The Tenant Of Wild fell Hall

VOL.III

By

Anne Brontë

THE TENANT OF WILD FELL HALL VOL.III

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 petrifaction 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 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 unbeclouded 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 as 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 part 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.’

CHAPTER XXXIX

My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements; and I need say no more to justify my alarm on his account, and my determination to deliver him at any hazard from the hands of such instructors. I first attempted to keep him always with me, or in the nursery, and gave Rachel particular injunctions never to let him come down to dessert as long as these 'gentlemen' stayed; but it was no use: these orders were immediately countermanded and overruled by his father; he was not going to have the little fellow moped to death between an old nurse and a cursed fool of a mother. So the little fellow came down every evening in spite of his cross mamma, and learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. To see such things done with the roguish naïveté of that pretty little child, and hear such things spoken by that small infantile voice, was as peculiarly piquant and irresistibly droll to them as it was inexpressibly distressing and painful to me; and when he had set the table in a roar he would look round delightedly upon them all, and add his shrill laugh to theirs. But if that beaming blue eye rested on me, its light would vanish for a moment, and he would say, in some concern, 'Mamma, why don't you laugh? Make her laugh, papa—she never will.'

Hence was I obliged to stay among these human brutes, watching an opportunity to get my child away from them instead of leaving them immediately after the removal of the cloth, as I should always otherwise have done. He was never willing to go, and I frequently had to carry him away by force, for which he thought me very cruel and unjust; and sometimes his father would insist upon my letting him remain; and then I would leave him to his kind friends, and retire to indulge my bitterness and despair alone, or to rack my brains for a remedy to this great evil.

But here again I must do Mr. Hargrave the justice to acknowledge that I never saw him laugh at the child's misdemeanours, nor heard him utter a word of encouragement to his aspirations after manly accomplishments. But when anything very extraordinary was said or done by the infant profligate, I noticed, at times, a peculiar expression in his face that I could neither interpret nor define: a slight twitching about the muscles of the mouth; a sudden flash in the eye, as he darted a sudden glance at the child and then at me: and then I could fancy there arose a gleam of hard, keen, sombre satisfaction in his countenance at the look of impotent wrath and anguish he was too certain to behold in mine. But on one occasion, when Arthur had been behaving particularly ill, and Mr. Huntingdon and his guests had been particularly provoking and insulting to me in their encouragement of him, and I particularly anxious to get him out of the room, and on the

very point of demeaning myself by a burst of uncontrollable passion—Mr. Hargrave suddenly rose from his seat with an aspect of stern determination, lifted the child from his father's knee, where he was sitting half-tipsy, cocking his head and laughing at me, and execrating me with words he little knew the meaning of, handed him out of the room, and, setting him down in the hall, held the door open for me, gravely bowed as I withdrew, and closed it after me. I heard high words exchanged between him and his already half-inebriated host as I departed, leading away my bewildered and disconcerted boy.

But this should not continue: my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity, with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father. These guests might not be with us long, but they would return again: and he, the most injurious of the whole, his child's worst enemy, would still remain. I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer: the world's opinion and the feelings of my friends must be alike unheeded here, at least—alike unable to deter me from my duty. But where should I find an asylum, and how obtain subsistence for us both? Oh, I would take my precious charge at early dawn, take the coach to M—, flee to the port of —, cross the Atlantic, and seek a quiet, humble home in New England, where I would support myself and him by the labour of my hands. The palette and the easel, my darling playmates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now. But was I sufficiently skilful as an artist to obtain my livelihood in a strange land, without friends and without recommendation? No; I must wait a little; I must labour hard to improve my talent, and to produce something worth while as a specimen of my powers, something to speak favourably for me, whether as an actual painter or a teacher. Brilliant success, of course, I did not look for, but some degree of security from positive failure was indispensable: I must not take my son to starve. And then I must have money for the journey, the passage, and some little to support us in our retreat in case I should be unsuccessful at first: and not too little either: for who could tell how long I might have to struggle with the indifference or neglect of others, or my own inexperience or inability to suit their tastes?

What should I do then? Apply to my brother and explain my circumstances and my resolves to him? No, no: even if I told him all my grievances, which I should be very reluctant to do, he would be certain to disapprove of the step: it would seem like madness to him, as it would to my uncle and aunt, or to Milicent. No; I must have patience and gather a hoard of my own. Rachel should be my only confidante—I thought I could persuade her into the scheme; and she should help me, first, to find out a picture-dealer in some distant town; then, through her means, I would privately sell what pictures I had on hand that would do for such a purpose, and some of those I should thereafter paint. Besides this, I would contrive to dispose of my jewels, not the family jewels, but the few I brought with me from home, and those my uncle gave me on

my marriage. A few months' arduous toil might well be borne by me with such an end in view; and in the interim my son could not be much more injured than he was already.

Having formed this resolution, I immediately set to work to accomplish it, I might possibly have been induced to wax cool upon it afterwards, or perhaps to keep weighing the pros and cons in my mind till the latter overbalanced the former, and I was driven to relinquish the project altogether, or delay the execution of it to an indefinite period, had not something occurred to confirm me in that determination, to which I still adhere, which I still think I did well to form, and shall do better to execute.

Since Lord Lowborough's departure I had regarded the library as entirely my own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day. None of our gentlemen had the smallest pretensions to a literary taste, except Mr. Hargrave; and he, at present, was quite contented with the newspapers and periodicals of the day. And if, by any chance, he should look in here, I felt assured he would soon depart on seeing me, for, instead of becoming less cool and distant towards me, he had become decidedly more so since the departure of his mother and sisters, which was just what I wished. Here, then, I set up my easel, and here I worked at my canvas from daylight till dusk, with very little intermission, saving when pure necessity, or my duties to little Arthur, called me away: for I still thought proper to devote some portion of every day exclusively to his instruction and amusement. But, contrary to my expectation, on the third morning, while I was thus employed, Mr. Hargrave did look in, and did not immediately withdraw on seeing me. He apologized for his intrusion, and said he was only come for a book; but when he had got it, he condescended to cast a glance over my picture. Being a man of taste, he had something to say on this subject as well as another, and having modestly commented on it, without much encouragement from me, he proceeded to expatiate on the art in general. Receiving no encouragement in that either, he dropped it, but did not depart.

'You don't give us much of your company, Mrs. Huntingdon,' observed he, after a brief pause, during which I went on coolly mixing and tempering my colours; 'and I cannot wonder at it, for you must be heartily sick of us all. I myself am so thoroughly ashamed of my companions, and so weary of their irrational conversation and pursuits—now that there is no one to humanize them and keep them in check, since you have justly abandoned us to our own devices—that I think I shall presently withdraw from amongst them, probably within this week; and I cannot suppose you will regret my departure.'

He paused. I did not answer.

'Probably,' he added, with a smile, 'your only regret on the subject will be that I do not take all my companions along with me. I flatter myself, at times, that though among

them I am not of them; but it is natural that you should be glad to get rid of me. I may regret this, but I cannot blame you for it.'

'I shall not rejoice at your departure, for you can conduct yourself like a gentleman,' said I, thinking it but right to make some acknowledgment for his good behaviour; 'but I must confess I shall rejoice to bid adieu to the rest, inhospitable as it may appear.'

'No one can blame you for such an avowal,' replied he gravely: 'not even the gentlemen themselves, I imagine. I'll just tell you,' he continued, as if actuated by a sudden resolution, 'what was said last night in the dining-room, after you left us: perhaps you will not mind it, as you're so very philosophical on certain points,' he added with a slight sneer. 'They were talking about Lord Lowborough and his delectable lady, the cause of whose sudden departure is no secret amongst them; and her character is so well known to them all, that, nearly related to me as she is, I could not attempt to defend it. Curse me!' he muttered, par parenthese, 'if I don't have vengeance for this! If the villain must disgrace the family, must he blazon it abroad to every low-bred knave of his acquaintance? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Huntingdon. Well, they were talking of these things, and some of them remarked that, as she was separated from her husband, he might see her again when he pleased.'

'"Thank you," said he; "I've had enough of her for the present: I'll not trouble to see her, unless she comes to me."

'"Then what do you mean to do, Huntingdon, when we're gone?" said Ralph Hattersley. "Do you mean to turn from the error of your ways, and be a good husband, a good father, and so forth; as I do, when I get shut of you and all these rollicking devils you call your friends? I think it's time; and your wife is fifty times too good for you, you know—"

'And he added some praise of you, which you would not thank me for repeating, nor him for uttering; proclaiming it aloud, as he did, without delicacy or discrimination, in an audience where it seemed profanation to utter your name: himself utterly incapable of understanding or appreciating your real excellences. Huntingdon, meanwhile, sat quietly drinking his wine,—or looking smilingly into his glass and offering no interruption or reply, till Hattersley shouted out,—"Do you hear me, man?"

'"Yes, go on," said he.

'"Nay, I've done," replied the other: "I only want to know if you intend to take my advice."

'"What advice?"

‘“To turn over a new leaf, you double-dyed scoundrel,” shouted Ralph, “and beg your wife’s pardon, and be a good boy for the future.”

‘“My wife! what wife? I have no wife,” replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass, “or if I have, look you, gentlemen: I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome: you may, by Jove, and my blessing into the bargain!”

‘I—hem—someone asked if he really meant what he said; upon which he solemnly swore he did, and no mistake. What do you think of that, Mrs. Huntingdon?’ asked Mr. Hargrave, after a short pause, during which I had felt he was keenly examining my half-averted face.

‘I say,’ replied I, calmly, ‘that what he prizes so lightly will not be long in his possession.’

‘You cannot mean that you will break your heart and die for the detestable conduct of an infamous villain like that!’

‘By no means: my heart is too thoroughly dried to be broken in a hurry, and I mean to live as long as I can.’

‘Will you leave him then?’

‘Yes.’

‘When: and how?’ asked he, eagerly.

‘When I am ready, and how I can manage it most effectually.’

‘But your child?’

‘My child goes with me.’

‘He will not allow it.’

‘I shall not ask him.’

‘Ah, then, it is a secret flight you meditate! but with whom, Mrs. Huntingdon?’

‘With my son: and possibly, his nurse.’

‘Alone—and unprotected! But where can you go? what can you do? He will follow you and bring you back.’

‘I have laid my plans too well for that. Let me once get clear of Grassdale, and I shall consider myself safe.’

Mr. Hargrave advanced one step towards me, looked me in the face, and drew in his breath to speak; but that look, that heightened colour, that sudden sparkle of the eye, made my blood rise in wrath: I abruptly turned away, and, snatching up my brush, began to dash away at my canvas with rather too much energy for the good of the picture.

‘Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said he with bitter solemnity, ‘you are cruel—cruel to me—cruel to yourself.’

‘Mr. Hargrave, remember your promise.’

‘I must speak: my heart will burst if I don’t! I have been silent long enough, and you must hear me!’ cried he, boldly intercepting my retreat to the door. ‘You tell me you owe no allegiance to your husband; he openly declares himself weary of you, and calmly gives you up to anybody that will take you; you are about to leave him; no one will believe that you go alone; all the world will say, “She has left him at last, and who can wonder at it? Few can blame her, fewer still can pity him; but who is the companion of her flight?” Thus you will have no credit for your virtue (if you call it such): even your best friends will not believe in it; because it is monstrous, and not to be credited but by those who suffer, from the effects of it, such cruel torments that they know it to be indeed reality. But what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? you, a young and inexperienced woman, delicately nurtured, and utterly—’

‘In a word, you would advise me to stay where I am,’ interrupted I. ‘Well, I’ll see about it.’

‘By all means, leave him!’ cried he earnestly; ‘but not alone! Helen! let me protect you!’

‘Never! while heaven spares my reason,’ replied I, snatching away the hand he had presumed to seize and press between his own. But he was in for it now; he had fairly broken the barrier: he was completely roused, and determined to hazard all for victory.

‘I must not be denied!’ exclaimed he, vehemently; and seizing both my hands, he held them very tight, but dropped upon his knee, and looked up in my face with a half-imploring, half-imperious gaze. ‘You have no reason now: you are flying in the face of heaven’s decrees. God has designed me to be your comfort and protector—I feel it, I know it as certainly as if a voice from heaven declared, “Ye twain shall be one flesh”—and you spurn me from you—’

‘Let me go, Mr. Hargrave!’ said I, sternly. But he only tightened his grasp.

‘Let me go!’ I repeated, quivering with indignation.

His face was almost opposite the window as he knelt. With a slight start, I saw him glance towards it; and then a gleam of malicious triumph lit up his countenance. Looking over my shoulder, I beheld a shadow just retiring round the corner.

‘That is Grimsby,’ said he deliberately. ‘He will report what he has seen to Huntingdon and all the rest, with such embellishments as he thinks proper. He has no love for you, Mrs. Huntingdon—no reverence for your sex, no belief in virtue, no admiration for its image. He will give such a version of this story as will leave no doubt at all about your character, in the minds of those who hear it. Your fair fame is gone; and nothing that I or you can say can ever retrieve it. But give me the power to protect you, and show me the villain that dares to insult!’

‘No one has ever dared to insult me as you are doing now!’ said I, at length releasing my hands, and recoiling from him.

‘I do not insult you,’ cried he: ‘I worship you. You are my angel, my divinity! I lay my powers at your feet, and you must and shall accept them!’ he exclaimed, impetuously starting to his feet. ‘I will be your consoler and defender! and if your conscience upbraid you for it, say I overcame you, and you could not choose but yield!’

I never saw a man go terribly excited. He precipitated himself towards me. I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him. This startled him: he stood and gazed at me in astonishment; I daresay I looked as fierce and resolute as he. I moved to the bell, and put my hand upon the cord. This tamed him still more. With a half-authoritative, half-deprecating wave of the hand, he sought to deter me from ringing.

‘Stand off, then!’ said I; he stepped back. ‘And listen to me. I don’t like you,’ I continued, as deliberately and emphatically as I could, to give the greater efficacy to my words; ‘and if I were divorced from my husband, or if he were dead, I would not marry you. There now! I hope you’re satisfied.’

His face grew blanched with anger.

'I am satisfied,' he replied, with bitter emphasis, 'that you are the most cold-hearted, unnatural, ungrateful woman I ever yet beheld!'

'Ungrateful, sir?'

'Ungrateful.'

'No, Mr. Hargrave, I am not. For all the good you ever did me, or ever wished to do, I most sincerely thank you: for all the evil you have done me, and all you would have done, I pray God to pardon you, and make you of a better mind.' Here the door was thrown open, and Messrs. Huntingdon and Hattersley appeared without. The latter remained in the hall, busy with his ramrod and his gun; the former walked in, and stood with his back to the fire, surveying Mr. Hargrave and me, particularly the former, with a smile of insupportable meaning, accompanied as it was by the impudence of his brazen brow, and the sly, malicious, twinkle of his eye.

'Well, sir?' said Hargrave, interrogatively, and with the air of one prepared to stand on the defensive.

'Well, sir,' returned his host.

'We want to know if you are at liberty to join us in a go at the pheasants, Walter,' interposed Hattersley from without. 'Come! there shall be nothing shot besides, except a puss or two; I'll vouch for that.'

Walter did not answer, but walked to the window to collect his faculties. Arthur uttered a low whistle, and followed him with his eyes. A slight flush of anger rose to Hargrave's cheek; but in a moment he turned calmly round, and said carelessly:

'I came here to bid farewell to Mrs. Huntingdon, and tell her I must go to-morrow.'

'Humph! You're mighty sudden in your resolution. What takes you off so soon, may I ask?'

'Business,' returned he, repelling the other's incredulous sneer with a glance of scornful defiance.

