement last night. But how am I to get over the ten or twelve days that must yet elapse before they go? Yet why so long for their departure? When they are

gone, how shall I get through the months or years of my future life in company with that man—my greatest enemy? for none could injure me as he has done. Oh! when I think how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love, betrayed my trust, scorned my prayers and tears, and efforts for his preservation, crushed my hopes, destroyed my youth's best feelings, and doomed me to a life of hopeless misery, as far as man can do it, it is not enough to say that I no longer love my husband—I HATE him! The word stares me in the face like a guilty confession, but it is true: I hate him—I hate him! But God have mercy on his miserable soul! and make him see and feel his guilt—I ask no other vengeance! If he could but fully know and truly feel my wrongs I should be well avenged, and I could freely pardon all; but he is so lost, so hardened in his heartless depravity, that in this life I believe he never will. But it is useless dwelling on this theme: let me seek once more to dissipate reflection in the minor details of passing events.

Mr. Hargrave has annoyed me all day long with his serious, sympathising, and (as he thinks) unobtrusive politeness. If it were more obtrusive it would trouble me less, for then I could snub him; but, as it is, he contrives to appear so really kind and thoughtful that I cannot do so without rudeness and seeming ingratitude. I sometimes think I ought to give him credit for the good feeling he simulates so well; and then again, I think it is my duty to suspect him under the peculiar circumstances in which I am placed. His kindness may not all be feigned; but still, let not the purest impulse of gratitude to him induce me to forget myself: let me remember the game of chess, the expressions he used on the occasion, and those indescribable looks of his, that so justly roused my indignation, and I think I shall be safe enough. I have done well to record them so minutely.

I think he wishes to find an opportunity of speaking to me alone: he has seemed to be on the watch all day; but I have taken care to disappoint him—not that I fear anything he could say, but I have trouble enough without the addition of his insulting consolations, condolences, or whatever else he might attempt; and, for Milicent's sake, I do not wish to quarrel with him. He excused himself from going out to shoot with the other gentlemen in the morning, under the pretext of having letters to write; and instead of retiring for that purpose into the library, he sent for his desk into the morning-room, where I was seated with Milicent and Lady Lowborough. They had betaken themselves to their work; I, less to divert my mind than to deprecate conversation, had provided myself with a book. Milicent saw that I wished to be quiet, and accordingly let me alone. Annabella, doubtless, saw it too: but that was no reason

why she should restrain her tongue, or curb her cheerful spirits: she accordingly chatted away, addressing herself almost exclusively to me, and with the utmost assurance and familiarity, growing the more animated and friendly the colder and briefer my answers became. Mr. Hargrave saw that I could ill endure it, and, looking up from his desk, he answered her questions and observations for me, as far as he could, and attempted to transfer her social attentions from me to himself; but it would not do. Perhaps she thought I had a headache, and could not bear to talk; at any rate, she saw that her loquacious vivacity annoyed me, as I could tell by the malicious pertinacity with which she persisted. But I checked it effectually by putting into her hand the book I had been trying to read, on the fly-leaf of which I had hastily scribbled,—

“I am too well acquainted with your character and conduct to feel any real friendship for you, and as I am without your talent for dissimulation, I cannot assume the appearance of it. I must, therefore, beg that hereafter all familiar intercourse may cease between us; and if I still continue to treat you with civility, as if you were a woman worthy of consideration and respect, understand that it is out of regard for your cousin Milicent’s feelings, not for yours.”

Upon perusing this she turned scarlet, and bit her lip. Covertly tearing away the leaf, she crumpled it up and put it in the fire, and then employed herself in turning over the pages of the book, and, really or apparently, perusing its contents. In a little while Milicent announced it her intention to repair to the nursery, and asked if I would accompany her.

“Annabella will excuse us,” said she; “she’s busy reading.”

“No, I won’t,” cried Annabella, suddenly looking up, and throwing her book on the table; “I want to speak to Helen a minute. You may go, Milicent, and she’ll follow in a while.” (Milicent went.) “Will you oblige me, Helen?” continued she.

Her impudence astounded me; but I complied, and followed her into the library. She closed the door, and walked up to the fire.

“Who told you this?” said she.

“No one: I am not incapable of seeing for myself.”

“Ah, you are suspicious!” cried she, smiling, with a gleam of hope. Hitherto there had been a kind of desperation in her hardihood; now she was evidently relieved.

“If I were suspicious,” I replied, “I should have discovered your infamy long before. No, Lady Lowborough, I do not found my charge upon suspicion.”

“On what do you found it, then?” said she, throwing herself into an arm-chair, and stretching out her feet to the fender, with an obvious effort to appear composed.

“I enjoy a moonlight ramble as well as you,” I answered, steadily fixing my eyes upon her; “and the shrubbery happens to be one of my favourite resorts.”

She coloured again excessively, and remained silent, pressing her finger against her teeth, and gazing into the fire. I watched her a few moments with a feeling of malevolent gratification; then, moving towards the door, I calmly asked if she had anything more to say.

“Yes, yes!” cried she eagerly, starting up from her reclining posture. “I want to know if you will tell Lord Lowborough?”

“Suppose I do?”

“Well, if you are disposed to publish the matter, I cannot dissuade you, of course—but there will be terrible work if you do—and if you don’t, I shall think you the most generous of mortal beings—and if there is anything in the world I can do for you—anything short of—” she hesitated.

“Short of renouncing your guilty connection with my husband, I suppose you mean?” said I.

She paused, in evident disconcertion and perplexity, mingled with anger she dared not show.

“I cannot renounce what is dearer than life,” she muttered, in a low, hurried tone. Then, suddenly raising her head and fixing her gleaming eyes upon me, she continued earnestly: “But, Helen—or Mrs. Huntingdon, or whatever you would have me call you—will you tell him? If you are generous, here is a fitting opportunity for the exercise of your magnanimity: if you are proud, here am I—your rival—ready to acknowledge myself your debtor for an act of the most noble forbearance.”

“I shall not tell him.”

“You will not!” cried she, delightedly. “Accept my sincere thanks, then!”

She sprang up, and offered me her hand. I drew back.

“Give me no thanks; it is not for your sake that I refrain. Neither is it an act of any forbearance: I have no wish to publish your shame. I should be sorry to distress your husband with the knowledge of it.”

“And Milicent? will you tell her?”

“No: on the contrary, I shall do my utmost to conceal it from her. I would not for much that she should know the infamy and disgrace of her relation!”

“You use hard words, Mrs. Huntingdon, but I can pardon you.”

“And now, Lady Lowborough,” continued I, “let me counsel you to leave this house as soon as possible. You must be aware that your continuance here is excessively disagreeable to me—not for Mr. Huntingdon’s sake,” said I, observing the dawn of a malicious smile of triumph on her face—“you are welcome to him, if you like him, as far as I am concerned—but because it is painful to be always disguising my true sentiments respecting you, and straining to keep up an appearance of civility and respect towards one for whom I have not the most distant shadow of esteem; and because, if you stay, your conduct cannot possibly remain concealed much longer from the only two persons in the house who do not know it already. And, for your husband’s sake, Annabella, and even for your own, I wish—I earnestly advise and entreat you to break off this unlawful connection at once, and return to your duty while you may, before the dreadful consequences—”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said she, interrupting me with a gesture of impatience. “But I cannot go, Helen, before the time appointed for our departure. What possible pretext could I frame for such a thing? Whether I proposed going back alone—which Lowborough would not hear of—or taking him with me, the very circumstance itself would be certain to excite suspicion—and when our visit is so nearly at an end too—little more than a week—surely you can endure my presence so long! I will not annoy you with any more of my friendly impertinences.”

“Well, I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Have you mentioned this affair to Huntingdon?” asked she, as I was leaving the room.

“How dare you mention his name to me!” was the only answer I gave.

No words have passed between us since, but such as outward decency or pure necessity demanded.

CHAPTER XXXV

Nineteenth.—In proportion as Lady Lowborough finds she has nothing to fear from me, and as the time of departure draws nigh, the more audacious and insolent she becomes. She does not scruple to speak to my husband with affectionate familiarity in my presence, when no one else is by, and is particularly fond of displaying her interest in his health and welfare, or in anything that concerns him, as if for the purpose of contrasting her kind solicitude with my cold indifference. And he rewards

her by such smiles and glances, such whispered words, or boldly-spoken insinuations, indicative of his sense of her goodness and my neglect, as make the blood rush into my face, in spite of myself—for I would be utterly regardless of it all—deaf and blind to everything that passes between them, since the more I show myself sensible of their wickedness the more she triumphs in her victory, and the more he flatters himself that I love him devotedly still, in spite of my pretended indifference. On such occasions I have sometimes been startled by a subtle, fiendish suggestion inciting me to show him the contrary by a seeming encouragement of Hargrave's advances; but such ideas are banished in a moment with horror and self-abasement; and then I hate him tenfold more than ever for having brought me to this!—God pardon me for it and all my sinful thoughts! Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel that they are turning my nature into gall. This must be my fault as much as theirs that wrong me. No true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and her, especially the latter: him, I still feel that I could pardon—freely, gladly—on the slightest token of repentance; but she—words cannot utter my abhorrence. Reason forbids, but passion urges strongly; and I must pray and struggle long ere I subdue it.

It is well that she is leaving to-morrow, for I could not well endure her presence for another day. This morning she rose earlier than usual. I found her in the room alone, when I went down to breakfast.

“Oh, Helen! is it you?” said she, turning as I entered.

I gave an involuntary start back on seeing her, at which she uttered a short laugh, observing, “I think we are both disappointed.”

I came forward and busied myself with the breakfast things.

“This is the last day I shall burden your hospitality,” said she, as she seated herself at the table. “Ah, here comes one that will not rejoice at it!” she murmured, half to herself, as Arthur entered the room.

He shook hands with her and wished her good-morning: then, looking lovingly in her face, and still retaining her hand in his, murmured pathetically, “The last—last day!”

“Yes,” said she with some asperity; “and I rose early to make the best of it—I have been here alone this half-hour, and you—you lazy creature—”

“Well, I thought I was early too,” said he; “but,” dropping his voice almost to a whisper, “you see we are not alone.”

“We never are,” returned she. But they were almost as good as alone, for I was now standing at the window, watching the clouds, and struggling to suppress my wrath.

Some more words passed between them, which, happily, I did not overhear; but Annabella had the audacity to come and place herself beside me, and even to put her hand upon my shoulder and say softly, “You need not grudge him to me, Helen, for I love him more than ever you could do.”

This put me beside myself. I took her hand and violently dashed it from me, with an expression of abhorrence and indignation that could not be suppressed. Startled, almost appalled, by this sudden outbreak, she recoiled in silence. I would have given way to my fury and said more, but Arthur’s low laugh recalled me to myself. I checked the half-uttered invective, and scornfully turned away, regretting that I had given him so much amusement. He was still laughing when Mr. Hargrave made his appearance. How much of the scene he had witnessed I do not know, for the door was ajar when he entered. He greeted his host and his cousin both coldly, and me with a glance intended to express the deepest sympathy mingled with high admiration and esteem.

“How much allegiance do you owe to that man?” he asked below his breath, as he stood beside me at the window, affecting to be making observations on the weather.

“None,” I answered. And immediately returning to the table, I employed myself in making the tea. He followed, and would have entered into some kind of conversation with me, but the other guests were now beginning to assemble, and I took no more notice of him, except to give him his coffee.

After breakfast, determined to pass as little of the day as possible in company with Lady Lowborough, I quietly stole away from the company and retired to the library. Mr. Hargrave followed me thither, under pretence of coming for a book; and first, turning to the shelves, he selected a volume, and then quietly, but by no means timidly, approaching me, he stood beside me, resting his hand on the back of my chair, and said softly, “And so you consider yourself free at last?”

“Yes,” said I, without moving, or raising my eyes from my book, “free to do anything but offend God and my conscience.”

There was a momentary pause.

“Very right,” said he, “provided your conscience be not too morbidly tender, and your ideas of God not too erroneously severe; but can you suppose it would offend that benevolent Being to make the happiness of one who would die for yours?—to raise a

devoted heart from purgatorial torments to a state of heavenly bliss, when you could do it without the slightest injury to yourself or any other?"

This was spoken in a low, earnest, melting tone, as he bent over me. I now raised my head; and steadily confronting his gaze, I answered calmly, "Mr. Hargrave, do you mean to insult me?"

He was not prepared for this. He paused a moment to recover the shock; then, drawing himself up and removing his hand from my chair, he answered, with proud sadness,—“That was not my intention.”

I just glanced towards the door, with a slight movement of the head, and then returned to my book. He immediately withdrew. This was better than if I had answered with more words, and in the passionate spirit to which my first impulse would have prompted. What a good thing it is to be able to command one's temper! I must labour to cultivate this inestimable quality: God only knows how often I shall need it in this rough, dark road that lies before me.

In the course of the morning I drove over to the Grove with the two ladies, to give Milicent an opportunity for bidding farewell to her mother and sister. They persuaded her to stay with them the rest of the day, Mrs. Hargrave promising to bring her back in the evening and remain till the party broke up on the morrow. Consequently, Lady Lowborough and I had the pleasure of returning tête-à-tête in the carriage together. For the first mile or two we kept silence, I looking out of my window, and she leaning back in her corner. But I was not going to restrict myself to any particular position for her; when I was tired of leaning forward, with the cold, raw wind in my face, and surveying the russet hedges and the damp, tangled grass of their banks, I gave it up and leant back too. With her usual impudence, my companion then made some attempts to get up a conversation; but the monosyllables “yes,” or “no” or “humph,” were the utmost her several remarks could elicit from me. At last, on her asking my opinion upon some immaterial point of discussion, I answered,—

“Why do you wish to talk to me, Lady Lowborough? You must know what I think of you.”

“Well, if you will be so bitter against me,” replied she, “I can't help it; but I'm not going to sulk for anybody.” Our short drive was now at an end. As soon as the carriage door was opened, she sprang out, and went down the park to meet the gentlemen, who were just returning from the woods. Of course I did not follow.

But I had not done with her impudence yet: after dinner, I retired to the drawing-room, as usual, and she accompanied me, but I had the two children with me, and I gave

them my whole attention, and determined to keep them till the gentlemen came, or till Milicent arrived with her mother. Little Helen, however, was soon tired of playing, and insisted upon going to sleep; and while I sat on the sofa with her on my knee, and Arthur seated beside me, gently playing with her soft, flaxen hair, Lady Lowborough composedly came and placed herself on the other side.