‘Very good,’ was the reply; and Hargrave walked away. Thereupon Mr. Huntingdon, gathering his coat-laps under his arms, and setting his shoulder against the mantel-piece, turned to me, and, addressing me in a low voice, scarcely above his breath, poured forth a volley of the vilest and grossest abuse it was possible for the imagination to conceive or the tongue to utter. I did not attempt to interrupt him; but my spirit kindled within me, and when he had done, I replied, ‘If your accusation were true, Mr. Huntingdon, how dare you blame me?’

‘She’s hit it, by Jove!’ cried Hattersley, rearing his gun against the wall; and, stepping into the room, he took his precious friend by the arm, and attempted to drag him away. ‘Come, my lad,’ he muttered; ‘true or false, you’ve no right to blame her, you know, nor him either; after what you said last night. So come along.’

There was something implied here that I could not endure.

‘Dare you suspect me, Mr. Hattersley?’ said I, almost beside myself with fury.

‘Nay, nay, I suspect nobody. It’s all right, it’s all right. So come along, Huntingdon, you blackguard.’

‘She can’t deny it!’ cried the gentleman thus addressed, grinning in mingled rage and triumph. ‘She can’t deny it if her life depended on it!’ and muttering some more abusive language, he walked into the hall, and took up his hat and gun from the table.

‘I scorn to justify myself to you!’ said I. ‘But you,’ turning to Hattersley, ‘if you presume to have any doubts on the subject, ask Mr. Hargrave.’

At this they simultaneously burst into a rude laugh that made my whole frame tingle to the fingers’ ends.

‘Where is he? I’ll ask him myself!’ said I, advancing towards them.

Suppressing a new burst of merriment, Hattersley pointed to the outer door. It was half open. His brother-in-law was standing on the front without.

‘Mr. Hargrave, will you please to step this way?’ said I.

He turned and looked at me in grave surprise.

‘Step this way, if you please!’ I repeated, in so determined a manner that he could not, or did not choose to resist its authority. Somewhat reluctantly he ascended the steps and advanced a pace or two into the hall.

‘And tell those gentlemen,’ I continued—‘these men, whether or not I yielded to your solicitations.’

‘I don’t understand you, Mrs. Huntingdon.’

‘You do understand me, sir; and I charge you, upon your honour as a gentleman (if you have any), to answer truly. Did I, or did I not?’

‘No,’ muttered he, turning away.

‘Speak up, sir; they can’t hear you. Did I grant your request?

‘You did not.’

‘No, I’ll be sworn she didn’t,’ said Hattersley, ‘or he’d never look so black.’

‘I’m willing to grant you the satisfaction of a gentleman, Huntingdon,’ said Mr. Hargrave, calmly addressing his host, but with a bitter sneer upon his countenance.

‘Go to the deuce!’ replied the latter, with an impatient jerk of the head. Hargrave withdrew with a look of cold disdain, saying,—‘You know where to find me, should you feel disposed to send a friend.’

Muttered oaths and curses were all the answer this intimation obtained.

‘Now, Huntingdon, you see!’ said Hattersley. ‘Clear as the day.’

‘I don’t care what he sees,’ said I, ‘or what he imagines; but you, Mr. Hattersley, when you hear my name belied and slandered, will you defend it?’

‘I will.’

I instantly departed and shut myself into the library. What could possess me to make such a request of such a man I cannot tell; but drowning men catch at straws: they had driven me desperate between them; I hardly knew what I said. There was no other to preserve my name from being blackened and aspersed among this nest of boon companions, and through them, perhaps, into the world; and beside my abandoned

wretch of a husband, the base, malignant Grimsby, and the false villain Hargrave, this boorish ruffian, coarse and brutal as he was, shone like a glow-worm in the dark, among its fellow worms.

What a scene was this! Could I ever have imagined that I should be doomed to bear such insults under my own roof—to hear such things spoken in my presence; nay, spoken to me and of me; and by those who arrogated to themselves the name of gentlemen? And could I have imagined that I should have been able to endure it as calmly, and to repel their insults as firmly and as boldly as I had done? A hardness such as this is taught by rough experience and despair alone.

Such thoughts as these chased one another through my mind, as I paced to and fro the room, and longed—oh, how I longed—to take my child and leave them now, without an hour's delay! But it could not be; there was work before me: hard work, that must be done.

'Then let me do it,' said I, 'and lose not a moment in vain repinings and idle chafings against my fate, and those who influence it.'

And conquering my agitation with a powerful effort, I immediately resumed my task, and laboured hard all day.

Mr. Hargrave did depart on the morrow; and I have never seen him since. The others stayed on for two or three weeks longer; but I kept aloof from them as much as possible, and still continued my labour, and have continued it, with almost unabated ardour, to the present day. I soon acquainted Rachel with my design, confiding all my motives and intentions to her ear, and, much to my agreeable surprise, found little difficulty in persuading her to enter into my views. She is a sober, cautious woman, but she so hates her master, and so loves her mistress and her nursling, that after several ejaculations, a few faint objections, and many tears and lamentations that I should be brought to such a pass, she applauded my resolution and consented to aid me with all her might: on one condition only: that she might share my exile: otherwise, she was utterly inexorable, regarding it as perfect madness for me and Arthur to go alone. With touching generosity, she modestly offered to aid me with her little hoard of savings, hoping I would 'excuse her for the liberty, but really, if I would do her the favour to accept it as a loan, she would be very happy.' Of course I could not think of such a thing; but now, thank heaven, I have gathered a little hoard of my own, and my preparations are so far advanced that I am looking forward to a speedy emancipation. Only let the stormy severity of this winter weather be somewhat abated, and then, some morning, Mr. Huntingdon will come down to a solitary breakfast-table, and perhaps be clamouring through the house for his invisible wife and child, when they are some fifty miles on

their way to the Western world, or it may be more: for we shall leave him hours before the dawn, and it is not probable he will discover the loss of both until the day is far advanced.

I am fully alive to the evils that may and must result upon the step I am about to take; but I never waver in my resolution, because I never forget my son. It was only this morning, while I pursued my usual employment, he was sitting at my feet, quietly playing with the shreds of canvas I had thrown upon the carpet; but his mind was otherwise occupied, for, in a while, he looked up wistfully in my face, and gravely asked,—'Mamma, why are you wicked?'

'Who told you I was wicked, love?'

'Rachel.'

'No, Arthur, Rachel never said so, I am certain.'

'Well, then, it was papa,' replied he, thoughtfully. Then, after a reflective pause, he added, 'At least, I'll tell you how it was I got to know: when I'm with papa, if I say mamma wants me, or mamma says I'm not to do something that he tells me to do, he always says, "Mamma be damned," and Rachel says it's only wicked people that are damned. So, mamma, that's why I think you must be wicked: and I wish you wouldn't.'

'My dear child, I am not. Those are bad words, and wicked people often say them of others better than themselves. Those words cannot make people be damned, nor show that they deserve it. God will judge us by our own thoughts and deeds, not by what others say about us. And when you hear such words spoken, Arthur, remember never to repeat them: it is wicked to say such things of others, not to have them said against you.'

'Then it's papa that's wicked,' said he, ruefully.

'Papa is wrong to say such things, and you will be very wrong to imitate him now that you know better.'

'What is imitate?'

'To do as he does.'

'Does he know better?'

'Perhaps he does; but that is nothing to you.'

‘If he doesn’t, you ought to tell him, mamma.’

‘I have told him.’

The little moralist paused and pondered. I tried in vain to divert his mind from the subject.

‘I’m sorry papa’s wicked,’ said he mournfully, at length, ‘for I don’t want him to go to hell.’ And so saying he burst into tears.

I consoled him with the hope that perhaps his papa would alter and become good before he died—; but is it not time to deliver him from such a parent?

CHAPTER XL

January 10th, 1827.—While writing the above, yesterday evening, I sat in the drawing-room. Mr. Huntingdon was present, but, as I thought, asleep on the sofa behind me. He had risen, however, unknown to me, and, actuated by some base spirit of curiosity, been looking over my shoulder for I know not how long; for when I had laid aside my pen, and was about to close the book, he suddenly placed his hand upon it, and saying,—'With your leave, my dear, I'll have a look at this,' forcibly wrested it from me, and, drawing a chair to the table, composedly sat down to examine it: turning back leaf after leaf to find an explanation of what he had read. Unluckily for me, he was more sober that night than he usually is at such an hour.

Of course I did not leave him to pursue this occupation in quiet: I made several attempts to snatch the book from his hands, but he held it too firmly for that; I upbraided him in bitterness and scorn for his mean and dishonourable conduct, but that had no effect upon him; and, finally, I extinguished both the candles, but he only wheeled round to the fire, and raising a blaze sufficient for his purposes, calmly continued the investigation. I had serious thoughts of getting a pitcher of water and extinguishing that light too; but it was evident his curiosity was too keenly excited to be quenched by that, and the more I manifested my anxiety to baffle his scrutiny, the greater would be his determination to persist in it besides it was too late.

'It seems very interesting, love,' said he, lifting his head and turning to where I stood, wringing my hands in silent rage and anguish; 'but it's rather long; I'll look at it some other time; and meanwhile I'll trouble you for your keys, my dear.'

'What keys?'

'The keys of your cabinet, desk, drawers, and whatever else you possess,' said he, rising and holding out his hand.

'I've not got them,' I replied. The key of my desk, in fact, was at that moment in the lock, and the others were attached to it.

'Then you must send for them,' said he; 'and if that old devil, Rachel, doesn't immediately deliver them up, she tramps bag and baggage tomorrow.'

'She doesn't know where they are,' I answered, quietly placing my hand upon them, and taking them from the desk, as I thought, unobserved. 'I know, but I shall not give them up without a reason.'

‘And I know, too,’ said he, suddenly seizing my closed hand and rudely abstracting them from it. He then took up one of the candles and relighted it by thrusting it into the fire.

‘Now, then,’ sneered he, ‘we must have a confiscation of property. But, first, let us take a peep into the studio.’

And putting the keys into his pocket, he walked into the library. I followed, whether with the dim idea of preventing mischief, or only to know the worst, I can hardly tell. My painting materials were laid together on the corner table, ready for to-morrow’s use, and only covered with a cloth. He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire: palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish: I saw them all consumed: the palette-knives snapped in two, the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney. He then rang the bell.

‘Benson, take those things away,’ said he, pointing to the easel, canvas, and stretcher; ‘and tell the housemaid she may kindle the fire with them: your mistress won’t want them any more.’

Benson paused aghast and looked at me.

‘Take them away, Benson,’ said I; and his master muttered an oath.

‘And this and all, sir?’ said the astonished servant, referring to the half-finished picture.

‘That and all,’ replied the master; and the things were cleared away.

Mr. Huntingdon then went up-stairs. I did not attempt to follow him, but remained seated in the arm-chair, speechless, tearless, and almost motionless, till he returned about half-an-hour after, and walking up to me, held the candle in my face and peered into my eyes with looks and laughter too insulting to be borne. With a sudden stroke of my hand I dashed the candle to the floor.

‘Hal-lo!’ muttered he, starting back; ‘she’s the very devil for spite. Did ever any mortal see such eyes?—they shine in the dark like a cat’s. Oh, you’re a sweet one!’ So saying, he gathered up the candle and the candlestick. The former being broken as well as extinguished, he rang for another.

‘Benson, your mistress has broken the candle; bring another.’

‘You expose yourself finely,’ observed I, as the man departed.

‘I didn’t say I’d broken it, did I?’ returned he. He then threw my keys into my lap, saying,—‘There! you’ll find nothing gone but your money, and the jewels, and a few little trifles I thought it advisable to take into my own possession, lest your mercantile spirit should be tempted to turn them into gold. I’ve left you a few sovereigns in your purse, which I expect to last you through the month; at all events, when you want more you will be so good as to give me an account of how that’s spent. I shall put you upon a small monthly allowance, in future, for your own private expenses; and you needn’t trouble yourself any more about my concerns; I shall look out for a steward, my dear—I won’t expose you to the temptation. And as for the household matters, Mrs. Greaves must be very particular in keeping her accounts; we must go upon an entirely new plan—’

‘What great discovery have you made now, Mr. Huntingdon? Have I attempted to defraud you?’

‘Not in money matters, exactly, it seems; but it’s best to keep out of the way of temptation.’

Here Benson entered with the candles, and there followed a brief interval of silence; I sitting still in my chair, and he standing with his back to the fire, silently triumphing in my despair.

‘And so,’ said he at length, ‘you thought to disgrace me, did you, by running away and turning artist, and supporting yourself by the labour of your hands, forsooth? And you thought to rob me of my son, too, and bring him up to be a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter?’

‘Yes, to obviate his becoming such a gentleman as his father.’

‘It’s well you couldn’t keep your own secret—ha, ha! It’s well these women must be blabbing. If they haven’t a friend to talk to, they must whisper their secrets to the fishes, or write them on the sand, or something; and it’s well, too, I wasn’t over full to-night, now I think of it, or I might have snoozed away and never dreamt of looking what my sweet lady was about; or I might have lacked the sense or the power to carry my point like a man, as I have done.’

Leaving him to his self-congratulations, I rose to secure my manuscript, for I now remembered it had been left upon the drawing-room table, and I determined, if possible, to save myself the humiliation of seeing it in his hands again. I could not bear the idea of his amusing himself over my secret thoughts and recollections; though, to be sure, he would find little good of himself therein indited, except in the former part; and

oh, I would sooner burn it all than he should read what I had written when I was such a fool as to love him!

'And by-the-by,' cried he, as I was leaving the room, 'you'd better tell that d—d old sneak of a nurse to keep out of my way for a day or two; I'd pay her her wages and send her packing to-morrow, but I know she'd do more mischief out of the house than in it.'

And as I departed, he went on cursing and abusing my faithful friend and servant with epithets I will not defile this paper with repeating. I went to her as soon as I had put away my book, and told her how our project was defeated. She was as much distressed and horrified as I was—and more so than I was that night, for I was partly stunned by the blow, and partly excited and supported against it by the bitterness of my wrath. But in the morning, when I woke without that cheering hope that had been my secret comfort and support so long, and all this day, when I have wandered about restless and objectless, shunning my husband, shrinking even from my child, knowing that I am unfit to be his teacher or companion, hoping nothing for his future life, and fervently wishing he had never been born,—I felt the full extent of my calamity, and I feel it now. I know that day after day such feelings will return upon me. I am a slave—a prisoner—but that is nothing; if it were myself alone I would not complain, but I am forbidden to rescue my son from ruin, and what was once my only consolation is become the crowning source of my despair.

Have I no faith in God? I try to look to Him and raise my heart to heaven, but it will cleave to the dust. I can only say, 'He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: He hath made my chain heavy. He hath filled me with bitterness—He hath made me drunken with wormwood.' I forget to add, 'But though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.' I ought to think of this; and if there be nothing but sorrow for me in this world, what is the longest life of misery to a whole eternity of peace? And for my little Arthur—has he no friend but me? Who was it said, 'It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish?'

CHAPTER XLI

March 20th.—Having now got rid of Mr. Huntingdon for a season, my spirits begin to revive. He left me early in February; and the moment he was gone, I breathed again, and felt my vital energy return; not with the hope of escape—he has taken care to leave me no visible chance of that—but with a determination to make the best of existing circumstances. Here was Arthur left to me at last; and rousing from my despondent apathy, I exerted all my powers to eradicate the weeds that had been fostered in his infant mind, and sow again the good seed they had rendered unproductive. Thank heaven, it is not a barren or a stony soil; if weeds spring fast there, so do better plants. His apprehensions are more quick, his heart more overflowing with affection than ever his father's could have been, and it is no hopeless task to bend him to obedience and win him to love and know his own true friend, as long as there is no one to counteract my efforts.