“To-morrow, Mrs. Huntingdon,” said she, “you will be delivered from my presence, which, no doubt, you will be very glad of—it is natural you should; but do you know I have rendered you a great service? Shall I tell you what it is?”

“I shall be glad to hear of any service you have rendered me,” said I, determined to be calm, for I knew by the tone of her voice she wanted to provoke me.

“Well,” resumed she, “have you not observed the salutary change in Mr. Huntingdon? Don’t you see what a sober, temperate man he is become? You saw with regret the sad habits he was contracting, I know: and I know you did your utmost to deliver him from them, but without success, until I came to your assistance. I told him in few words that I could not bear to see him degrade himself so, and that I should cease to—no matter what I told him, but you see the reformation I have wrought; and you ought to thank me for it.”

I rose and rang for the nurse.

“But I desire no thanks,” she continued; “all the return I ask is, that you will take care of him when I am gone, and not, by harshness and neglect, drive him back to his old courses.”

I was almost sick with passion, but Rachel was now at the door. I pointed to the children, for I could not trust myself to speak: she took them away, and I followed.

“Will you, Helen?” continued the speaker.

I gave her a look that blighted the malicious smile on her face, or checked it, at least for a moment, and departed. In the ante-room I met Mr. Hargrave. He saw I was in no humour to be spoken to, and suffered me to pass without a word; but when, after a few minutes’ seclusion in the library, I had regained my composure, and was returning to join Mrs. Hargrave and Milicent, whom I had just heard come downstairs and go into the drawing-room, I found him there still lingering in the dimly-lighted apartment, and evidently waiting for me.

“Mrs. Huntingdon,” said he as I passed, “will you allow me one word?”

“What is it then? be quick, if you please.”

“I offended you this morning; and I cannot live under your displeasure.”

“Then go, and sin no more,” replied I, turning away.

“No, no!” said he, hastily, setting himself before me. “Pardon me, but I must have your forgiveness. I leave you to-morrow, and I may not have an opportunity of speaking to you again. I was wrong to forget myself and you, as I did; but let me implore you to forget and forgive my rash presumption, and think of me as if those words had never been spoken; for, believe me, I regret them deeply, and the loss of your esteem is too severe a penalty: I cannot bear it.”

“Forgetfulness is not to be purchased with a wish; and I cannot bestow my esteem on all who desire it, unless they deserve it too.”

“I shall think my life well spent in labouring to deserve it, if you will but pardon this offence—will you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes! but that is coldly spoken. Give me your hand and I’ll believe you. You won’t? Then, Mrs. Huntingdon, you do not forgive me!”

“Yes; here it is, and my forgiveness with it: only, sin no more.”

He pressed my cold hand with sentimental fervour, but said nothing, and stood aside to let me pass into the room, where all the company were now assembled. Mr. Grimsby was seated near the door: on seeing me enter, almost immediately followed by Hargrave, he leered at me with a glance of intolerable significance, as I passed. I looked him in the face, till he sullenly turned away, if not ashamed, at least confounded for the moment. Meantime Hattersley had seized Hargrave by the arm, and was whispering something in his ear—some coarse joke, no doubt, for the latter neither laughed nor spoke in answer, but, turning from him with a slight curl of the lip, disengaged himself and went to his mother, who was telling Lord Lowborough how many reasons she had to be proud of her son.

Thank heaven, they are all going to-morrow.

CHAPTER XXXVI

December 20th, 1824.—This is the third anniversary of our felicitous union. It is now two months since our guests left us to the enjoyment of each other’s society; and I have had nine weeks’ experience of this new phase of conjugal life—two persons living together, as master and mistress of the house, and father and mother of a winsome, merry little child, with the mutual understanding that there is no love,

friendship, or sympathy between them. As far as in me lies, I endeavour to live peaceably with him: I treat him with unimpeachable civility, give up my convenience to his, wherever it may reasonably be done, and consult him in a business-like way on household affairs, deferring to his pleasure and judgment, even when I know the latter to be inferior to my own.

As for him, for the first week or two, he was peevish and low, fretting, I suppose, over his dear Annabella's departure, and particularly ill-tempered to me: everything I did was wrong; I was cold-hearted, hard, insensate; my sour, pale face was perfectly repulsive; my voice made him shudder; he knew not how he could live through the winter with me; I should kill him by inches. Again I proposed a separation, but it would not do: he was not going to be the talk of all the old gossips in the neighbourhood: he would not have it said that he was such a brute his wife could not live with him. No; he must contrive to bear with me.

"I must contrive to bear with you, you mean," said I; "for so long as I discharge my functions of steward and house-keeper, so conscientiously and well, without pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me. I shall therefore remit these duties when my bondage becomes intolerable." This threat, I thought, would serve to keep him in check, if anything would.

I believe he was much disappointed that I did not feel his offensive sayings more acutely, for when he had said anything particularly well calculated to hurt my feelings, he would stare me searchingly in the face, and then grumble against my "marble heart" or my "brutal insensibility." If I had bitterly wept and deplored his lost affection, he would, perhaps, have condescended to pity me, and taken me into favour for a while, just to comfort his solitude and console him for the absence of his beloved Annabella, until he could meet her again, or some more fitting substitute. Thank heaven, I am not so weak as that! I was infatuated once with a foolish, besotted affection, that clung to him in spite of his unworthiness, but it is fairly gone now—wholly crushed and withered away; and he has none but himself and his vices to thank for it.

At first (in compliance with his sweet lady's injunctions, I suppose), he abstained wonderfully well from seeking to solace his cares in wine; but at length he began to relax his virtuous efforts, and now and then exceeded a little, and still continues to do so; nay, sometimes, not a little. When he is under the exciting influence of these excesses, he sometimes fires up and attempts to play the brute; and then I take little pains to suppress my scorn and disgust. When he is under the depressing influence of the after-consequences, he bemoans his sufferings and his errors, and charges them

both upon me; he knows such indulgence injures his health, and does him more harm than good; but he says I drive him to it by my unnatural, unwomanly conduct; it will be the ruin of him in the end, but it is all my fault; and then I am roused to defend myself, sometimes with bitter recrimination. This is a kind of injustice I cannot patiently endure. Have I not laboured long and hard to save him from this very vice? Would I not labour still to deliver him from it if I could? but could I do so by fawning upon him and caressing him when I know that he scorns me? Is it my fault that I have lost my influence with him, or that he has forfeited every claim to my regard? And should I seek a reconciliation with him, when I feel that I abhor him, and that he despises me? and while he continues still to correspond with Lady Lowborough, as I know he does? No, never, never, never! he may drink himself dead, but it is NOT my fault!

Yet I do my part to save him still: I give him to understand that drinking makes his eyes dull, and his face red and bloated; and that it tends to render him imbecile in body and mind; and if Annabella were to see him as often as I do, she would speedily be disenchanted; and that she certainly will withdraw her favour from him, if he continues such courses. Such a mode of admonition wins only coarse abuse for me—and, indeed, I almost feel as if I deserved it, for I hate to use such arguments; but they sink into his stupefied heart, and make him pause, and ponder, and abstain, more than anything else I could say.

At present I am enjoying a temporary relief from his presence: he is gone with Hargrave to join a distant hunt, and will probably not be back before to-morrow evening. How differently I used to feel his absence!

Mr. Hargrave is still at the Grove. He and Arthur frequently meet to pursue their rural sports together: he often calls upon us here, and Arthur not unfrequently rides over to him. I do not think either of these soi-disant friends is overflowing with love for the other; but such intercourse serves to get the time on, and I am very willing it should continue, as it saves me some hours of discomfort in Arthur's society, and gives him some better employment than the sottish indulgence of his sensual appetites. The only objection I have to Mr. Hargrave's being in the neighbourhood, is that the fear of meeting him at the Grove prevents me from seeing his sister so often as I otherwise should; for, of late, he has conducted himself towards me with such unerring propriety, that I have almost forgotten his former conduct. I suppose he is striving to "win my esteem." If he continue to act in this way, he may win it; but what then? The moment he attempts to demand anything more, he will lose it again.

February 10th.—It is a hard, embittering thing to have one's kind feelings and good intentions cast back in one's teeth. I was beginning to relent towards my wretched

partner; to pity his forlorn, comfortless condition, unalleviated as it is by the consolations of intellectual resources and the answer of a good conscience towards God; and to think I ought to sacrifice my pride, and renew my efforts once again to make his home agreeable and lead him back to the path of virtue; not by false professions of love, and not by pretended remorse, but by mitigating my habitual coldness of manner, and commuting my frigid civility into kindness wherever an opportunity occurred; and not only was I beginning to think so, but I had already begun to act upon the thought—and what was the result? No answering spark of kindness, no awakening penitence, but an unappeasable ill-humour, and a spirit of tyrannous exaction that increased with indulgence, and a lurking gleam of self-complacent triumph at every detection of relenting softness in my manner, that congealed me to marble again as often as it recurred; and this morning he finished the business:—I think the petrification is so completely effected at last that nothing can melt me again. Among his letters was one which he perused with symptoms of unusual gratification, and then threw it across the table to me, with the admonition,—

“There! read that, and take a lesson by it!”

It was in the free, dashing hand of Lady Lowborough. I glanced at the first page; it seemed full of extravagant protestations of affection; impetuous longings for a speedy reunion—and impious defiance of God’s mandates, and railings against His providence for having cast their lot asunder, and doomed them both to the hateful bondage of alliance with those they could not love. He gave a slight titter on seeing me change colour. I folded up the letter, rose, and returned it to him, with no remark, but—

“Thank you, I will take a lesson by it!”

My little Arthur was standing between his knees, delightedly playing with the bright, ruby ring on his finger. Urged by a sudden, imperative impulse to deliver my son from that contaminating influence, I caught him up in my arms and carried him with me out of the room. Not liking this abrupt removal, the child began to pout and cry. This was a new stab to my already tortured heart. I would not let him go; but, taking him with me into the library, I shut the door, and, kneeling on the floor beside him, I embraced him, kissed him, wept over with him with passionate fondness. Rather frightened than consoled by this, he turned struggling from me, and cried out aloud for his papa. I released him from my arms, and never were more bitter tears than those that now concealed him from my blinded, burning eyes. Hearing his cries, the father came to the room. I instantly turned away, lest he should see and misconstrue my emotion. He swore at me, and took the now pacified child away.

It is hard that my little darling should love him more than me; and that, when the well-being and culture of my son is all I have to live for, I should see my influence destroyed by one whose selfish affection is more injurious than the coldest indifference or the harshest tyranny could be. If I, for his good, deny him some trifling indulgence, he goes to his father, and the latter, in spite of his selfish indolence, will even give himself some trouble to meet the child's desires: if I attempt to curb his will, or look gravely on him for some act of childish disobedience, he knows his other parent will smile and take his part against me. Thus, not only have I the father's spirit in the son to contend against, the germs of his evil tendencies to search out and eradicate, and his corrupting intercourse and example in after-life to counteract, but already he counteracts my arduous labour for the child's advantage, destroys my influence over his tender mind, and robs me of his very love; I had no earthly hope but this, and he seems to take a diabolical delight in tearing it away.

But it is wrong to despair; I will remember the counsel of the inspired writer to him "that feareth the Lord and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that sitteth in darkness and hath no light; let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

December 20th, 1825.—Another year is past; and I am weary of this life. And yet I cannot wish to leave it: whatever afflictions assail me here, I cannot wish to go and leave my darling in this dark and wicked world alone, without a friend to guide him through its weary mazes, to warn him of its thousand snares, and guard him from the perils that beset him on every hand. I am not well fitted to be his only companion, I know; but there is no other to supply my place. I am too grave to minister to his amusements and enter into his infantile sports as a nurse or a mother ought to do, and often his bursts of gleeful merriment trouble and alarm me; I see in them his father's spirit and temperament, and I tremble for the consequences; and too often damp the innocent mirth I ought to share. That father, on the contrary, has no weight of sadness on his mind; is troubled with no fears, no scruples concerning his son's future welfare; and at evenings especially, the times when the child sees him the most and the oftenest, he is always particularly jocund and open-hearted: ready to laugh and to jest with anything or anybody but me, and I am particularly silent and sad: therefore, of course, the child dotes upon his seemingly joyous amusing, ever-indulgent papa, and will at any time gladly exchange my company for his. This disturbs me greatly; not so much for the sake of my son's affection (though I do prize that highly, and though I feel it is my right, and know I have done much to earn it) as for that influence over him which, for his own advantage, I would strive to purchase and retain, and which for very spite his father delights to rob me of, and, from motives of mere idle

egotism, is pleased to win to himself; making no use of it but to torment me and ruin the child. My only consolation is, that he spends comparatively little of his time at home, and, during the months he passes in London or elsewhere, I have a chance of recovering the ground I had lost, and overcoming with good the evil he has wrought by his wilful mismanagement. But then it is a bitter trial to behold him, on his return, doing his utmost to subvert my labours and transform my innocent, affectionate, tractable darling into a selfish, disobedient, and mischievous boy; thereby preparing the soil for those vices he has so successfully cultivated in his own perverted nature.

Happily, there were none of Arthur's "friends" invited to Grassdale last autumn: he took himself off to visit some of them instead. I wish he would always do so, and I wish his friends were numerous and loving enough to keep him amongst them all the year round. Mr. Hargrave, considerably to my annoyance, did not go with him; but I think I have done with that gentleman at last.

For seven or eight months he behaved so remarkably well, and managed so skilfully too, that I was almost completely off my guard, and was really beginning to look upon him as a friend, and even to treat him as such, with certain prudent restrictions (which I deemed scarcely necessary); when, presuming upon my unsuspecting kindness, he thought he might venture to overstep the bounds of decent moderation and propriety that had so long restrained him. It was on a pleasant evening at the close of May: I was wandering in the park, and he, on seeing me there as he rode past, made bold to enter and approach me, dismounting and leaving his horse at the gate. This was the first time he had ventured to come within its inclosure since I had been left alone, without the sanction of his mother's or sister's company, or at least the excuse of a message from them. But he managed to appear so calm and easy, so respectful and self-possessed in his friendliness, that, though a little surprised, I was neither alarmed nor offended at the unusual liberty, and he walked with me under the ash-trees and by the water-side, and talked, with considerable animation, good taste, and intelligence, on many subjects, before I began to think about getting rid of him. Then, after a pause, during which we both stood gazing on the calm, blue water—I revolving in my mind the best means of politely dismissing my companion, he, no doubt, pondering other matters equally alien to the sweet sights and sounds that alone were present to his senses,—he suddenly electrified me by beginning, in a peculiar tone, low, soft, but perfectly distinct, to pour forth the most unequivocal expressions of earnest and passionate love; pleading his cause with all the bold yet artful eloquence he could summon to his aid. But I cut short his appeal, and repulsed him so determinately, so decidedly, and with such a mixture of scornful indignation, tempered with cool, dispassionate sorrow and pity for his benighted mind, that he withdrew, astonished,

mortified, and discomforted; and, a few days after, I heard that he had departed for London. He returned, however, in eight or nine weeks, and did not entirely keep aloof from me, but comported himself in so remarkable a manner that his quick-sighted sister could not fail to notice the change.