I had much trouble at first in breaking him of those evil habits his father had taught him to acquire, but already that difficulty is nearly vanquished now: bad language seldom defiles his mouth, and I have succeeded in giving him an absolute disgust for all intoxicating liquors, which I hope not even his father or his father's friends will be able to overcome. He was inordinately fond of them for so young a creature, and, remembering my unfortunate father as well as his, I dreaded the consequences of such a taste. But if I had stinted him, in his usual quantity of wine, or forbidden him to taste it altogether, that would only have increased his partiality for it, and made him regard it as a greater treat than ever. I therefore gave him quite as much as his father was accustomed to allow him; as much, indeed, as he desired to have—but into every glass I surreptitiously introduced a small quantity of tartar-emetic, just enough to produce inevitable nausea and depression without positive sickness. Finding such disagreeable consequences invariably to result from this indulgence, he soon grew weary of it, but the more he shrank from the daily treat the more I pressed it upon him, till his reluctance was strengthened to perfect abhorrence. When he was thoroughly disgusted with every kind of wine, I allowed him, at his own request, to try brandy-and-water, and then gin-and-water, for the little toper was familiar with them all, and I was determined that all should be equally hateful to him. This I have now effected; and since he declares that the taste, the smell, the sight of any one of them is sufficient to make him sick, I have given up teasing him about them, except now and then as objects of terror in cases of misbehaviour. 'Arthur, if you're not a good boy I shall give you a glass of wine,' or 'Now, Arthur, if you say that again you shall have some brandy-and-water,' is as good as any other threat; and once or twice, when he was sick, I have obliged the poor child to swallow a little wine-and-water without the tartar-emetic, by way of medicine; and this practice I intend to continue for some time to come; not that I think it of any real service in a physical sense, but because I am determined to enlist all the powers of association

in my service; I wish this aversion to be so deeply grounded in his nature that nothing in after-life may be able to overcome it.

Thus, I flatter myself, I shall secure him from this one vice; and for the rest, if on his father's return I find reason to apprehend that my good lessons will be all destroyed—if Mr. Huntingdon commence again the game of teaching the child to hate and despise his mother, and emulate his father's wickedness—I will yet deliver my son from his hands. I have devised another scheme that might be resorted to in such a case; and if I could but obtain my brother's consent and assistance, I should not doubt of its success. The old hall where he and I were born, and where our mother died, is not now inhabited, nor yet quite sunk into decay, as I believe. Now, if I could persuade him to have one or two rooms made habitable, and to let them to me as a stranger, I might live there, with my child, under an assumed name, and still support myself by my favourite art. He should lend me the money to begin with, and I would pay him back, and live in lowly independence and strict seclusion, for the house stands in a lonely place, and the neighbourhood is thinly inhabited, and he himself should negotiate the sale of my pictures for me. I have arranged the whole plan in my head: and all I want is to persuade Frederick to be of the same mind as myself. He is coming to see me soon, and then I will make the proposal to him, having first enlightened him upon my circumstances sufficiently to excuse the project.

Already, I believe, he knows much more of my situation than I have told him. I can tell this by the air of tender sadness pervading his letters; and by the fact of his so seldom mentioning my husband, and generally evincing a kind of covert bitterness when he does refer to him; as well as by the circumstance of his never coming to see me when Mr. Huntingdon is at home. But he has never openly expressed any disapprobation of him or sympathy for me; he has never asked any questions, or said anything to invite my confidence. Had he done so, I should probably have had but few concealments from him. Perhaps he feels hurt at my reserve. He is a strange being; I wish we knew each other better. He used to spend a month at Staningley every year, before I was married; but, since our father's death, I have only seen him once, when he came for a few days while Mr. Huntingdon was away. He shall stay many days this time, and there shall be more candour and cordiality between us than ever there was before, since our early childhood. My heart clings to him more than ever; and my soul is sick of solitude.

April 16th.—He is come and gone. He would not stay above a fortnight. The time passed quickly, but very, very happily, and it has done me good. I must have a bad disposition, for my misfortunes have soured and embittered me exceedingly: I was beginning insensibly to cherish very unamiable feelings against my fellow-mortals, the male part of them especially; but it is a comfort to see there is at least one among them worthy to be trusted and esteemed; and doubtless there are more, though I have never

known them, unless I except poor Lord Lowborough, and he was bad enough in his day. But what would Frederick have been, if he had lived in the world, and mingled from his childhood with such men as these of my acquaintance? and what will Arthur be, with all his natural sweetness of disposition, if I do not save him from that world and those companions? I mentioned my fears to Frederick, and introduced the subject of my plan of rescue on the evening after his arrival, when I presented my little son to his uncle.

'He is like you, Frederick,' said I, 'in some of his moods: I sometimes think he resembles you more than his father; and I am glad of it.'

'You flatter me, Helen,' replied he, stroking the child's soft, wavy locks.

'No, you will think it no compliment when I tell you I would rather have him to resemble Benson than his father.' He slightly elevated his eyebrows, but said nothing.

'Do you know what sort of man Mr. Huntingdon is?' said I.

'I think I have an idea.'

'Have you so clear an idea that you can hear, without surprise or disapproval, that I meditate escaping with that child to some secret asylum, where we can live in peace, and never see him again?'

'Is it really so?'

'If you have not,' continued I, 'I'll tell you something more about him'; and I gave a sketch of his general conduct, and a more particular account of his behaviour with regard to his child, and explained my apprehensions on the latter's account, and my determination to deliver him from his father's influence.

Frederick was exceedingly indignant against Mr. Huntingdon, and very much grieved for me; but still he looked upon my project as wild and impracticable. He deemed my fears for Arthur disproportioned to the circumstances, and opposed so many objections to my plan, and devised so many milder methods for ameliorating my condition, that I was obliged to enter into further details to convince him that my husband was utterly incorrigible, and that nothing could persuade him to give up his son, whatever became of me, he being as fully determined the child should not leave him, as I was not to leave the child; and that, in fact, nothing would answer but this, unless I fled the country, as I had intended before. To obviate that, he at length consented to have one wing of the old hall put into a habitable condition, as a place of refuge against a time of need; but hoped I would not take advantage of it unless circumstances should render it really necessary,

which I was ready enough to promise: for though, for my own sake, such a hermitage appears like paradise itself, compared with my present situation, yet for my friends' sakes, for Milicent and Esther, my sisters in heart and affection, for the poor tenants of Grassdale, and, above all, for my aunt, I will stay if I possibly can.

July 29th.—Mrs. Hargrave and her daughter are come back from London. Esther is full of her first season in town; but she is still heart-whole and unengaged. Her mother sought out an excellent match for her, and even brought the gentleman to lay his heart and fortune at her feet; but Esther had the audacity to refuse the noble gifts. He was a man of good family and large possessions, but the naughty girl maintained he was old as Adam, ugly as sin, and hateful as—one who shall be nameless.

'But, indeed, I had a hard time of it,' said she: 'mamma was very greatly disappointed at the failure of her darling project, and very, very angry at my obstinate resistance to her will, and is so still; but I can't help it. And Walter, too, is so seriously displeased at my perversity and absurd caprice, as he calls it, that I fear he will never forgive me—I did not think he could be so unkind as he has lately shown himself. But Milicent begged me not to yield, and I'm sure, Mrs. Huntingdon, if you had seen the man they wanted to palm upon me, you would have advised me not to take him too.'

'I should have done so whether I had seen him or not,' said I; 'it is enough that you dislike him.'

'I knew you would say so; though mamma affirmed you would be quite shocked at my undutiful conduct. You can't imagine how she lectures me: I am disobedient and ungrateful; I am thwarting her wishes, wronging my brother, and making myself a burden on her hands. I sometimes fear she'll overcome me after all. I have a strong will, but so has she, and when she says such bitter things, it provokes me to such a pass that I feel inclined to do as she bids me, and then break my heart and say, "There, mamma, it's all your fault!"'

'Pray don't!' said I. 'Obedience from such a motive would be positive wickedness, and certain to bring the punishment it deserves. Stand firm, and your mamma will soon relinquish her persecution; and the gentleman himself will cease to pester you with his addresses if he finds them steadily rejected.'

'Oh, no! mamma will weary all about her before she tires herself with her exertions; and as for Mr. Oldfield, she has given him to understand that I have refused his offer, not from any dislike of his person, but merely because I am giddy and young, and cannot at present reconcile myself to the thoughts of marriage under any circumstances: but by next season, she has no doubt, I shall have more sense, and hopes my girlish fancies will

be worn away. So she has brought me home, to school me into a proper sense of my duty, against the time comes round again. Indeed, I believe she will not put herself to the expense of taking me up to London again, unless I surrender: she cannot afford to take me to town for pleasure and nonsense, she says, and it is not every rich gentleman that will consent to take me without a fortune, whatever exalted ideas I may have of my own attractions.'

'Well, Esther, I pity you; but still, I repeat, stand firm. You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life.'

'But I cannot leave them unless I get married, and I cannot get married if nobody sees me. I saw one or two gentlemen in London that I might have liked, but they were younger sons, and mamma would not let me get to know them—one especially, who I believe rather liked me—but she threw every possible obstacle in the way of our better acquaintance. Wasn't it provoking?'

'I have no doubt you would feel it so, but it is possible that if you married him, you might have more reason to regret it hereafter than if you married Mr. Oldfield. When I tell you not to marry without love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone: there are many, many other things to be considered. Keep both heart and hand in your own possession, till you see good reason to part with them; and if such an occasion should never present itself, comfort your mind with this reflection, that though in single life your joys may not be very many, your sorrows, at least, will not be more than you can bear. Marriage may change your circumstances for the better, but, in my private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result.'

'So thinks Milicent; but allow me to say I think otherwise. If I thought myself doomed to old-maidenhood, I should cease to value my life. The thoughts of living on, year after year, at the Grove—a hanger-on upon mamma and Walter, a mere cumberer of the ground (now that I know in what light they would regard it), is perfectly intolerable; I would rather run away with the butler.'

'Your circumstances are peculiar, I allow; but have patience, love; do nothing rashly. Remember you are not yet nineteen, and many years are yet to pass before any one can set you down as an old maid: you cannot tell what Providence may have in store for you. And meantime, remember you have a right to the protection and support of your mother and brother, however they may seem to grudge it.'

‘You are so grave, Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said Esther, after a pause. ‘When Milicent uttered the same discouraging sentiments concerning marriage, I asked if she was happy: she said she was; but I only half believed her; and now I must put the same question to you.’

‘It is a very impertinent question,’ laughed I, ‘from a young girl to a married woman so many years her senior, and I shall not answer it.’

‘Pardon me, dear madam,’ said she, laughingly throwing herself into my arms, and kissing me with playful affection; but I felt a tear on my neck, as she dropped her head on my bosom and continued, with an odd mixture of sadness and levity, timidity and audacity,—‘I know you are not so happy as I mean to be, for you spend half your life alone at Grassdale, while Mr. Huntingdon goes about enjoying himself where and how he pleases. I shall expect my husband to have no pleasures but what he shares with me; and if his greatest pleasure of all is not the enjoyment of my company, why, it will be the worse for him, that’s all.’

‘If such are your expectations of matrimony, Esther, you must, indeed, be careful whom you marry—or rather, you must avoid it altogether.’

CHAPTER XLII

September 1st.—No Mr. Huntingdon yet. Perhaps he will stay among his friends till Christmas; and then, next spring, he will be off again. If he continue this plan, I shall be able to stay at Grassdale well enough—that is, I shall be able to stay, and that is enough; even an occasional bevy of friends at the shooting season may be borne, if Arthur get so firmly attached to me, so well established in good sense and principles before they come that I shall be able, by reason and affection, to keep him pure from their contaminations. Vain hope, I fear! but still, till such a time of trial comes I will forbear to think of my quiet asylum in the beloved old hall.

Mr. and Mrs. Hattersley have been staying at the Grove a fortnight: and as Mr. Hargrave is still absent, and the weather was remarkably fine, I never passed a day without seeing my two friends, Milicent and Esther, either there or here. On one occasion, when Mr. Hattersley had driven them over to Grassdale in the phaeton, with little Helen and Ralph, and we were all enjoying ourselves in the garden—I had a few minutes' conversation with that gentleman, while the ladies were amusing themselves with the children.

'Do you want to hear anything of your husband, Mrs. Huntingdon?' said he.

'No, unless you can tell me when to expect him home.'

'I can't.—You don't want him, do you?' said he, with a broad grin.

'No.'

'Well, I think you're better without him, sure enough—for my part, I'm downright weary of him. I told him I'd leave him if he didn't mend his manners, and he wouldn't; so I left him. You see, I'm a better man than you think me; and, what's more, I have serious thoughts of washing my hands of him entirely, and the whole set of 'em, and comporting myself from this day forward with all decency and sobriety, as a Christian and the father of a family should do. What do you think of that?'

'It is a resolution you ought to have formed long ago.'

'Well, I'm not thirty yet; it isn't too late, is it?'

'No; it is never too late to reform, as long as you have the sense to desire it, and the strength to execute your purpose.'

‘Well, to tell you the truth, I’ve thought of it often and often before; but he’s such devilish good company, is Huntingdon, after all. You can’t imagine what a jovial good fellow he is when he’s not fairly drunk, only just primed or half-seas-over. We all have a bit of a liking for him at the bottom of our hearts, though we can’t respect him.’

‘But should you wish yourself to be like him?’

‘No, I’d rather be like myself, bad as I am.’

‘You can’t continue as bad as you are without getting worse and more brutalised every day, and therefore more like him.’

I could not help smiling at the comical, half-angry, half-confounded look he put on at this rather unusual mode of address.

‘Never mind my plain speaking,’ said I; ‘it is from the best of motives. But tell me, should you wish your sons to be like Mr. Huntingdon—or even like yourself?’

‘Hang it! no.’

‘Should you wish your daughter to despise you—or, at least, to feel no vestige of respect for you, and no affection but what is mingled with the bitterest regret?’

‘Oh, no! I couldn’t stand that.’

‘And, finally, should you wish your wife to be ready to sink into the earth when she hears you mentioned; and to loathe the very sound of your voice, and shudder at your approach?’

‘She never will; she likes me all the same, whatever I do.’

‘Impossible, Mr. Hattersley! you mistake her quiet submission for affection.’

‘Fire and fury—’

‘Now don’t burst into a tempest at that. I don’t mean to say she does not love you—she does, I know, a great deal better than you deserve; but I am quite sure, that if you behave better, she will love you more, and if you behave worse, she will love you less and less, till all is lost in fear, aversion, and bitterness of soul, if not in secret hatred and contempt. But, dropping the subject of affection, should you wish to be the tyrant of her

life—to take away all the sunshine from her existence, and make her thoroughly miserable?'

'Of course not; and I don't, and I'm not going to.'

'You have done more towards it than you suppose.'

'Pooh, pooh! she's not the susceptible, anxious, worriting creature you imagine: she's a little meek, peaceable, affectionate body; apt to be rather sulky at times, but quiet and cool in the main, and ready to take things as they come.'

'Think of what she was five years ago, when you married her, and what she is now.'

'I know she was a little plump lassie then, with a pretty pink and white face: now she's a poor little bit of a creature, fading and melting away like a snow-wreath. But hang it!—that's not my fault.'

'What is the cause of it then? Not years, for she's only five-and-twenty.'

'It's her own delicate health, and confound it, madam! what would you make of me?—and the children, to be sure, that worry her to death between them.'

'No, Mr. Hattersley, the children give her more pleasure than pain: they are fine, well-dispositioned children—'

'I know they are—bless them!'

'Then why lay the blame on them?—I'll tell you what it is: it's silent fretting and constant anxiety on your account, mingled, I suspect, with something of bodily fear on her own. When you behave well, she can only rejoice with trembling; she has no security, no confidence in your judgment or principles; but is continually dreading the close of such short-lived felicity; when you behave ill, her causes of terror and misery are more than any one can tell but herself. In patient endurance of evil, she forgets it is our duty to admonish our neighbours of their transgressions. Since you will mistake her silence for indifference, come with me, and I'll show you one or two of her letters—no breach of confidence, I hope, since you are her other half.'

He followed me into the library. I sought out and put into his hands two of Milicent's letters: one dated from London, and written during one of his wildest seasons of reckless dissipation; the other in the country, during a lucid interval. The former was full of trouble and anguish; not accusing him, but deeply regretting his connection with his

profligate companions, abusing Mr. Grimsby and others, insinuating bitter things against Mr. Huntingdon, and most ingeniously throwing the blame of her husband's misconduct on to other men's shoulders. The latter was full of hope and joy, yet with a trembling consciousness that this happiness would not last; praising his goodness to the skies, but with an evident, though but half-expressed wish, that it were based on a surer foundation than the natural impulses of the heart, and a half-prophetic dread of the fall of that house so founded on the sand,—which fall had shortly after taken place, as Hattersley must have been conscious while he read.

Almost at the commencement of the first letter I had the unexpected pleasure of seeing him blush; but he immediately turned his back to me, and finished the perusal at the window. At the second, I saw him, once or twice, raise his hand, and hurriedly pass it across his face. Could it be to dash away a tear? When he had done, there was an interval spent in clearing his throat and staring out of the window, and then, after whistling a few bars of a favourite air, he turned round, gave me back the letters, and silently shook me by the hand.

'I've been a cursed rascal, God knows,' said he, as he gave it a hearty squeeze, 'but you see if I don't make amends for it—d—n me if I don't!'

'Don't curse yourself, Mr. Hattersley; if God had heard half your invocations of that kind, you would have been in hell long before now—and you cannot make amends for the past by doing your duty for the future, inasmuch as your duty is only what you owe to your Maker, and you cannot do more than fulfil it: another must make amends for your past delinquencies. If you intend to reform, invoke God's blessing, His mercy, and His aid; not His curse.'

'God help me, then—for I'm sure I need it. Where's Milicent?'

'She's there, just coming in with her sister.'

He stepped out at the glass door, and went to meet them. I followed at a little distance. Somewhat to his wife's astonishment, he lifted her off from the ground, and saluted her with a hearty kiss and a strong embrace; then placing his two hands on her shoulders, he gave her, I suppose, a sketch of the great things he meant to do, for she suddenly threw her arms round him, and burst into tears, exclaiming,—'Do, do, Ralph—we shall be so happy! How very, very good you are!'

'Nay, not I,' said he, turning her round, and pushing her towards me. 'Thank her; it's her doing.'

Milicent flew to thank me, overflowing with gratitude. I disclaimed all title to it, telling her her husband was predisposed to amendment before I added my mite of exhortation and encouragement, and that I had only done what she might, and ought to have done herself.

'Oh, no!' cried she; 'I couldn't have influenced him, I'm sure, by anything that I could have said. I should only have bothered him by my clumsy efforts at persuasion, if I had made the attempt.'

'You never tried me, Milly,' said he.

Shortly after they took their leave. They are now gone on a visit to Hattersley's father. After that they will repair to their country home. I hope his good resolutions will not fall through, and poor Milicent will not be again disappointed. Her last letter was full of present bliss, and pleasing anticipations for the future; but no particular temptation has yet occurred to put his virtue to the test. Henceforth, however, she will doubtless be somewhat less timid and reserved, and he more kind and thoughtful.—Surely, then, her hopes are not unfounded; and I have one bright spot, at least, whereon to rest my thoughts.

CHAPTER XLIII

October 10th.—Mr. Huntingdon returned about three weeks ago. His appearance, his demeanour and conversation, and my feelings with regard to him, I shall not trouble myself to describe. The day after his arrival, however, he surprised me by the announcement of an intention to procure a governess for little Arthur: I told him it was quite unnecessary, not to say ridiculous, at the present season: I thought I was fully competent to the task of teaching him myself—for some years to come, at least: the child's education was the only pleasure and business of my life; and since he had deprived me of every other occupation, he might surely leave me that.

He said I was not fit to teach children, or to be with them: I had already reduced the boy to little better than an automaton; I had broken his fine spirit with my rigid severity; and I should freeze all the sunshine out of his heart, and make him as gloomy an ascetic as myself, if I had the handling of him much longer. And poor Rachel, too, came in for her share of abuse, as usual; he cannot endure Rachel, because he knows she has a proper appreciation of him.

I calmly defended our several qualifications as nurse and governess, and still resisted the proposed addition to our family; but he cut me short by saying it was no use bothering about the matter, for he had engaged a governess already, and she was coming next week; so that all I had to do was to get things ready for her reception. This was a rather startling piece of intelligence. I ventured to inquire her name and address, by whom she had been recommended, or how he had been led to make choice of her.

'She is a very estimable, pious young person,' said he; 'you needn't be afraid. Her name is Myers, I believe; and she was recommended to me by a respectable old dowager: a lady of high repute in the religious world. I have not seen her myself, and therefore cannot give you a particular account of her person and conversation, and so forth; but, if the old lady's eulogies are correct, you will find her to possess all desirable qualifications for her position: an inordinate love of children among the rest.'

All this was gravely and quietly spoken, but there was a laughing demon in his half-averted eye that boded no good, I imagined. However, I thought of my asylum in —shire, and made no further objections.

When Miss Myers arrived, I was not prepared to give her a very cordial reception. Her appearance was not particularly calculated to produce a favourable impression at first sight, nor did her manners and subsequent conduct, in any degree, remove the prejudice I had already conceived against her. Her attainments were limited, her intellect noways

above mediocrity. She had a fine voice, and could sing like a nightingale, and accompany herself sufficiently well on the piano; but these were her only accomplishments. There was a look of guile and subtlety in her face, a sound of it in her voice. She seemed afraid of me, and would start if I suddenly approached her. In her behaviour she was respectful and complaisant, even to servility: she attempted to flatter and fawn upon me at first, but I soon checked that. Her fondness for her little pupil was overstrained, and I was obliged to remonstrate with her on the subject of over-indulgence and injudicious praise; but she could not gain his heart. Her piety consisted in an occasional heaving of sighs, and uplifting of eyes to the ceiling, and the utterance of a few cant phrases. She told me she was a clergyman's daughter, and had been left an orphan from her childhood, but had had the good fortune to obtain a situation in a very pious family; and then she spoke so gratefully of the kindness she had experienced from its different members, that I reproached myself for my uncharitable thoughts and unfriendly conduct, and relented for a time, but not for long: my causes of dislike were too rational, my suspicions too well founded for that; and I knew it was my duty to watch and scrutinize till those suspicions were either satisfactorily removed or confirmed.

I asked the name and residence of the kind and pious family. She mentioned a common name, and an unknown and distant place of abode, but told me they were now on the Continent, and their present address was unknown to her. I never saw her speak much to Mr. Huntingdon; but he would frequently look into the school-room to see how little Arthur got on with his new companion, when I was not there. In the evening, she sat with us in the drawing-room, and would sing and play to amuse him or us, as she pretended, and was very attentive to his wants, and watchful to anticipate them, though she only talked to me; indeed, he was seldom in a condition to be talked to. Had she been other than she was, I should have felt her presence a great relief to come between us thus, except, indeed, that I should have been thoroughly ashamed for any decent person to see him as he often was.

I did not mention my suspicions to Rachel; but she, having sojourned for half a century in this land of sin and sorrow, has learned to be suspicious herself. She told me from the first she was 'down of that new governess,' and I soon found she watched her quite as narrowly as I did; and I was glad of it, for I longed to know the truth: the atmosphere of Grassdale seemed to stifle me, and I could only live by thinking of Wildfell Hall.

At last, one morning, she entered my chamber with such intelligence that my resolution was taken before she had ceased to speak. While she dressed me I explained to her my intentions and what assistance I should require from her, and told her which of my things she was to pack up, and what she was to leave behind for herself, as I had no

other means of recompensing her for this sudden dismissal after her long and faithful service: a circumstance I most deeply regretted, but could not avoid.

'And what will you do, Rachel?' said I; 'will you go home, or seek another place?'

'I have no home, ma'am, but with you,' she replied; 'and if I leave you I'll never go into place again as long as I live.'

'But I can't afford to live like a lady now,' returned I: 'I must be my own maid and my child's nurse.'

'What signifies!' replied she, in some excitement. 'You'll want somebody to clean and wash, and cook, won't you? I can do all that; and never mind the wages: I've my bits o' savings yet, and if you wouldn't take me I should have to find my own board and lodging out of 'em somewhere, or else work among strangers: and it's what I'm not used to: so you can please yourself, ma'am.' Her voice quavered as she spoke, and the tears stood in her eyes.

'I should like it above all things, Rachel, and I'd give you such wages as I could afford: such as I should give to any servant-of-all-work I might employ: but don't you see I should be dragging you down with me when you have done nothing to deserve it?'

'Oh, fiddle!' ejaculated she.

'And, besides, my future way of living will be so widely different to the past: so different to all you have been accustomed to—'

'Do you think, ma'am, I can't bear what my missis can? surely I'm not so proud and so dainty as that comes to; and my little master, too, God bless him!'

'But I'm young, Rachel; I sha'n't mind it; and Arthur is young too: it will be nothing to him.'

'Nor me either: I'm not so old but what I can stand hard fare and hard work, if it's only to help and comfort them as I've loved like my own bairns: for all I'm too old to bide the thoughts o' leaving 'em in trouble and danger, and going amongst strangers myself.'

'Then you sha'n't, Rachel!' cried I, embracing my faithful friend. 'We'll all go together, and you shall see how the new life suits you.'

‘Bless you, honey!’ cried she, affectionately returning my embrace. ‘Only let us get shut of this wicked house, and we’ll do right enough, you’ll see.’

‘So think I,’ was my answer; and so that point was settled.

By that morning’s post I despatched a few hasty lines to Frederick, beseeching him to prepare my asylum for my immediate reception: for I should probably come to claim it within a day after the receipt of that note: and telling him, in few words, the cause of my sudden resolution. I then wrote three letters of adieu: the first to Esther Hargrave, in which I told her that I found it impossible to stay any longer at Grassdale, or to leave my son under his father’s protection; and, as it was of the last importance that our future abode should be unknown to him and his acquaintance, I should disclose it to no one but my brother, through the medium of whom I hoped still to correspond with my friends. I then gave her his address, exhorted her to write frequently, reiterated some of my former admonitions regarding her own concerns, and bade her a fond farewell.

The second was to Milicent; much to the same effect, but a little more confidential, as befitted our longer intimacy, and her greater experience and better acquaintance with my circumstances.

The third was to my aunt: a much more difficult and painful undertaking, and therefore I had left it to the last; but I must give her some explanation of that extraordinary step I had taken: and that quickly, for she and my uncle would no doubt hear of it within a day or two after my disappearance, as it was probable that Mr. Huntingdon would speedily apply to them to know what was become of me. At last, however, I told her I was sensible of my error: I did not complain of its punishment, and I was sorry to trouble my friends with its consequences; but in duty to my son I must submit no longer; it was absolutely necessary that he should be delivered from his father’s corrupting influence. I should not disclose my place of refuge even to her, in order that she and my uncle might be able, with truth, to deny all knowledge concerning it; but any communications addressed to me under cover to my brother would be certain to reach me. I hoped she and my uncle would pardon the step I had taken, for if they knew all, I was sure they would not blame me; and I trusted they would not afflict themselves on my account, for if I could only reach my retreat in safety and keep it unmolested, I should be very happy, but for the thoughts of them; and should be quite contented to spend my life in obscurity, devoting myself to the training up of my child, and teaching him to avoid the errors of both his parents.

These things were done yesterday: I have given two whole days to the preparation for our departure, that Frederick may have more time to prepare the rooms, and Rachel to pack up the things: for the latter task must be done with the utmost caution and secrecy,

and there is no one but me to assist her. I can help to get the articles together, but I do not understand the art of stowing them into the boxes, so as to take up the smallest possible space; and there are her own things to do, as well as mine and Arthur's. I can ill afford to leave anything behind, since I have no money, except a few guineas in my purse; and besides, as Rachel observed, whatever I left would most likely become the property of Miss Myers, and I should not relish that.

But what trouble I have had throughout these two days, struggling to appear calm and collected, to meet him and her as usual, when I was obliged to meet them, and forcing myself to leave my little Arthur in her hands for hours together! But I trust these trials are over now: I have laid him in my bed for better security, and never more, I trust, shall his innocent lips be defiled by their contaminating kisses, or his young ears polluted by their words. But shall we escape in safety? Oh, that the morning were come, and we were on our way at least! This evening, when I had given Rachel all the assistance I could, and had nothing left me but to wait, and wish and tremble, I became so greatly agitated that I knew not what to do. I went down to dinner, but I could not force myself to eat. Mr. Huntingdon remarked the circumstance.

'What's to do with you now?' said he, when the removal of the second course gave him time to look about him.

'I am not well,' I replied: 'I think I must lie down a little; you won't miss me much?'

'Not the least: if you leave your chair, it'll do just as well—better, a trifle,' he muttered, as I left the room, 'for I can fancy somebody else fills it.'

'Somebody else may fill it to-morrow,' I thought, but did not say. 'There! I've seen the last of you, I hope,' I muttered, as I closed the door upon him.

Rachel urged me to seek repose at once, to recruit my strength for to-morrow's journey, as we must be gone before the dawn; but in my present state of nervous excitement that was entirely out of the question. It was equally out of the question to sit, or wander about my room, counting the hours and the minutes between me and the appointed time of action, straining my ears and trembling at every sound, lest someone should discover and betray us after all. I took up a book and tried to read: my eyes wandered over the pages, but it was impossible to bind my thoughts to their contents. Why not have recourse to the old expedient, and add this last event to my chronicle? I opened its pages once more, and wrote the above account—with difficulty, at first, but gradually my mind became more calm and steady. Thus several hours have passed away: the time is drawing near; and now my eyes feel heavy and my frame exhausted. I will commend my cause to God, and then lie down and gain an hour or two of sleep; and then!—

Little Arthur sleeps soundly. All the house is still: there can be no one watching. The boxes were all corded by Benson, and quietly conveyed down the back stairs after dusk, and sent away in a cart to the M— coach-office. The name upon the cards was Mrs. Graham, which appellation I mean henceforth to adopt. My mother's maiden name was Graham, and therefore I fancy I have some claim to it, and prefer it to any other, except my own, which I dare not resume.

CHAPTER XLIV

October 24th.—Thank heaven, I am free and safe at last. Early we rose, swiftly and quietly dressed, slowly and stealthily descended to the hall, where Benson stood ready with a light, to open the door and fasten it after us. We were obliged to let one man into our secret on account of the boxes, &c. All the servants were but too well acquainted with their master's conduct, and either Benson or John would have been willing to serve me; but as the former was more staid and elderly, and a crony of Rachel's besides, I of course directed her to make choice of him as her assistant and confidant on the occasion, as far as necessity demanded, I only hope he may not be brought into trouble thereby, and only wish I could reward him for the perilous service he was so ready to undertake. I slipped two guineas into his hand, by way of remembrance, as he stood in the doorway, holding the candle to light our departure, with a tear in his honest grey eye, and a host of good wishes depicted on his solemn countenance. Alas! I could offer no more: I had barely sufficient remaining for the probable expenses of the journey.