“What have you done to Walter, Mrs. Huntingdon?” said she one morning, when I had called at the Grove, and he had just left the room after exchanging a few words of the coldest civility. “He has been so extremely ceremonious and stately of late, I can’t imagine what it is all about, unless you have desperately offended him. Tell me what it is, that I may be your mediator, and make you friends again.”

“I have done nothing willingly to offend him,” said I. “If he is offended, he can best tell you himself what it is about.”

“I’ll ask him,” cried the giddy girl, springing up and putting her head out of the window: “he’s only in the garden—Walter!”

“No, no, Esther! you will seriously displease me if you do; and I shall leave you immediately, and not come again for months—perhaps years.”

“Did you call, Esther?” said her brother, approaching the window from without.

“Yes; I wanted to ask you—”

“Good-morning, Esther,” said I, taking her hand and giving it a severe squeeze.

“To ask you,” continued she, “to get me a rose for Mrs. Huntingdon.” He departed.

“Mrs. Huntingdon,” she exclaimed, turning to me and still holding me fast by the hand, “I’m quite shocked at you—you’re just as angry, and distant, and cold as he is: and I’m determined you shall be as good friends as ever before you go.”

“Esther, how can you be so rude!” cried Mrs. Hargrave, who was seated gravely knitting in her easy-chair. “Surely, you never will learn to conduct yourself like a lady!”

“Well, mamma, you said yourself—” But the young lady was silenced by the uplifted finger of her mamma, accompanied with a very stern shake of the head.

“Isn’t she cross?” whispered she to me; but, before I could add my share of reproof, Mr. Hargrave reappeared at the window with a beautiful moss-rose in his hand.

“Here, Esther, I’ve brought you the rose,” said he, extending it towards her.

“Give it her yourself, you blockhead!” cried she, recoiling with a spring from between us.

“Mrs. Huntingdon would rather receive it from you,” replied he, in a very serious tone, but lowering his voice that his mother might not hear. His sister took the rose and gave it to me.

“My brother’s compliments, Mrs. Huntingdon, and he hopes you and he will come to a better understanding by-and-by. Will that do, Walter?” added the saucy girl, turning to him and putting her arm round his neck, as he stood leaning upon the sill of the window—“or should I have said that you are sorry you were so touchy? or that you hope she will pardon your offence?”

“You silly girl! you don’t know what you are talking about,” replied he gravely.

“Indeed I don’t: for I’m quite in the dark!”

“Now, Esther,” interposed Mrs. Hargrave, who, if equally benighted on the subject of our estrangement, saw at least that her daughter was behaving very improperly, “I must insist upon your leaving the room!”

“Pray don’t, Mrs. Hargrave, for I’m going to leave it myself,” said I, and immediately made my adieux.

About a week after Mr. Hargrave brought his sister to see me. He conducted himself, at first, with his usual cold, distant, half-stately, half-melancholy, altogether injured air; but Esther made no remark upon it this time: she had evidently been schooled into better manners. She talked to me, and laughed and romped with little Arthur, her loved and loving playmate. He, somewhat to my discomfort, enticed her from the room to have a run in the hall, and thence into the garden. I got up to stir the fire. Mr. Hargrave asked if I felt cold, and shut the door—a very unseasonable piece of officiousness, for I had meditated following the noisy playfellows if they did not speedily return. He then took the liberty of walking up to the fire himself, and asking me if I were aware that Mr. Huntingdon was now at the seat of Lord Lowborough, and likely to continue there some time.

“No; but it’s no matter,” I answered carelessly; and if my cheek glowed like fire, it was rather at the question than the information it conveyed.

“You don’t object to it?” he said.

“Not at all, if Lord Lowborough likes his company.”

“You have no love left for him, then?”

“Not the least.”

“I knew that—I knew you were too high-minded and pure in your own nature to continue to regard one so utterly false and polluted with any feelings but those of indignation and scornful abhorrence!”

“Is he not your friend?” said I, turning my eyes from the fire to his face, with perhaps a slight touch of those feelings he assigned to another.

“He was,” replied he, with the same calm gravity as before; “but do not wrong me by supposing that I could continue my friendship and esteem to a man who could so infamously, so impiously forsake and injure one so transcendently—well, I won’t speak of it. But tell me, do you never think of revenge?”

“Revenge! No—what good would that do?—it would make him no better, and me no happier.”

“I don’t know how to talk to you, Mrs. Huntingdon,” said he, smiling; “you are only half a woman—your nature must be half human, half angelic. Such goodness overawes me; I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Then, sir, I fear you must be very much worse than you should be, if I, a mere ordinary mortal, am, by your own confession, so vastly your superior; and since there exists so little sympathy between us, I think we had better each look out for some more congenial companion.” And forthwith moving to the window, I began to look out for my little son and his gay young friend.

“No, I am the ordinary mortal, I maintain,” replied Mr. Hargrave. “I will not allow myself to be worse than my fellows; but you, Madam—I equally maintain there is nobody like you. But are you happy?” he asked in a serious tone.

“As happy as some others, I suppose.”

“Are you as happy as you desire to be?”

“No one is so blest as that comes to on this side of eternity.”

“One thing I know,” returned he, with a deep sad sigh; “you are immeasurably happier than I am.”

“I am very sorry for you, then,” I could not help replying.

“Are you, indeed? No, for if you were you would be glad to relieve me.”

“And so I should if I could do so without injuring myself or any other.”

“And can you suppose that I should wish you to injure yourself? No: on the contrary, it is your own happiness I long for more than mine. You are miserable now, Mrs. Huntingdon,” continued he, looking me boldly in the face. “You do not complain, but I see—and feel—and know that you are miserable—and must remain so as long as you keep those walls of impenetrable ice about your still warm and palpitating heart; and I am miserable, too. Deign to smile on me and I am happy: trust me, and you shall be happy also, for if you are a woman I can make you so—and I will do it in spite of yourself!” he muttered between his teeth; “and as for others, the question is between ourselves alone: you cannot injure your husband, you know, and no one else has any concern in the matter.”

“I have a son, Mr. Hargrave, and you have a mother,” said I, retiring from the window, whither he had followed me.

“They need not know,” he began; but before anything more could be said on either side, Esther and Arthur re-entered the room. The former glanced at Walter’s flushed, excited countenance, and then at mine—a little flushed and excited too, I daresay, though from far different causes. She must have thought we had been quarrelling desperately, and was evidently perplexed and disturbed at the circumstance; but she was too polite or too much afraid of her brother’s anger to refer to it. She seated herself on the sofa, and putting back her bright, golden ringlets, that were scattered in wild profusion over her face, she immediately began to talk about the garden and her little playfellow, and continued to chatter away in her usual strain till her brother summoned her to depart.

“If I have spoken too warmly, forgive me,” he murmured on taking his leave, “or I shall never forgive myself.” Esther smiled and glanced at me: I merely bowed, and her countenance fell. She thought it a poor return for Walter’s generous concession, and was disappointed in her friend. Poor child, she little knows the world she lives in!

Mr. Hargrave had not an opportunity of meeting me again in private for several weeks after this; but when he did meet me there was less of pride and more of touching melancholy in his manner than before. Oh, how he annoyed me! I was obliged at last almost entirely to remit my visits to the Grove, at the expense of deeply offending Mrs. Hargrave and seriously afflicting poor Esther, who really values my society for want of better, and who ought not to suffer for the fault of her brother. But that indefatigable foe was not yet vanquished: he seemed to be always on the watch. I frequently saw him riding lingeringly past the premises, looking searchingly round him as he went—or, if I did not, Rachel did. That sharp-sighted woman soon guessed how matters stood between us, and descrying the enemy’s movements from her elevation at the

nursery-window, she would give me a quiet intimation if she saw me preparing for a walk when she had reason to believe he was about, or to think it likely that he would meet or overtake me in the way I meant to traverse. I would then defer my ramble, or confine myself for that day to the park and gardens, or, if the proposed excursion was a matter of importance, such as a visit to the sick or afflicted, I would take Rachel with me, and then I was never molested.

But one mild, sunshiny day, early in November, I had ventured forth alone to visit the village school and a few of the poor tenants, and on my return I was alarmed at the clatter of a horse's feet behind me, approaching at a rapid, steady trot. There was no stile or gap at hand by which I could escape into the fields, so I walked quietly on, saying to myself, "It may not be he after all; and if it is, and if he do annoy me, it shall be for the last time, I am determined, if there be power in words and looks against cool impudence and mawkish sentimentality so inexhaustible as his."

The horse soon overtook me, and was reined up close beside me. It was Mr. Hargrave. He greeted me with a smile intended to be soft and melancholy, but his triumphant satisfaction at having caught me at last so shone through that it was quite a failure. After briefly answering his salutation and inquiring after the ladies at the Grove, I turned away and walked on; but he followed and kept his horse at my side: it was evident he intended to be my companion all the way.

"Well! I don't much care. If you want another rebuff, take it—and welcome," was my inward remark. "Now, sir, what next?"

This question, though unspoken, was not long unanswered; after a few passing observations upon indifferent subjects, he began in solemn tones the following appeal to my humanity:—

"It will be four years next April since I first saw you, Mrs. Huntingdon—you may have forgotten the circumstance, but I never can. I admired you then most deeply, but I dared not love you. In the following autumn I saw so much of your perfections that I could not fail to love you, though I dared not show it. For upwards of three years I have endured a perfect martyrdom. From the anguish of suppressed emotions, intense and fruitless longings, silent sorrow, crushed hopes, and trampled affections, I have suffered more than I can tell, or you imagine—and you were the cause of it, and not altogether the innocent cause. My youth is wasting away; my prospects are darkened; my life is a desolate blank; I have no rest day or night: I am become a burden to myself and others, and you might save me by a word—a glance, and will not do it—is this right?"

“In the first place, I don’t believe you,” answered I; “in the second, if you will be such a fool, I can’t hinder it.”

“If you affect,” replied he, earnestly, “to regard as folly the best, the strongest, the most godlike impulses of our nature, I don’t believe you. I know you are not the heartless, icy being you pretend to be—you had a heart once, and gave it to your husband. When you found him utterly unworthy of the treasure, you reclaimed it; and you will not pretend that you loved that sensual, earthly-minded profligate so deeply, so devotedly, that you can never love another? I know that there are feelings in your nature that have never yet been called forth; I know, too, that in your present neglected lonely state you are and must be miserable. You have it in your power to raise two human beings from a state of actual suffering to such unspeakable beatitude as only generous, noble, self-forgetting love can give (for you can love me if you will); you may tell me that you scorn and detest me, but, since you have set me the example of plain speaking, I will answer that I do not believe you! But you will not do it! you choose rather to leave us miserable; and you coolly tell me it is the will of God that we should remain so. You may call this religion, but I call it wild fanaticism!”

“There is another life both for you and for me,” said I. “If it be the will of God that we should sow in tears now, it is only that we may reap in joy hereafter. It is His will that we should not injure others by the gratification of our own earthly passions; and you have a mother, and sisters, and friends who would be seriously injured by your disgrace; and I, too, have friends, whose peace of mind shall never be sacrificed to my enjoyment, or yours either, with my consent; and if I were alone in the world, I have still my God and my religion, and I would sooner die than disgrace my calling and break my faith with heaven to obtain a few brief years of false and fleeting happiness—happiness sure to end in misery even here—for myself or any other!”

“There need be no disgrace, no misery or sacrifice in any quarter,” persisted he. “I do not ask you to leave your home or defy the world’s opinion.” But I need not repeat all his arguments. I refuted them to the best of my power; but that power was provokingly small, at the moment, for I was too much flurried with indignation—and even shame—that he should thus dare to address me, to retain sufficient command of thought and language to enable me adequately to contend against his powerful sophistries. Finding, however, that he could not be silenced by reason, and even covertly exulted in his seeming advantage, and ventured to deride those assertions I had not the coolness to prove, I changed my course and tried another plan.

“Do you really love me?” said I, seriously, pausing and looking him calmly in the face.

“Do I love you!” cried he.

“Truly?” I demanded.

His countenance brightened; he thought his triumph was at hand. He commenced a passionate protestation of the truth and fervour of his attachment, which I cut short by another question:—

“But is it not a selfish love? Have you enough disinterested affection to enable you to sacrifice your own pleasure to mine?”

“I would give my life to serve you.”

“I don’t want your life; but have you enough real sympathy for my afflictions to induce you to make an effort to relieve them, at the risk of a little discomfort to yourself?”

“Try me, and see.”

“If you have, never mention this subject again. You cannot recur to it in any way without doubling the weight of those sufferings you so feelingly deplore. I have nothing left me but the solace of a good conscience and a hopeful trust in heaven, and you labour continually to rob me of these. If you persist, I must regard you as my deadliest foe.”

“But hear me a moment—”

“No, sir! You said you would give your life to serve me; I only ask your silence on one particular point. I have spoken plainly; and what I say I mean. If you torment me in this way any more, I must conclude that your protestations are entirely false, and that you hate me in your heart as fervently as you profess to love me!”

He bit his lip, and bent his eyes upon the ground in silence for a while.

“Then I must leave you,” said he at length, looking steadily upon me, as if with the last hope of detecting some token of irrepressible anguish or dismay awakened by those solemn words. “I must leave you. I cannot live here, and be for ever silent on the all-absorbing subject of my thoughts and wishes.”

“Formerly, I believe, you spent but little of your time at home,” I answered; “it will do you no harm to absent yourself again, for a while—if that be really necessary.”

“If that be really possible,” he muttered; “and can you bid me go so coolly? Do you really wish it?”

“Most certainly I do. If you cannot see me without tormenting me as you have lately done, I would gladly say farewell and never see you more.”

He made no answer, but, bending from his horse, held out his hand towards me. I looked up at his face, and saw therein such a look of genuine agony of soul, that, whether bitter disappointment, or wounded pride, or lingering love, or burning wrath were uppermost, I could not hesitate to put my hand in his as frankly as if I bade a friend farewell. He grasped it very hard, and immediately put spurs to his horse and galloped away. Very soon after, I learned that he was gone to Paris, where he still is; and the longer he stays there the better for me.