What trembling joy it was when the little wicket closed behind us, as we issued from the park! Then, for one moment, I paused, to inhale one draught of that cool, bracing air, and venture one look back upon the house. All was dark and still: no light glimmered in the windows, no wreath of smoke obscured the stars that sparkled above it in the frosty sky. As I bade farewell for ever to that place, the scene of so much guilt and misery, I felt glad that I had not left it before, for now there was no doubt about the propriety of such a step—no shadow of remorse for him I left behind. There was nothing to disturb my joy but the fear of detection; and every step removed us further from the chance of that.

We had left Grassdale many miles behind us before the round red sun arose to welcome our deliverance; and if any inhabitant of its vicinity had chanced to see us then, as we bowled along on the top of the coach, I scarcely think they would have suspected our identity. As I intend to be taken for a widow, I thought it advisable to enter my new abode in mourning: I was, therefore, attired in a plain black silk dress and mantle, a black veil (which I kept carefully over my face for the first twenty or thirty miles of the journey), and a black silk bonnet, which I had been constrained to borrow of Rachel, for want of such an article myself. It was not in the newest fashion, of course; but none the worse for that, under present circumstances. Arthur was clad in his plainest clothes, and wrapped in a coarse woollen shawl; and Rachel was muffled in a grey cloak and hood that had seen better days, and gave her more the appearance of an ordinary though decent old woman, than of a lady's-maid.

Oh, what delight it was to be thus seated aloft, rumbling along the broad, sunshiny road, with the fresh morning breeze in my face, surrounded by an unknown country, all smiling—cheerfully, gloriously smiling in the yellow lustre of those early beams; with my

darling child in my arms, almost as happy as myself, and my faithful friend beside me: a prison and despair behind me, receding further, further back at every clatter of the horses' feet; and liberty and hope before! I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance, or astonishing my fellow-passengers by some surprising outburst of hilarity.

But the journey was a very long one, and we were all weary enough before the close of it. It was far into the night when we reached the town of L—, and still we were seven miles from our journey's end; and there was no more coaching, nor any conveyance to be had, except a common cart, and that with the greatest difficulty, for half the town was in bed. And a dreary ride we had of it, that last stage of the journey, cold and weary as we were; sitting on our boxes, with nothing to cling to, nothing to lean against, slowly dragged and cruelly shaken over the rough, hilly roads. But Arthur was asleep in Rachel's lap, and between us we managed pretty well to shield him from the cold night air.

At last we began to ascend a terribly steep and stony lane, which, in spite of the darkness, Rachel said she remembered well: she had often walked there with me in her arms, and little thought to come again so many years after, under such circumstances as the present. Arthur being now awakened by the jolting and the stoppages, we all got out and walked. We had not far to go; but what if Frederick should not have received my letter? or if he should not have had time to prepare the rooms for our reception, and we should find them all dark, damp, and comfortless, destitute of food, fire, and furniture, after all our toil?

At length the grim, dark pile appeared before us. The lane conducted us round by the back way. We entered the desolate court, and in breathless anxiety surveyed the ruinous mass. Was it all blackness and desolation? No; one faint red glimmer cheered us from a window where the lattice was in good repair. The door was fastened, but after due knocking and waiting, and some parleying with a voice from an upper window, we were admitted by an old woman who had been commissioned to air and keep the house till our arrival, into a tolerably snug little apartment, formerly the scullery of the mansion, which Frederick had now fitted up as a kitchen. Here she procured us a light, roused the fire to a cheerful blaze, and soon prepared a simple repast for our refreshment; while we disencumbered ourselves of our travelling-gear, and took a hasty survey of our new abode. Besides the kitchen, there were two bedrooms, a good-sized parlour, and another smaller one, which I destined for my studio, all well aired and seemingly in good repair, but only partly furnished with a few old articles, chiefly of ponderous black oak, the veritable ones that had been there before, and which had been kept as antiquarian relics in my brother's present residence, and now, in all haste, transported back again.

The old woman brought my supper and Arthur's into the parlour, and told me, with all due formality, that 'the master desired his compliments to Mrs. Graham, and he had prepared the rooms as well as he could upon so short a notice; but he would do himself the pleasure of calling upon her to-morrow, to receive her further commands.'

I was glad to ascend the stern-looking stone staircase, and lie down in the gloomy, old-fashioned bed, beside my little Arthur. He was asleep in a minute; but, weary as I was, my excited feelings and restless cogitations kept me awake till dawn began to struggle with the darkness; but sleep was sweet and refreshing when it came, and the waking was delightful beyond expression. It was little Arthur that roused me, with his gentle kisses. He was here, then, safely clasped in my arms, and many leagues away from his unworthy father! Broad daylight illumined the apartment, for the sun was high in heaven, though obscured by rolling masses of autumnal vapour.

The scene, indeed, was not remarkably cheerful in itself, either within or without. The large bare room, with its grim old furniture, the narrow, latticed windows, revealing the dull, grey sky above and the desolate wilderness below, where the dark stone walls and iron gate, the rank growth of grass and weeds, and the hardy evergreens of preternatural forms, alone remained to tell that there had been once a garden,—and the bleak and barren fields beyond might have struck me as gloomy enough at another time; but now, each separate object seemed to echo back my own exhilarating sense of hope and freedom: indefinite dreams of the far past and bright anticipations of the future seemed to greet me at every turn. I should rejoice with more security, to be sure, had the broad sea rolled between my present and my former homes; but surely in this lonely spot I might remain unknown; and then I had my brother here to cheer my solitude with his occasional visits.

He came that morning; and I have had several interviews with him since; but he is obliged to be very cautious when and how he comes; not even his servants or his best friends must know of his visits to Wildfell—except on such occasions as a landlord might be expected to call upon a stranger tenant—lest suspicion should be excited against me, whether of the truth or of some slanderous falsehood.

I have now been here nearly a fortnight, and, but for one disturbing care, the haunting dread of discovery, I am comfortably settled in my new home: Frederick has supplied me with all requisite furniture and painting materials: Rachel has sold most of my clothes for me, in a distant town, and procured me a wardrobe more suitable to my present position: I have a second-hand piano, and a tolerably well-stocked bookcase in my parlour; and my other room has assumed quite a professional, business-like appearance already. I am working hard to repay my brother for all his expenses on my account; not that there is the slightest necessity for anything of the kind, but it pleases

me to do so: I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own; and that no one suffers for my folly—in a pecuniary way at least. I shall make him take the last penny I owe him, if I can possibly effect it without offending him too deeply. I have a few pictures already done, for I told Rachel to pack up all I had; and she executed her commission but too well—for among the rest, she put up a portrait of Mr. Huntingdon that I had painted in the first year of my marriage. It struck me with dismay, at the moment, when I took it from the box and beheld those eyes fixed upon me in their mocking mirth, as if exulting still in his power to control my fate, and deriding my efforts to escape.

How widely different had been my feelings in painting that portrait to what they now were in looking upon it! How I had studied and toiled to produce something, as I thought, worthy of the original! what mingled pleasure and dissatisfaction I had had in the result of my labours!—pleasure for the likeness I had caught; dissatisfaction, because I had not made it handsome enough. Now, I see no beauty in it—nothing pleasing in any part of its expression; and yet it is far handsomer and far more agreeable—far less repulsive I should rather say—than he is now: for these six years have wrought almost as great a change upon himself as on my feelings regarding him. The frame, however, is handsome enough; it will serve for another painting. The picture itself I have not destroyed, as I had first intended; I have put it aside; not, I think, from any lurking tenderness for the memory of past affection, nor yet to remind me of my former folly, but chiefly that I may compare my son's features and countenance with this, as he grows up, and thus be enabled to judge how much or how little he resembles his father—if I may be allowed to keep him with me still, and never to behold that father's face again—a blessing I hardly dare reckon upon.

It seems Mr. Huntingdon is making every exertion to discover the place of my retreat. He has been in person to Staningley, seeking redress for his grievances—expecting to hear of his victims, if not to find them there—and has told so many lies, and with such unblushing coolness, that my uncle more than half believes him, and strongly advocates my going back to him and being friends again. But my aunt knows better: she is too cool and cautious, and too well acquainted with both my husband's character and my own to be imposed upon by any specious falsehoods the former could invent. But he does not want me back; he wants my child; and gives my friends to understand that if I prefer living apart from him, he will indulge the whim and let me do so unmolested, and even settle a reasonable allowance on me, provided I will immediately deliver up his son. But heaven help me! I am not going to sell my child for gold, though it were to save both him and me from starving: it would be better that he should die with me than that he should live with his father.

Frederick showed me a letter he had received from that gentleman, full of cool impudence such as would astonish any one who did not know him, but such as, I am convinced, none would know better how to answer than my brother. He gave me no account of his reply, except to tell me that he had not acknowledged his acquaintance with my place of refuge, but rather left it to be inferred that it was quite unknown to him, by saying it was useless to apply to him, or any other of my relations, for information on the subject, as it appeared I had been driven to such extremity that I had concealed my retreat even from my best friends; but that if he had known it, or should at any time be made aware of it, most certainly Mr. Huntingdon would be the last person to whom he should communicate the intelligence; and that he need not trouble himself to bargain for the child, for he (Frederick) fancied he knew enough of his sister to enable him to declare, that wherever she might be, or however situated, no consideration would induce her to deliver him up.

30th.—Alas! my kind neighbours will not let me alone. By some means they have ferreted me out, and I have had to sustain visits from three different families, all more or less bent upon discovering who and what I am, whence I came, and why I have chosen such a home as this. Their society is unnecessary to me, to say the least, and their curiosity annoys and alarms me: if I gratify it, it may lead to the ruin of my son, and if I am too mysterious it will only excite their suspicions, invite conjecture, and rouse them to greater exertions—and perhaps be the means of spreading my fame from parish to parish, till it reach the ears of some one who will carry it to the Lord of Grassdale Manor.

I shall be expected to return their calls, but if, upon inquiry, I find that any of them live too far away for Arthur to accompany me, they must expect in vain for a while, for I cannot bear to leave him, unless it be to go to church, and I have not attempted that yet: for—it may be foolish weakness, but I am under such constant dread of his being snatched away, that I am never easy when he is not by my side; and I fear these nervous terrors would so entirely disturb my devotions, that I should obtain no benefit from the attendance. I mean, however, to make the experiment next Sunday, and oblige myself to leave him in charge of Rachel for a few hours. It will be a hard task, but surely no imprudence; and the vicar has been to scold me for my neglect of the ordinances of religion. I had no sufficient excuse to offer, and I promised, if all were well, he should see me in my pew next Sunday; for I do not wish to be set down as an infidel; and, besides, I know I should derive great comfort and benefit from an occasional attendance at public worship, if I could only have faith and fortitude to compose my thoughts in conformity with the solemn occasion, and forbid them to be for ever dwelling on my absent child, and on the dreadful possibility of finding him gone when I return; and surely God in His mercy will preserve me from so severe a trial: for my child's own sake, if not for mine, He will not suffer him to be torn away.

November 3rd.—I have made some further acquaintance with my neighbours. The fine gentleman and beau of the parish and its vicinity (in his own estimation, at least) is a young . . . .

* * * * *

Here it ended. The rest was torn away. How cruel, just when she was going to mention me! for I could not doubt it was your humble servant she was about to mention, though not very favourably, of course. I could tell that, as well by those few words as by the recollection of her whole aspect and demeanour towards me in the commencement of our acquaintance. Well! I could readily forgive her prejudice against me, and her hard thoughts of our sex in general, when I saw to what brilliant specimens her experience had been limited.

Respecting me, however, she had long since seen her error, and perhaps fallen into another in the opposite extreme: for if, at first, her opinion of me had been lower than I deserved, I was convinced that now my deserts were lower than her opinion; and if the former part of this continuation had been torn away to avoid wounding my feelings, perhaps the latter portion had been removed for fear of ministering too much to my self-conceit. At any rate, I would have given much to have seen it all—to have witnessed the gradual change, and watched the progress of her esteem and friendship for me, and whatever warmer feeling she might have; to have seen how much of love there was in her regard, and how it had grown upon her in spite of her virtuous resolutions and strenuous exertions to—but no, I had no right to see it: all this was too sacred for any eyes but her own, and she had done well to keep it from me.

CHAPTER XLV

Well, Halford, what do you think of all this? and while you read it, did you ever picture to yourself what my feelings would probably be during its perusal? Most likely not; but I am not going to descant upon them now: I will only make this acknowledgment, little honourable as it may be to human nature, and especially to myself,—that the former half of the narrative was, to me, more painful than the latter, not that I was at all insensible to Mrs. Huntingdon's wrongs or unmoved by her sufferings, but, I must confess, I felt a kind of selfish gratification in watching her husband's gradual decline in her good graces, and seeing how completely he extinguished all her affection at last. The effect of the whole, however, in spite of all my sympathy for her, and my fury against him, was to relieve my mind of an intolerable burden, and fill my heart with joy, as if some friend had roused me from a dreadful nightmare.

It was now near eight o'clock in the morning, for my candle had expired in the midst of my perusal, leaving me no alternative but to get another, at the expense of alarming the house, or to go to bed, and wait the return of daylight. On my mother's account, I chose the latter; but how willingly I sought my pillow, and how much sleep it brought me, I leave you to imagine.

At the first appearance of dawn, I rose, and brought the manuscript to the window, but it was impossible to read it yet. I devoted half an hour to dressing, and then returned to it again. Now, with a little difficulty, I could manage; and with intense and eager interest, I devoured the remainder of its contents. When it was ended, and my transient regret at its abrupt conclusion was over, I opened the window and put out my head to catch the cooling breeze, and imbibe deep draughts of the pure morning air. A splendid morning it was; the half-frozen dew lay thick on the grass, the swallows were twittering round me, the rooks cawing, and cows lowing in the distance; and early frost and summer sunshine mingled their sweetness in the air. But I did not think of that: a confusion of countless thoughts and varied emotions crowded upon me while I gazed abstractedly on the lovely face of nature. Soon, however, this chaos of thoughts and passions cleared away, giving place to two distinct emotions: joy unspeakable that my adored Helen was all I wished to think her—that through the noisome vapours of the world's aspersions and my own fancied convictions, her character shone bright, and clear, and stainless as that sun I could not bear to look on; and shame and deep remorse for my own conduct.

Immediately after breakfast I hurried over to Wildfell Hall. Rachel had risen many degrees in my estimation since yesterday. I was ready to greet her quite as an old friend; but every kindly impulse was checked by the look of cold distrust she cast upon me on opening the door. The old virgin had constituted herself the guardian of her lady's

honour, I suppose, and doubtless she saw in me another Mr. Hargrave, only the more dangerous in being more esteemed and trusted by her mistress.

'Missis can't see any one to-day, sir—she's poorly,' said she, in answer to my inquiry for Mrs. Graham.

'But I must see her, Rachel,' said I, placing my hand on the door to prevent its being shut against me.

'Indeed, sir, you can't,' replied she, settling her countenance in still more iron frigidity than before.

'Be so good as to announce me.'

'It's no manner of use, Mr. Markham; she's poorly, I tell you.'

Just in time to prevent me from committing the impropriety of taking the citadel by storm, and pushing forward unannounced, an inner door opened, and little Arthur appeared with his frolicsome playfellow, the dog. He seized my hand between both his, and smilingly drew me forward.

'Mamma says you're to come in, Mr. Markham,' said he, 'and I am to go out and play with Rover.'

Rachel retired with a sigh, and I stepped into the parlour and shut the door. There, before the fire-place, stood the tall, graceful figure, wasted with many sorrows. I cast the manuscript on the table, and looked in her face. Anxious and pale, it was turned towards me; her clear, dark eyes were fixed on mine with a gaze so intensely earnest that they bound me like a spell.

'Have you looked it over?' she murmured. The spell was broken.

'I've read it through,' said I, advancing into the room,—'and I want to know if you'll forgive me—if you can forgive me?'