I thank God for this deliverance!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

December 20th, 1826.—The fifth anniversary of my wedding-day, and, I trust, the last I shall spend under this roof. My resolution is formed, my plan concocted, and already partly put in execution. My conscience does not blame me, but while the purpose ripens let me beguile a few of these long winter evenings in stating the case for my own satisfaction: a dreary amusement enough, but having the air of a useful occupation, and being pursued as a task, it will suit me better than a lighter one.

In September, quiet Grassdale was again alive with a party of ladies and gentlemen (so called), consisting of the same individuals as those invited the year before last, with the addition of two or three others, among whom were Mrs. Hargrave and her younger daughter. The gentlemen and Lady Lowborough were invited for the pleasure and convenience of the host; the other ladies, I suppose, for the sake of appearances, and to keep me in check, and make me discreet and civil in my demeanour. But the ladies stayed only three weeks; the gentlemen, with two exceptions, above two months: for their hospitable entertainer was loth to part with them and be left alone with his bright intellect, his stainless conscience, and his loved and loving wife.

On the day of Lady Lowborough's arrival, I followed her into her chamber, and plainly told her that, if I found reason to believe that she still continued her criminal connection with Mr. Huntingdon, I should think it my absolute duty to inform her husband of the circumstance—or awaken his suspicions at least—however painful it might be, or however dreadful the consequences. She was startled at first by the declaration, so unexpected, and so determinately yet calmly delivered; but rallying in a moment, she coolly replied that, if I saw anything at all reprehensible or suspicious in her conduct, she would freely give me leave to tell his lordship all about it. Willing to be satisfied with this, I left her; and certainly I saw nothing thenceforth particularly reprehensible or suspicious in her demeanour towards her host; but then I had the other guests to attend to, and I did not watch them narrowly—for, to confess the truth, I feared to see anything between them. I no longer regarded it as any concern of mine,

and if it was my duty to enlighten Lord Lowborough, it was a painful duty, and I dreaded to be called to perform it.

But my fears were brought to an end in a manner I had not anticipated. One evening, about a fortnight after the visitors' arrival, I had retired into the library to snatch a few minutes' respite from forced cheerfulness and wearisome discourse, for after so long a period of seclusion, dreary indeed as I had often found it, I could not always bear to be doing violence to my feelings, and goading my powers to talk, and smile and listen, and play the attentive hostess, or even the cheerful friend: I had just ensconced myself within the bow of the window, and was looking out upon the west, where the darkening hills rose sharply defined against the clear amber light of evening, that gradually blended and faded away into the pure, pale blue of the upper sky, where one bright star was shining through, as if to promise—"When that dying light is gone, the world will not be left in darkness, and they who trust in God, whose minds are unobscured by the mists of unbelief and sin, are never wholly comfortless,"—when I heard a hurried step approaching, and Lord Lowborough entered. This room was still his favourite resort. He flung the door to with unusual violence, and cast his hat aside regardless where it fell. What could be the matter with him? His face was ghastly pale; his eyes were fixed upon the ground; his teeth clenched: his forehead glistened with the dews of agony. It was plain he knew his wrongs at last!

Unconscious of my presence, he began to pace the room in a state of fearful agitation, violently wringing his hands and uttering low groans or incoherent ejaculations. I made a movement to let him know that he was not alone; but he was too preoccupied to notice it. Perhaps, while his back was towards me, I might cross the room and slip away unobserved. I rose to make the attempt, but then he perceived me. He started and stood still a moment; then wiped his streaming forehead, and, advancing towards me, with a kind of unnatural composure, said in a deep, almost sepulchral tone,—
"Mrs. Huntingdon, I must leave you to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" I repeated. "I do not ask the cause."

"You know it then, and you can be so calm!" said he, surveying me with profound astonishment, not unmingled with a kind of resentful bitterness, as it appeared to me.

"I have so long been aware of—" I paused in time, and added, "of my husband's character, that nothing shocks me."

"But this—how long have you been aware of this?" demanded he, laying his clenched hand on the table beside him, and looking me keenly and fixedly in the face.

I felt like a criminal.

“Not long,” I answered.

“You knew it!” cried he, with bitter vehemence—“and you did not tell me! You helped to deceive me!”

“My lord, I did not help to deceive you.”

“Then why did you not tell me?”

“Because I knew it would be painful to you. I hoped she would return to her duty, and then there would be no need to harrow your feelings with such—”

“O God! how long has this been going on? How long has it been, Mrs. Huntingdon?—Tell me—I MUST know!” exclaimed, with intense and fearful eagerness.

“Two years, I believe.”

“Great heaven! and she has duped me all this time!” He turned away with a suppressed groan of agony, and paced the room again in a paroxysm of renewed agitation. My heart smote me; but I would try to console him, though I knew not how to attempt it.

“She is a wicked woman,” I said. “She has basely deceived and betrayed you. She is a little worthy of your regret as she was of your affection. Let her injure you no further; abstract yourself from her, and stand alone.”

“And you, Madam,” said he sternly, arresting himself, and turning round upon me, “you have injured me too by this ungenerous concealment!”

There was a sudden revulsion in my feelings. Something rose within me, and urged me to resent this harsh return for my heartfelt sympathy, and defend myself with answering severity. Happily, I did not yield to the impulse. I saw his anguish as, suddenly smiting his forehead, he turned abruptly to the window, and, looking upward at the placid sky, murmured passionately, “O God, that I might die!”—and felt that to add one drop of bitterness to that already overflowing cup would be ungenerous indeed. And yet I fear there was more coldness than gentleness in the quiet tone of my reply:—“I might offer many excuses that some would admit to be valid, but I will not attempt to enumerate them—”

“I know them,” said he hastily: “you would say that it was no business of yours: that I ought to have taken care of myself; that if my own blindness has led me into this pit of hell, I have no right to blame another for giving me credit for a larger amount of sagacity than I possessed—”

“I confess I was wrong,” continued I, without regarding this bitter interruption; “but whether want of courage or mistaken kindness was the cause of my error, I think you blame me too severely. I told Lady Lowborough two weeks ago, the very hour she came, that I should certainly think it my duty to inform you if she continued to deceive you: she gave me full liberty to do so if I should see anything reprehensible or suspicious in her conduct; I have seen nothing; and I trusted she had altered her course.”

He continued gazing from the window while I spoke, and did not answer, but, stung by the recollections my words awakened, stamped his foot upon the floor, ground his teeth, and corrugated his brow, like one under the influence of acute physical pain.

“It was wrong, it was wrong!” he muttered at length. “Nothing can excuse it; nothing can atone for it,—for nothing can recall those years of cursed credulity; nothing obliterate them!—nothing, nothing!” he repeated in a whisper, whose despairing bitterness precluded all resentment.

“When I put the case to myself, I own it was wrong,” I answered; “but I can only now regret that I did not see it in this light before, and that, as you say, nothing can recall the past.”

Something in my voice or in the spirit of this answer seemed to alter his mood. Turning towards me, and attentively surveying my face by the dim light, he said, in a milder tone than he had yet employed,—“You, too, have suffered, I suppose.”

“I suffered much, at first.”

“When was that?”

“Two years ago; and two years hence you will be as calm as I am now, and far, far happier, I trust, for you are a man, and free to act as you please.”

Something like a smile, but a very bitter one, crossed his face for a moment.

“You have not been happy, lately?” he said, with a kind of effort to regain composure, and a determination to waive the further discussion of his own calamity.