She did not answer, but her eyes glistened, and a faint red mantled on her lip and cheek. As I approached, she abruptly turned away, and went to the window. It was not in anger, I was well assured, but only to conceal or control her emotion. I therefore ventured to follow and stand beside her there,—but not to speak. She gave me her hand, without turning her head, and murmured in a voice she strove in vain to steady,—'Can you forgive me?'

It might be deemed a breach of trust, I thought, to convey that lily hand to my lips, so I only gently pressed it between my own, and smilingly replied,—'I hardly can. You should have told me this before. It shows a want of confidence—'

'Oh, no,' cried she, eagerly interrupting me; 'it was not that. It was no want of confidence in you; but if I had told you anything of my history, I must have told you all, in order to excuse my conduct; and I might well shrink from such a disclosure, till necessity obliged me to make it. But you forgive me?—I have done very, very wrong, I know; but, as usual, I have reaped the bitter fruits of my own error,—and must reap them to the end.'

Bitter, indeed, was the tone of anguish, repressed by resolute firmness, in which this was spoken. Now, I raised her hand to my lips, and fervently kissed it again and again; for tears prevented any other reply. She suffered these wild caresses without resistance or resentment; then, suddenly turning from me, she paced twice or thrice through the room. I knew by the contraction of her brow, the tight compression of her lips, and wringing of her hands, that meantime a violent conflict between reason and passion was silently passing within. At length she paused before the empty fire-place, and turning to me, said calmly—if that might be called calmness which was so evidently the result of a violent effort,—'Now, Gilbert, you must leave me—not this moment, but soon—and you must never come again.'

'Never again, Helen? just when I love you more than ever.'

'For that very reason, if it be so, we should not meet again. I thought this interview was necessary—at least, I persuaded myself it was so—that we might severally ask and receive each other's pardon for the past; but there can be no excuse for another. I shall leave this place, as soon as I have means to seek another asylum; but our intercourse must end here.'

'End here!' echoed I; and approaching the high, carved chimney-piece, I leant my hand against its heavy mouldings, and dropped my forehead upon it in silent, sullen despondency.

'You must not come again,' continued she. There was a slight tremor in her voice, but I thought her whole manner was provokingly composed, considering the dreadful sentence she pronounced. 'You must know why I tell you so,' she resumed; 'and you must see that it is better to part at once: —if it be hard to say adieu for ever, you ought to help me.' She paused. I did not answer. 'Will you promise not to come?—if you won't,

and if you do come here again, you will drive me away before I know where to find another place of refuge—or how to seek it.'

'Helen,' said I, turning impatiently towards her, 'I cannot discuss the matter of eternal separation calmly and dispassionately as you can do. It is no question of mere expedience with me; it is a question of life and death!'

She was silent. Her pale lips quivered, and her fingers trembled with agitation, as she nervously entwined them in the hair-chain to which was appended her small gold watch—the only thing of value she had permitted herself to keep. I had said an unjust and cruel thing; but I must needs follow it up with something worse.

'But, Helen!' I began in a soft, low tone, not daring to raise my eyes to her face, 'that man is not your husband: in the sight of heaven he has forfeited all claim to—' She seized my arm with a grasp of startling energy.

'Gilbert, don't!' she cried, in a tone that would have pierced a heart of adamant. 'For God's sake, don't you attempt these arguments! No fiend could torture me like this!'

'I won't, I won't!' said I, gently laying my hand on hers; almost as much alarmed at her vehemence as ashamed of my own misconduct.

'Instead of acting like a true friend,' continued she, breaking from me, and throwing herself into the old arm-chair, 'and helping me with all your might—or rather taking your own part in the struggle of right against passion—you leave all the burden to me;—and not satisfied with that, you do your utmost to fight against me—when you know that!—' she paused, and hid her face in her handkerchief.

'Forgive me, Helen!' pleaded I. 'I will never utter another word on the subject. But may we not still meet as friends?'

'It will not do,' she replied, mournfully shaking her head; and then she raised her eyes to mine, with a mildly reproachful look that seemed to say, 'You must know that as well as I.'

'Then what must we do?' cried I, passionately. But immediately I added in a quieter tone—'I'll do whatever you desire; only don't say that this meeting is to be our last.'

'And why not? Don't you know that every time we meet the thoughts of the final parting will become more painful? Don't you feel that every interview makes us dearer to each other than the last?'

The utterance of this last question was hurried and low, and the downcast eyes and burning blush too plainly showed that she, at least, had felt it. It was scarcely prudent to make such an admission, or to add—as she presently did—'I have power to bid you go, now: another time it might be different,'—but I was not base enough to attempt to take advantage of her candour.

'But we may write,' I timidly suggested. 'You will not deny me that consolation?'

'We can hear of each other through my brother.'

'Your brother!' A pang of remorse and shame shot through me. She had not heard of the injury he had sustained at my hands; and I had not the courage to tell her. 'Your brother will not help us,' I said: 'he would have all communion between us to be entirely at an end.'

'And he would be right, I suppose. As a friend of both, he would wish us both well; and every friend would tell us it was our interest, as well as our duty, to forget each other, though we might not see it ourselves. But don't be afraid, Gilbert,' she added, smiling sadly at my manifest discomposure; 'there is little chance of my forgetting you. But I did not mean that Frederick should be the means of transmitting messages between us—only that each might know, through him, of the other's welfare;—and more than this ought not to be: for you are young, Gilbert, and you ought to marry—and will some time, though you may think it impossible now: and though I hardly can say I wish you to forget me, I know it is right that you should, both for your own happiness, and that of your future wife;—and therefore I must and will wish it,' she added resolutely.

'And you are young too, Helen,' I boldly replied; 'and when that profligate scoundrel has run through his career, you will give your hand to me—I'll wait till then.'

But she would not leave me this support. Independently of the moral evil of basing our hopes upon the death of another, who, if unfit for this world, was at least no less so for the next, and whose amelioration would thus become our bane and his greatest transgression our greatest benefit,—she maintained it to be madness: many men of Mr. Huntingdon's habits had lived to a ripe though miserable old age. 'And if I,' said she, 'am young in years, I am old in sorrow; but even if trouble should fail to kill me before vice destroys him, think, if he reached but fifty years or so, would you wait twenty or fifteen—in vague uncertainty and suspense—through all the prime of youth and manhood—and marry at last a woman faded and worn as I shall be—without ever having seen me from this day to that?—You would not,' she continued, interrupting my earnest protestations of unfailing constancy,—'or if you would, you should not. Trust me,

Gilbert; in this matter I know better than you. You think me cold and stony-hearted, and you may, but—'

'I don't, Helen.'

'Well, never mind: you might if you would: but I have not spent my solitude in utter idleness, and I am not speaking now from the impulse of the moment, as you do. I have thought of all these matters again and again; I have argued these questions with myself, and pondered well our past, and present, and future career; and, believe me, I have come to the right conclusion at last. Trust my words rather than your own feelings now, and in a few years you will see that I was right—though at present I hardly can see it myself,' she murmured with a sigh as she rested her head on her hand. 'And don't argue against me any more: all you can say has been already said by my own heart and refuted by my reason. It was hard enough to combat those suggestions as they were whispered within me; in your mouth they are ten times worse, and if you knew how much they pain me you would cease at once, I know. If you knew my present feelings, you would even try to relieve them at the expense of your own.'

'I will go—in a minute, if that can relieve you—and never return!' said I, with bitter emphasis. 'But, if we may never meet, and never hope to meet again, is it a crime to exchange our thoughts by letter? May not kindred spirits meet, and mingle in communion, whatever be the fate and circumstances of their earthly tenements?'

'They may, they may!' cried she, with a momentary burst of glad enthusiasm. 'I thought of that too, Gilbert, but I feared to mention it, because I feared you would not understand my views upon the subject. I fear it even now—I fear any kind friend would tell us we are both deluding ourselves with the idea of keeping up a spiritual intercourse without hope or prospect of anything further—without fostering vain regrets and hurtful aspirations, and feeding thoughts that should be sternly and pitilessly left to perish of inanition.'

'Never mind our kind friends: if they can part our bodies, it is enough; in God's name, let them not sunder our souls!' cried I, in terror lest she should deem it her duty to deny us this last remaining consolation.

'But no letters can pass between us here,' said she, 'without giving fresh food for scandal; and when I departed, I had intended that my new abode should be unknown to you as to the rest of the world; not that I should doubt your word if you promised not to visit me, but I thought you would be more tranquil in your own mind if you knew you could not do it, and likely to find less difficulty in abstracting yourself from me if you could not picture my situation to your mind. But listen,' said she, smilingly putting up

her finger to check my impatient reply: 'in six months you shall hear from Frederick precisely where I am; and if you still retain your wish to write to me, and think you can maintain a correspondence all thought, all spirit—such as disembodied souls or unimpassioned friends, at least, might hold,—write, and I will answer you.'

'Six months!'

'Yes, to give your present ardour time to cool, and try the truth and constancy of your soul's love for mine. And now, enough has been said between us. Why can't we part at once?' exclaimed she, almost wildly, after a moment's pause, as she suddenly rose from her chair, with her hands resolutely clasped together. I thought it was my duty to go without delay; and I approached and half extended my hand as if to take leave—she grasped it in silence. But this thought of final separation was too intolerable: it seemed to squeeze the blood out of my heart; and my feet were glued to the floor.

'And must we never meet again?' I murmured, in the anguish of my soul.

'We shall meet in heaven. Let us think of that,' said she in a tone of desperate calmness; but her eyes glittered wildly, and her face was deadly pale.

'But not as we are now,' I could not help replying. 'It gives me little consolation to think I shall next behold you as a disembodied spirit, or an altered being, with a frame perfect and glorious, but not like this!—and a heart, perhaps, entirely estranged from me.'

'No, Gilbert, there is perfect love in heaven!'

'So perfect, I suppose, that it soars above distinctions, and you will have no closer sympathy with me than with any one of the ten thousand thousand angels and the innumerable multitude of happy spirits round us.'

'Whatever I am, you will be the same, and, therefore, cannot possibly regret it; and whatever that change may be we know it must be for the better.'

'But if I am to be so changed that I shall cease to adore you with my whole heart and soul, and love you beyond every other creature, I shall not be myself; and though, if ever I win heaven at all, I must, I know, be infinitely better and happier than I am now, my earthly nature cannot rejoice in the anticipation of such beatitude, from which itself and its chief joy must be excluded.'

'Is your love all earthly, then?'

‘No, but I am supposing we shall have no more intimate communion with each other than with the rest.’

‘If so, it will be because we love them more, and not each other less. Increase of love brings increase of happiness, when it is mutual, and pure as that will be.’

‘But can you, Helen, contemplate with delight this prospect of losing me in a sea of glory?’

‘I own I cannot; but we know not that it will be so;—and I do know that to regret the exchange of earthly pleasures for the joys of heaven, is as if the grovelling caterpillar should lament that it must one day quit the nibbled leaf to soar aloft and flutter through the air, roving at will from flower to flower, sipping sweet honey from their cups, or basking in their sunny petals. If these little creatures knew how great a change awaited them, no doubt they would regret it; but would not all such sorrow be misplaced? And if that illustration will not move you, here is another:—We are children now; we feel as children, and we understand as children; and when we are told that men and women do not play with toys, and that our companions will one day weary of the trivial sports and occupations that interest them and us so deeply now, we cannot help being saddened at the thoughts of such an alteration, because we cannot conceive that as we grow up our own minds will become so enlarged and elevated that we ourselves shall then regard as trifling those objects and pursuits we now so fondly cherish, and that, though our companions will no longer join us in those childish pastimes, they will drink with us at other fountains of delight, and mingle their souls with ours in higher aims and nobler occupations beyond our present comprehension, but not less deeply relished or less truly good for that, while yet both we and they remain essentially the same individuals as before. But, Gilbert, can you really derive no consolation from the thought that we may meet together where there is no more pain and sorrow, no more striving against sin, and struggling of the spirit against the flesh; where both will behold the same glorious truths, and drink exalted and supreme felicity from the same fountain of light and goodness—that Being whom both will worship with the same intensity of holy ardour—and where pure and happy creatures both will love with the same divine affection? If you cannot, never write to me!’

‘Helen, I can! if faith would never fail.’

‘Now, then,’ exclaimed she, ‘while this hope is strong within us—’

‘We will part,’ I cried. ‘You shall not have the pain of another effort to dismiss me. I will go at once; but—’

I did not put my request in words: she understood it instinctively, and this time she yielded too—or rather, there was nothing so deliberate as requesting or yielding in the matter: there was a sudden impulse that neither could resist. One moment I stood and looked into her face, the next I held her to my heart, and we seemed to grow together in a close embrace from which no physical or mental force could rend us. A whispered 'God bless you!' and 'Go—go!' was all she said; but while she spoke she held me so fast that, without violence, I could not have obeyed her. At length, however, by some heroic effort, we tore ourselves apart, and I rushed from the house.

I have a confused remembrance of seeing little Arthur running up the garden-walk to meet me, and of bolting over the wall to avoid him—and subsequently running down the steep fields, clearing the stone fences and hedges as they came in my way, till I got completely out of sight of the old hall and down to the bottom of the hill; and then of long hours spent in bitter tears and lamentations, and melancholy musings in the lonely valley, with the eternal music in my ears, of the west wind rushing through the overshadowing trees, and the brook babbling and gurgling along its stony bed; my eyes, for the most part, vacantly fixed on the deep, chequered shades restlessly playing over the bright sunny grass at my feet, where now and then a withered leaf or two would come dancing to share the revelry; but my heart was away up the hill in that dark room where she was weeping desolate and alone—she whom I was not to comfort, not to see again, till years or suffering had overcome us both, and torn our spirits from their perishing abodes of clay.

There was little business done that day, you may be sure. The farm was abandoned to the labourers, and the labourers were left to their own devices. But one duty must be attended to; I had not forgotten my assault upon Frederick Lawrence; and I must see him to apologise for the unhappy deed. I would fain have put it off till the morrow; but what if he should denounce me to his sister in the meantime? No, no! I must ask his pardon to-day, and entreat him to be lenient in his accusation, if the revelation must be made. I deferred it, however, till the evening, when my spirits were more composed, and when—oh, wonderful perversity of human nature!—some faint germs of indefinite hopes were beginning to rise in my mind; not that I intended to cherish them, after all that had been said on the subject, but there they must lie for a while, uncrushed though not encouraged, till I had learnt to live without them.

Arrived at Woodford, the young squire's abode, I found no little difficulty in obtaining admission to his presence. The servant that opened the door told me his master was very ill, and seemed to think it doubtful whether he would be able to see me. I was not going to be baulked, however. I waited calmly in the hall to be announced, but inwardly determined to take no denial. The message was such as I expected—a polite intimation that Mr. Lawrence could see no one; he was feverish, and must not be disturbed.

‘I shall not disturb him long,’ said I; ‘but I must see him for a moment: it is on business of importance that I wish to speak to him.’

‘I’ll tell him, sir,’ said the man. And I advanced further into the hall and followed him nearly to the door of the apartment where his master was—for it seemed he was not in bed. The answer returned was that Mr. Lawrence hoped I would be so good as to leave a message or a note with the servant, as he could attend to no business at present.

‘He may as well see me as you,’ said I; and, stepping past the astonished footman, I boldly rapped at the door, entered, and closed it behind me. The room was spacious and handsomely furnished—very comfortably, too, for a bachelor. A clear, red fire was burning in the polished grate: a superannuated greyhound, given up to idleness and good living, lay basking before it on the thick, soft rug, on one corner of which, beside the sofa, sat a smart young springer, looking wistfully up in its master’s face—perhaps asking permission to share his couch, or, it might be, only soliciting a caress from his hand or a kind word from his lips. The invalid himself looked very interesting as he lay reclining there, in his elegant dressing-gown, with a silk handkerchief bound across his temples. His usually pale face was flushed and feverish; his eyes were half closed, until he became sensible of my presence—and then he opened them wide enough: one hand was thrown listlessly over the back of the sofa, and held a small volume, with which, apparently, he had been vainly attempting to beguile the weary hours. He dropped it, however, in his start of indignant surprise as I advanced into the room and stood before him on the rug. He raised himself on his pillows, and gazed upon me with equal degrees of nervous horror, anger, and amazement depicted on his countenance.

‘Mr. Markham, I scarcely expected this!’ he said; and the blood left his cheek as he spoke.

‘I know you didn’t,’ answered I; ‘but be quiet a minute, and I’ll tell you what I came for.’ Unthinkingly, I advanced a step or two nearer. He winced at my approach, with an expression of aversion and instinctive physical fear anything but conciliatory to my feelings. I stepped back, however.

‘Make your story a short one,’ said he, putting his hand on the small silver bell that stood on the table beside him, ‘or I shall be obliged to call for assistance. I am in no state to bear your brutalities now, or your presence either.’ And in truth the moisture started from his pores and stood on his pale forehead like dew.

Such a reception was hardly calculated to diminish the difficulties of my unenviable task. It must be performed however, in some fashion; and so I plunged into it at once, and floundered through it as I could.

'The truth is, Lawrence,' said I, 'I have not acted quite correctly towards you of late—especially on this last occasion; and I'm come to—in short, to express my regret for what has been done, and to beg your pardon. If you don't choose to grant it,' I added hastily, not liking the aspect of his face, 'it's no matter; only I've done my duty—that's all.'

'It's easily done,' replied he, with a faint smile bordering on a sneer: 'to abuse your friend and knock him on the head without any assignable cause, and then tell him the deed was not quite correct, but it's no matter whether he pardons it or not.'

'I forgot to tell you that it was in consequence of a mistake,'—muttered I. 'I should have made a very handsome apology, but you provoked me so confoundedly with your—. Well, I suppose it's my fault. The fact is, I didn't know that you were Mrs. Graham's brother, and I saw and heard some things respecting your conduct towards her which were calculated to awaken unpleasant suspicions, that, allow me to say, a little candour and confidence on your part might have removed; and, at last, I chanced to overhear a part of a conversation between you and her that made me think I had a right to hate you.'

'And how came you to know that I was her brother?' asked he, in some anxiety.

'She told me herself. She told me all. She knew I might be trusted. But you needn't disturb yourself about that, Mr. Lawrence, for I've seen the last of her!'

'The last! Is she gone, then?'

'No; but she has bid adieu to me, and I have promised never to go near that house again while she inhabits it.' I could have groaned aloud at the bitter thoughts awakened by this turn in the discourse. But I only clenched my hands and stamped my foot upon the rug. My companion, however, was evidently relieved.

'You have done right,' he said, in a tone of unqualified approbation, while his face brightened into almost a sunny expression. 'And as for the mistake, I am sorry for both our sakes that it should have occurred. Perhaps you can forgive my want of candour, and remember, as some partial mitigation of the offence, how little encouragement to friendly confidence you have given me of late.'

‘Yes, yes—I remember it all: nobody can blame me more than I blame myself in my own heart; at any rate, nobody can regret more sincerely than I do the result of my brutality, as you rightly term it.’

‘Never mind that,’ said he, faintly smiling; ‘let us forget all unpleasant words on both sides, as well as deeds, and consign to oblivion everything that we have cause to regret. Have you any objection to take my hand, or you’d rather not?’ It trembled through weakness as he held it out, and dropped before I had time to catch it and give it a hearty squeeze, which he had not the strength to return.

‘How dry and burning your hand is, Lawrence,’ said I. ‘You are really ill, and I have made you worse by all this talk.’

‘Oh, it is nothing; only a cold got by the rain.’

‘My doing, too.’

‘Never mind that. But tell me, did you mention this affair to my sister?’

‘To confess the truth, I had not the courage to do so; but when you tell her, will you just say that I deeply regret it, and—?’

‘Oh, never fear! I shall say nothing against you, as long as you keep your good resolution of remaining aloof from her. She has not heard of my illness, then, that you are aware of?’

‘I think not.’

‘I’m glad of that, for I have been all this time tormenting myself with the fear that somebody would tell her I was dying, or desperately ill, and she would be either distressing herself on account of her inability to hear from me or do me any good, or perhaps committing the madness of coming to see me. I must contrive to let her know something about it, if I can,’ continued he, reflectively, ‘or she will be hearing some such story. Many would be glad to tell her such news, just to see how she would take it; and then she might expose herself to fresh scandal.’

‘I wish I had told her,’ said I. ‘If it were not for my promise, I would tell her now.’

‘By no means! I am not dreaming of that;—but if I were to write a short note, now, not mentioning you, Markham, but just giving a slight account of my illness, by way of excuse for my not coming to see her, and to put her on her guard against any

exaggerated reports she may hear,—and address it in a disguised hand—would you do me the favour to slip it into the post-office as you pass? for I dare not trust any of the servants in such a case.'

Most willingly I consented, and immediately brought him his desk. There was little need to disguise his hand, for the poor fellow seemed to have considerable difficulty in writing at all, so as to be legible. When the note was done, I thought it time to retire, and took leave, after asking if there was anything in the world I could do for him, little or great, in the way of alleviating his sufferings, and repairing the injury I had done.

'No,' said he; 'you have already done much towards it; you have done more for me than the most skilful physician could do: for you have relieved my mind of two great burdens—anxiety on my sister's account, and deep regret upon your own: for I do believe these two sources of torment have had more effect in working me up into a fever than anything else; and I am persuaded I shall soon recover now. There is one more thing you can do for me, and that is, come and see me now and then—for you see I am very lonely here, and I promise your entrance shall not be disputed again.'

I engaged to do so, and departed with a cordial pressure of the hand. I posted the letter on my way home, most manfully resisting the temptation of dropping in a word from myself at the same time.

CHAPTER XLVI

I felt strongly tempted, at times, to enlighten my mother and sister on the real character and circumstances of the persecuted tenant of Wildfell Hall, and at first I greatly regretted having omitted to ask that lady's permission to do so; but, on due reflection, I considered that if it were known to them, it could not long remain a secret to the Millwards and Wilsons, and such was my present appreciation of Eliza Millward's disposition, that, if once she got a clue to the story, I should fear she would soon find means to enlighten Mr. Huntingdon upon the place of his wife's retreat. I would therefore wait patiently till these weary six months were over, and then, when the fugitive had found another home, and I was permitted to write to her, I would beg to be allowed to clear her name from these vile calumnies: at present I must content myself with simply asserting that I knew them to be false, and would prove it some day, to the shame of those who slandered her. I don't think anybody believed me, but everybody soon learned to avoid insinuating a word against her, or even mentioning her name in my presence. They thought I was so madly infatuated by the seductions of that unhappy lady that I was determined to support her in the very face of reason; and meantime I grow insupportably morose and misanthropical from the idea that every one I met was harbouring unworthy thoughts of the supposed Mrs. Graham, and would express them if he dared. My poor mother was quite distressed about me; but I couldn't help it—at least I thought I could not, though sometimes I felt a pang of remorse for my undutiful conduct to her, and made an effort to amend, attended with some partial success; and indeed I was generally more humanised in my demeanour to her than to any one else, Mr. Lawrence excepted. Rose and Fergus usually shunned my presence; and it was well they did, for I was not fit company for them, nor they for me, under the present circumstances.

Mrs. Huntingdon did not leave Wildfell Hall till above two months after our farewell interview. During that time she never appeared at church, and I never went near the house: I only knew she was still there by her brother's brief answers to my many and varied inquiries respecting her. I was a very constant and attentive visitor to him throughout the whole period of his illness and convalescence; not only from the interest I took in his recovery, and my desire to cheer him up and make the utmost possible amends for my former 'brutality,' but from my growing attachment to himself, and the increasing pleasure I found in his society—partly from his increased cordiality to me, but chiefly on account of his close connection, both in blood and in affection, with my adored Helen. I loved him for it better than I liked to express: and I took a secret delight in pressing those slender white fingers, so marvellously like her own, considering he was not a woman, and in watching the passing changes in his fair, pale features, and observing the intonations of his voice, detecting resemblances which I wondered had never struck me before. He provoked me at times, indeed, by his evident reluctance to

talk to me about his sister, though I did not question the friendliness of his motives in wishing to discourage my remembrance of her.

His recovery was not quite so rapid as he had expected it to be; he was not able to mount his pony till a fortnight after the date of our reconciliation; and the first use he made of his returning strength was to ride over by night to Wildfell Hall, to see his sister. It was a hazardous enterprise both for him and for her, but he thought it necessary to consult with her on the subject of her projected departure, if not to calm her apprehensions respecting his health, and the worst result was a slight relapse of his illness, for no one knew of the visit but the inmates of the old Hall, except myself; and I believe it had not been his intention to mention it to me, for when I came to see him the next day, and observed he was not so well as he ought to have been, he merely said he had caught cold by being out too late in the evening.

'You'll never be able to see your sister, if you don't take care of yourself,' said I, a little provoked at the circumstance on her account, instead of commiserating him.

'I've seen her already,' said he, quietly.

'You've seen her!' cried I, in astonishment.

'Yes.' And then he told me what considerations had impelled him to make the venture, and with what precautions he had made it.

'And how was she?' I eagerly asked.

'As usual,' was the brief though sad reply.

'As usual—that is, far from happy and far from strong.'

'She is not positively ill,' returned he; 'and she will recover her spirits in a while, I have no doubt—but so many trials have been almost too much for her. How threatening those clouds look,' continued he, turning towards the window. 'We shall have thunder-showers before night, I imagine, and they are just in the midst of stacking my corn. Have you got yours all in yet?'

'No. And, Lawrence, did she—did your sister mention me?'

'She asked if I had seen you lately.'

'And what else did she say?'

‘I cannot tell you all she said,’ replied he, with a slight smile; ‘for we talked a good deal, though my stay was but short; but our conversation was chiefly on the subject of her intended departure, which I begged her to delay till I was better able to assist her in her search after another home.’

‘But did she say no more about me?’

‘She did not say much about you, Markham. I should not have encouraged her to do so, had she been inclined; but happily she was not: she only asked a few questions concerning you, and seemed satisfied with my brief answers, wherein she showed herself wiser than her friend; and I may tell you, too, that she seemed to be far more anxious lest you should think too much of her, than lest you should forget her.’

‘She was right.’

‘But I fear your anxiety is quite the other way respecting her.’

‘No, it is not: I wish her to be happy; but I don’t wish her to forget me altogether. She knows it is impossible that I should forget her; and she is right to wish me not to remember her too well. I should not desire her to regret me too deeply; but I can scarcely imagine she will make herself very unhappy about me, because I know I am not worthy of it, except in my appreciation of her.’

‘You are neither of you worthy of a broken heart,—nor of all the sighs, and tears, and sorrowful thoughts that have been, and I fear will be, wasted upon you both; but, at present, each has a more exalted opinion of the other than, I fear, he or she deserves; and my sister’s feelings are naturally full as keen as yours, and I believe more constant; but she has the good sense and fortitude to strive against them in this particular; and I trust she will not rest till she has entirely weaned her thoughts—‘ he hesitated.

‘From me,’ said I.

‘And I wish you would make the like exertions,’ continued he.

‘Did she tell you that that was her intention?’

‘No; the question was not broached between us: there was no necessity for it, for I had no doubt that such was her determination.’

‘To forget me?’

‘Yes, Markham! Why not?’

‘Oh, well!’ was my only audible reply; but I internally answered,—‘No, Lawrence, you’re wrong there: she is not determined to forget me. It would be wrong to forget one so deeply and fondly devoted to her, who can so thoroughly appreciate her excellencies, and sympathise with all her thoughts, as I can do, and it would be wrong in me to forget so excellent and divine a piece of God’s creation as she, when I have once so truly loved and known her.’ But I said no more to him on that subject. I instantly started a new topic of conversation, and soon took leave of my companion, with a feeling of less cordiality towards him than usual. Perhaps I had no right to be annoyed at him, but I was so nevertheless.

In little more than a week after this I met him returning from a visit to the Wilsons’; and I now resolved to do him a good turn, though at the expense of his feelings, and perhaps at the risk of incurring that displeasure which is so commonly the reward of those who give disagreeable information, or tender their advice unasked. In this, believe me, I was actuated by no motives of revenge for the occasional annoyances I had lately sustained from him,—nor yet by any feeling of malevolent enmity towards Miss Wilson, but purely by the fact that I could not endure that such a woman should be Mrs. Huntingdon’s sister, and that, as well for his own sake as for hers, I could not bear to think of his being deceived into a union with one so unworthy of him, and so utterly unfitted to be the partner of his quiet home, and the companion of his life. He had had uncomfortable suspicions on that head himself, I imagined; but such was his inexperience, and such were the lady’s powers of attraction, and her skill in bringing them to bear upon his young imagination, that they had not disturbed him long; and I believe the only effectual causes of the vacillating indecision that had preserved him hitherto from making an actual declaration of love, was the consideration of her connections, and especially of her mother, whom he could not abide. Had they lived at a distance, he might have surmounted the objection, but within two or three miles of Woodford it was really no light matter.

‘You’ve been to call on the Wilsons, Lawrence,’ said I, as I walked beside his pony.

‘Yes,’ replied he, slightly averting his face: ‘I thought it but civil to take the first opportunity of returning their kind attentions, since they have been so very particular and constant in their inquiries throughout the whole course of my illness.’

‘It’s all Miss Wilson’s doing.’

‘And if it is,’ returned he, with a very perceptible blush, ‘is that any reason why I should not make a suitable acknowledgment?’

‘It is a reason why you should not make the acknowledgment she looks for.’

‘Let us drop that subject if you please,’ said he, in evident displeasure.

‘No, Lawrence, with your leave we’ll continue it a while longer; and I’ll tell you something, now we’re about it, which you may believe or not as you choose—only please to remember that it is not my custom to speak falsely, and that in this case I can have no motive for misrepresenting the truth—’

‘Well, Markham, what now?’

‘Miss Wilson hates your sister. It may be natural enough that, in her ignorance of the relationship, she should feel some degree of enmity against her, but no good or amiable woman would be capable of evincing that bitter, cold-blooded, designing malice towards a fancied rival that I have observed in her.’

‘Markham!’

‘Yes—and it is my belief that Eliza Millward and she, if not the very originators of the slanderous reports that have been propagated, were designedly the encouragers and chief disseminators of them. She was not desirous to mix up your name in the matter, of course, but her delight was, and still is, to blacken your sister’s character to the utmost of her power, without risking too greatly the exposure of her own malevolence!’

‘I cannot believe it,’ interrupted my companion, his face burning with indignation.

‘Well, as I cannot prove it, I must content myself with asserting that it is so to the best of my belief; but as you would not willingly marry Miss Wilson if it were so, you will do well to be cautious, till you have proved it to be otherwise.’

‘I never told you, Markham, that I intended to marry Miss Wilson,’ said he, proudly.

‘No, but whether you do or not, she intends to marry you.’

‘Did she tell you so?’

‘No, but—’

‘Then you have no right to make such an assertion respecting her.’ He slightly quickened his pony’s pace, but I laid my hand on its mane, determined he should not leave me yet.

‘Wait a moment, Lawrence, and let me explain myself; and don’t be so very—I don’t know what to call it—inaccessible as you are.—I know what you think of Jane Wilson; and I believe I know how far you are mistaken in your opinion: you think she is singularly charming, elegant, sensible, and refined: you are not aware that she is selfish, cold-hearted, ambitious, artful, shallow-minded—’

‘Enough, Markham—enough!’