“Happy?” I repeated, almost provoked at such a question. “Could I be so, with such a husband?”

“I have noticed a change in your appearance since the first years of your marriage,” pursued he: “I observed it to—to that infernal demon,” he muttered between his teeth; “and he said it was your own sour temper that was eating away your bloom: it was making you old and ugly before your time, and had already made his fireside as

comfortless as a convent cell. You smile, Mrs. Huntingdon; nothing moves you. I wish my nature were as calm as yours.”

“My nature was not originally calm,” said I. “I have learned to appear so by dint of hard lessons and many repeated efforts.”

At this juncture Mr. Hattersley burst into the room.

“Hallo, Lowborough!” he began—“Oh! I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed on seeing me. “I didn’t know it was a tête-à-tête. Cheer up, man,” he continued, giving Lord Lowborough a thump on the back, which caused the latter to recoil from him with looks of ineffable disgust and irritation. “Come, I want to speak with you a bit.”

“Speak, then.”

“But I’m not sure it would be quite agreeable to the lady what I have to say.”

“Then it would not be agreeable to me,” said his lordship, turning to leave the room.

“Yes, it would,” cried the other, following him into the hall. “If you’ve the heart of a man, it would be the very ticket for you. It’s just this, my lad,” he continued, rather lowering his voice, but not enough to prevent me from hearing every word he said, though the half-closed door stood between us. “I think you’re an ill-used man—nay, now, don’t flare up; I don’t want to offend you: it’s only my rough way of talking. I must speak right out, you know, or else not at all; and I’m come—stop now! let me explain—I’m come to offer you my services, for though Huntingdon is my friend, he’s a devilish scamp, as we all know, and I’ll be your friend for the nonce. I know what it is you want, to make matters straight: it’s just to exchange a shot with him, and then you’ll feel yourself all right again; and if an accident happens—why, that’ll be all right too, I daresay, to a desperate fellow like you. Come now, give me your hand, and don’t look so black upon it. Name time and place, and I’ll manage the rest.”

“That,” answered the more low, deliberate voice of Lord Lowborough, “is just the remedy my own heart, or the devil within it, suggested—to meet him, and not to sever without blood. Whether I or he should fall, or both, it would be an inexpressible relief to me, if—”

“Just so! Well then,—”

“No!” exclaimed his lordship, with deep, determined emphasis. “Though I hate him from my heart, and should rejoice at any calamity that could befall him, I’ll leave him to God; and though I abhor my own life, I’ll leave that, too, to Him that gave it.”

“But you see, in this case,” pleaded Hattersley—

“I’ll not hear you!” exclaimed his companion, hastily turning away. “Not another word! I’ve enough to do against the fiend within me.”

“Then you’re a white-livered fool, and I wash my hands of you,” grumbled the tempter, as he swung himself round and departed.

“Right, right, Lord Lowborough,” cried I, darting out and clasping his burning hand, as he was moving away to the stairs. “I begin to think the world is not worthy of you!” Not understanding this sudden ebullition, he turned upon me with a stare of gloomy, bewildered amazement, that made me ashamed of the impulse to which I had yielded; but soon a more humanised expression dawned upon his countenance, and before I could withdraw my hand, he pressed it kindly, while a gleam of genuine feeling flashed from his eyes as he murmured, “God help us both!”

“Amen!” responded I; and we parted.

I returned to the drawing-room, where, doubtless, my presence would be expected by most, desired by one or two. In the ante-room was Mr. Hattersley, railing against Lord Lowborough’s poltroonery before a select audience, viz. Mr. Huntingdon, who was lounging against the table, exulting in his own treacherous villainy, and laughing his victim to scorn, and Mr. Grimsby, standing by, quietly rubbing his hands and chuckling with fiendish satisfaction.

In the drawing-room I found Lady Lowborough, evidently in no very enviable state of mind, and struggling hard to conceal her discomposure by an overstrained affectation of unusual cheerfulness and vivacity, very uncalled-for under the circumstances, for she had herself given the company to understand that her husband had received unpleasant intelligence from home, which necessitated his immediate departure, and that he had suffered it so to bother his mind that it had brought on a bilious headache, owing to which, and the preparations he judged necessary to hasten his departure, she believed they would not have the pleasure of seeing him to-night. However, she asserted, it was only a business concern, and so she did not intend it should trouble her. She was just saying this as I entered, and she darted upon me such a glance of hardihood and defiance as at once astonished and revolted me.

“But I am troubled,” continued she, “and vexed too, for I think it my duty to accompany his lordship, and of course I am very sorry to part with all my kind friends so unexpectedly and so soon.”

“And yet, Annabella,” said Esther, who was sitting beside her, “I never saw you in better spirits in my life.”

“Precisely so, my love: because I wish to make the best of your society, since it appears this is to be the last night I am to enjoy it till heaven knows when; and I wish to leave a good impression on you all,”—she glanced round, and seeing her aunt’s eye fixed upon her, rather too scrutinizingly, as she probably thought, she started up and continued: “To which end I’ll give you a song—shall I, aunt? shall I, Mrs. Huntingdon? shall I ladies and gentlemen all? Very well. I’ll do my best to amuse you.”

She and Lord Lowborough occupied the apartments next to mine. I know not how she passed the night, but I lay awake the greater part of it listening to his heavy step pacing monotonously up and down his dressing-room, which was nearest my chamber. Once I heard him pause and throw something out of the window with a passionate ejaculation; and in the morning, after they were gone, a keen-bladed clasp-knife was found on the grass-plot below; a razor, likewise, was snapped in two and thrust deep into the cinders of the grate, but partially corroded by the decaying embers. So strong had been the temptation to end his miserable life, so determined his resolution to resist it.

My heart bled for him as I lay listening to that ceaseless tread. Hitherto I had thought too much of myself, too little of him: now I forgot my own afflictions, and thought only of his; of the ardent affection so miserably wasted, the fond faith so cruelly betrayed, the—no, I will not attempt to enumerate his wrongs—but I hated his wife and my husband more intensely than ever, and not for my sake, but for his.

They departed early in the morning, before any one else was down, except myself, and just as I was leaving my room Lord Lowborough was descending to take his place in the carriage, where his lady was already ensconced; and Arthur (or Mr. Huntingdon, as I prefer calling him, for the other is my child’s name) had the gratuitous insolence to come out in his dressing-gown to bid his “friend” good-by.

“What, going already, Lowborough!” said he. “Well, good-morning.” He smilingly offered his hand.

I think the other would have knocked him down, had he not instinctively started back before that bony fist quivering with rage and clenched till the knuckles gleamed white and glistening through the skin. Looking upon him with a countenance livid with furious hate, Lord Lowborough muttered between his closed teeth a deadly execration he would not have uttered had he been calm enough to choose his words, and departed.

“I call that an unchristian spirit now,” said the villain. “But I’d never give up an old friend for the sake of a wife. You may have mine if you like, and I call that handsome; I can do no more than offer restitution, can I?”

But Lowborough had gained the bottom of the stairs, and was now crossing the hall; and Mr. Huntingdon, leaning over the banisters, called out, “Give my love to Annabella! and I wish you both a happy journey,” and withdrew, laughing, to his chamber.

He subsequently expressed himself rather glad she was gone. “She was so deuced imperious and exacting,” said he. “Now I shall be my own man again, and feel rather more at my ease.”