‘No; let me finish:—you don’t know that, if you married her, your home would be rayless and comfortless; and it would break your heart at last to find yourself united to one so wholly incapable of sharing your tastes, feelings, and ideas—so utterly destitute of sensibility, good feeling, and true nobility of soul.’

‘Have you done?’ asked my companion quietly.

‘Yes;—I know you hate me for my impertinence, but I don’t care if it only conduces to preserve you from that fatal mistake.’

‘Well!’ returned he, with a rather wintry smile—‘I’m glad you have overcome or forgotten your own afflictions so far as to be able to study so deeply the affairs of others, and trouble your head so unnecessarily about the fancied or possible calamities of their future life.’

We parted—somewhat coldly again: but still we did not cease to be friends; and my well-meant warning, though it might have been more judiciously delivered, as well as more thankfully received, was not wholly unproductive of the desired effect: his visit to the Wilsons was not repeated, and though, in our subsequent interviews, he never mentioned her name to me, nor I to him,—I have reason to believe he pondered my words in his mind, eagerly though covertly sought information respecting the fair lady from other quarters, secretly compared my character of her with what he had himself observed and what he heard from others, and finally came to the conclusion that, all things considered, she had much better remain Miss Wilson of Ryecote Farm than be transmuted into Mrs. Lawrence of Woodford Hall. I believe, too, that he soon learned to contemplate with secret amazement his former predilection, and to congratulate himself on the lucky escape he had made; but he never confessed it to me, or hinted one word of acknowledgment for the part I had had in his deliverance, but this was not surprising to any one that knew him as I did.

As for Jane Wilson, she, of course, was disappointed and embittered by the sudden cold neglect and ultimate desertion of her former admirer. Had I done wrong to blight her cherished hopes? I think not; and certainly my conscience has never accused me, from that day to this, of any evil design in the matter.

CHAPTER XLVII

One morning, about the beginning of November, while I was inditing some business letters, shortly after breakfast, Eliza Millward came to call upon my sister. Rose had neither the discrimination nor the virulence to regard the little demon as I did, and they still preserved their former intimacy. At the moment of her arrival, however, there was no one in the room but Fergus and myself, my mother and sister being both of them absent, 'on household cares intent'; but I was not going to lay myself out for her amusement, whoever else might so incline: I merely honoured her with a careless salutation and a few words of course, and then went on with my writing, leaving my brother to be more polite if he chose. But she wanted to tease me.

'What a pleasure it is to find you at home, Mr. Markham!' said she, with a disingenuously malicious smile. 'I so seldom see you now, for you never come to the vicarage. Papa, is quite offended, I can tell you,' she added playfully, looking into my face with an impertinent laugh, as she seated herself, half beside and half before my desk, off the corner of the table.

'I have had a good deal to do of late,' said I, without looking up from my letter.

'Have you, indeed! Somebody said you had been strangely neglecting your business these last few months.'

'Somebody said wrong, for, these last two months especially, I have been particularly plodding and diligent.'

'Ah! well, there's nothing like active employment, I suppose, to console the afflicted;—and, excuse me, Mr. Markham, but you look so very far from well, and have been, by all accounts, so moody and thoughtful of late,—I could almost think you have some secret care preying on your spirits. Formerly,' said she timidly, 'I could have ventured to ask you what it was, and what I could do to comfort you: I dare not do it now.'

'You're very kind, Miss Eliza. When I think you can do anything to comfort me, I'll make bold to tell you.'

'Pray do!—I suppose I mayn't guess what it is that troubles you?'

'There's no necessity, for I'll tell you plainly. The thing that troubles me the most at present is a young lady sitting at my elbow, and preventing me from finishing my letter, and, thereafter, repairing to my daily business.'

Before she could reply to this ungallant speech, Rose entered the room; and Miss Eliza rising to greet her, they both seated themselves near the fire, where that idle lad Fergus was standing, leaning his shoulder against the corner of the chimney-piece, with his legs crossed and his hands in his breeches-pockets.

'Now, Rose, I'll tell you a piece of news—I hope you have not heard it before: for good, bad, or indifferent, one always likes to be the first to tell. It's about that sad Mrs. Graham—'

'Hush-sh-sh!' whispered Fergus, in a tone of solemn import. '"We never mention her; her name is never heard."' And glancing up, I caught him with his eye askance on me, and his finger pointed to his forehead; then, winking at the young lady with a doleful shake of the head, be whispered—'A monomania—but don't mention it—all right but that.'

'I should be sorry to injure any one's feelings,' returned she, speaking below her breath. 'Another time, perhaps.'

'Speak out, Miss Eliza!' said I, not deigning to notice the other's buffooneries: 'you needn't fear to say anything in my presence.'

'Well,' answered she, 'perhaps you know already that Mrs. Graham's husband is not really dead, and that she had run away from him?' I started, and felt my face glow; but I bent it over my letter, and went on folding it up as she proceeded. 'But perhaps you did not know that she is now gone back to him again, and that a perfect reconciliation has taken place between them? Only think,' she continued, turning to the confounded Rose, 'what a fool the man must be!'

'And who gave you this piece of intelligence, Miss Eliza?' said I, interrupting my sister's exclamations.

'I had it from a very authentic source.'

'From whom, may I ask?'

'From one of the servants at Woodford.'

'Oh! I was not aware that you were on such intimate terms with Mr. Lawrence's household.'

‘It was not from the man himself that I heard it, but he told it in confidence to our maid Sarah, and Sarah told it to me.’

‘In confidence, I suppose? And you tell it in confidence to us? But I can tell you that it is but a lame story after all, and scarcely one-half of it true.’

While I spoke I completed the sealing and direction of my letters, with a somewhat unsteady hand, in spite of all my efforts to retain composure, and in spite of my firm conviction that the story was a lame one—that the supposed Mrs. Graham, most certainly, had not voluntarily gone back to her husband, or dreamt of a reconciliation. Most likely she was gone away, and the tale-bearing servant, not knowing what was become of her, had conjectured that such was the case, and our fair visitor had detailed it as a certainty, delighted with such an opportunity of tormenting me. But it was possible—barely possible—that some one might have betrayed her, and she had been taken away by force. Determined to know the worst, I hastily pocketed my two letters, and muttered something about being too late for the post, left the room, rushed into the yard, and vociferously called for my horse. No one being there, I dragged him out of the stable myself, strapped the saddle on to his back and the bridle on to his head, mounted, and speedily galloped away to Woodford. I found its owner pensively strolling in the grounds.

‘Is your sister gone?’ were my first words as I grasped his hand, instead of the usual inquiry after his health.

‘Yes, she’s gone,’ was his answer, so calmly spoken that my terror was at once removed.

‘I suppose I mayn’t know where she is?’ said I, as I dismounted, and relinquished my horse to the gardener, who, being the only servant within call, had been summoned by his master, from his employment of raking up the dead leaves on the lawn, to take him to the stables.

My companion gravely took my arm, and leading me away to the garden, thus answered my question,—‘She is at Grassdale Manor, in —shire.’

‘Where?’ cried I, with a convulsive start.

‘At Grassdale Manor.’

‘How was it?’ I gasped. ‘Who betrayed her?’

‘She went of her own accord.’

‘Impossible, Lawrence! She could not be so frantic!’ exclaimed I, vehemently grasping his arm, as if to force him to unsay those hateful words.

‘She did,’ persisted he in the same grave, collected manner as before; ‘and not without reason,’ he continued, gently disengaging himself from my grasp. ‘Mr. Huntingdon is ill.’

‘And so she went to nurse him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fool!’ I could not help exclaiming, and Lawrence looked up with a rather reproachful glance. ‘Is he dying, then?’

‘I think not, Markham.’

‘And how many more nurses has he? How many ladies are there besides to take care of him?’

‘None; he was alone, or she would not have gone.’

‘Oh, confound it! This is intolerable!’

‘What is? That he should be alone?’

I attempted no reply, for I was not sure that this circumstance did not partly conduce to my distraction. I therefore continued to pace the walk in silent anguish, with my hand pressed to my forehead; then suddenly pausing and turning to my companion, I impatiently exclaimed, ‘Why did she take this infatuated step? What fiend persuaded her to it?’

‘Nothing persuaded her but her own sense of duty.’

‘Humbug!’

‘I was half inclined to say so myself, Markham, at first. I assure you it was not by my advice that she went, for I detest that man as fervently as you can do,—except, indeed, that his reformation would give me much greater pleasure than his death; but all I did was to inform her of the circumstance of his illness (the consequence of a fall from his

horse in hunting), and to tell her that that unhappy person, Miss Myers, had left him some time ago.'

'It was ill done! Now, when he finds the convenience of her presence, he will make all manner of lying speeches and false, fair promises for the future, and she will believe him, and then her condition will be ten times worse and ten times more irremediable than before.'

'There does not appear to be much ground for such apprehensions at present,' said he, producing a letter from his pocket. 'From the account I received this morning, I should say—'

It was her writing! By an irresistible impulse I held out my hand, and the words, 'Let me see it,' involuntarily passed my lips. He was evidently reluctant to grant the request, but while he hesitated I snatched it from his hand. Recollecting myself, however, the minute after, I offered to restore it.

'Here, take it,' said I, 'if you don't want me to read it.'

'No,' replied he, 'you may read it if you like.'

I read it, and so may you.

Grassdale, Nov. 4th.

Dear Frederick,—I know you will be anxious to hear from me, and I will tell you all I can. Mr. Huntingdon is very ill, but not dying, or in any immediate danger; and he is rather better at present than he was when I came. I found the house in sad confusion: Mrs. Greaves, Benson, every decent servant had left, and those that were come to supply their places were a negligent, disorderly set, to say no worse—I must change them again, if I stay. A professional nurse, a grim, hard old woman, had been hired to attend the wretched invalid. He suffers much, and has no fortitude to bear him through. The immediate injuries he sustained from the accident, however, were not very severe, and would, as the doctor says, have been but trifling to a man of temperate habits, but with him it is very different. On the night of my arrival, when I first entered his room, he was lying in a kind of half delirium. He did not notice me till I spoke, and then he mistook me for another.

'Is it you, Alice, come again?' he murmured. 'What did you leave me for?'

'It is I, Arthur—it is Helen, your wife,' I replied.

‘My wife!’ said he, with a start. ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t mention her—I have none. Devil take her,’ he cried, a moment after, ‘and you, too! What did you do it for?’

I said no more; but observing that he kept gazing towards the foot of the bed, I went and sat there, placing the light so as to shine full upon me, for I thought he might be dying, and I wanted him to know me. For a long time he lay silently looking upon me, first with a vacant stare, then with a fixed gaze of strange growing intensity. At last he startled me by suddenly raising himself on his elbow and demanding in a horrified whisper, with his eyes still fixed upon me, ‘Who is it?’

‘It is Helen Huntingdon,’ said I, quietly rising at the same time, and removing to a less conspicuous position.

‘I must be going mad,’ cried he, ‘or something—delirious, perhaps; but leave me, whoever you are. I can’t bear that white face, and those eyes. For God’s sake go, and send me somebody else that doesn’t look like that!’

I went at once, and sent the hired nurse; but next morning I ventured to enter his chamber again, and, taking the nurse’s place by his bedside, I watched him and waited on him for several hours, showing myself as little as possible, and only speaking when necessary, and then not above my breath. At first he addressed me as the nurse, but, on my crossing the room to draw up the window-blinds, in obedience to his directions, he said, ‘No, it isn’t nurse; it’s Alice. Stay with me, do! That old hag will be the death of me.’

‘I mean to stay with you,’ said I. And after that he would call me Alice, or some other name almost equally repugnant to my feelings. I forced myself to endure it for a while, fearing a contradiction might disturb him too much; but when, having asked for a glass of water, while I held it to his lips, he murmured, ‘Thanks, dearest!’ I could not help distinctly observing, ‘You would not say so if you knew me,’ intending to follow that up with another declaration of my identity; but he merely muttered an incoherent reply, so I dropped it again, till some time after, when, as I was bathing his forehead and temples with vinegar and water to relieve the heat and pain in his head, he observed, after looking earnestly upon me for some minutes, ‘I have such strange fancies—I can’t get rid of them, and they won’t let me rest; and the most singular and pertinacious of them all is your face and voice—they seem just like hers. I could swear at this moment that she was by my side.’

‘She is,’ said I.

‘That seems comfortable,’ continued he, without noticing my words; ‘and while you do it, the other fancies fade away—but this only strengthens.—Go on—go on, till it vanishes, too. I can’t stand such a mania as this; it would kill me!’

‘It never will vanish,’ said I, distinctly, ‘for it is the truth!’

‘The truth!’ he cried, starting, as if an asp had stung him. ‘You don’t mean to say that you are really she?’

‘I do; but you needn’t shrink away from me, as if I were your greatest enemy: I am come to take care of you, and do what none of them would do.’

‘For God’s sake, don’t torment me now!’ cried he in pitiable agitation; and then he began to mutter bitter curses against me, or the evil fortune that had brought me there; while I put down the sponge and basin, and resumed my seat at the bed-side.

‘Where are they?’ said he: ‘have they all left me—servants and all?’

‘There are servants within call if you want them; but you had better lie down now and be quiet: none of them could or would attend you as carefully as I shall do.’

‘I can’t understand it at all,’ said he, in bewildered perplexity. ‘Was it a dream that—‘ and he covered his eyes with his hands, as if trying to unravel the mystery.

‘No, Arthur, it was not a dream, that your conduct was such as to oblige me to leave you; but I heard that you were ill and alone, and I am come back to nurse you. You need not fear to trust me: tell me all your wants, and I will try to satisfy them. There is no one else to care for you; and I shall not upbraid you now.’

‘Oh! I see,’ said he, with a bitter smile; ‘it’s an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me.’

‘No; I came to offer you that comfort and assistance your situation required; and if I could benefit your soul as well as your body, and awaken some sense of contrition and—’

‘Oh, yes; if you could overwhelm me with remorse and confusion of face, now’s the time. What have you done with my son?’

‘He is well, and you may see him some time, if you will compose yourself, but not now.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He is safe.’

‘Is he here?’

‘Wherever he is, you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please, if I should hereafter judge it necessary to remove him again. But we will talk of that to-morrow: you must be quiet now.’

‘No, let me see him now, I promise, if it must be so.’

‘No—’

‘I swear it, as God is in heaven! Now, then, let me see him.’

‘But I cannot trust your oaths and promises: I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness: but not to-day—to-morrow.’

‘No, to-day; now,’ persisted he: and he was in such a state of feverish excitement, and so bent upon the immediate gratification of his wish, that I thought it better to grant it at once, as I saw he would not rest till I did. But I was determined my son’s interest should not be forgotten; and having clearly written out the promise I wished Mr. Huntingdon to give upon a slip of paper, I deliberately read it over to him, and made him sign it in the presence of Rachel. He begged I would not insist upon this: it was a useless exposure of my want of faith in his word to the servant. I told him I was sorry, but since he had forfeited my confidence, he must take the consequence. He next pleaded inability to hold the pen. ‘Then we must wait until you can hold it,’ said I. Upon which he said he would try; but then he could not see to write. I placed my finger where the signature was to be, and told him he might write his name in the dark, if he only knew where to put it. But he had not power to form the letters. ‘In that case, you must be too ill to see the child,’ said I; and finding me inexorable, he at length managed to ratify the agreement; and I bade Rachel send the boy.

All this may strike you as harsh, but I felt I must not lose my present advantage, and my son’s future welfare should not be sacrificed to any mistaken tenderness for this man’s feelings. Little Arthur had not forgotten his father, but thirteen months of absence, during which he had seldom been permitted to hear a word about him, or hardly to whisper his name, had rendered him somewhat shy; and when he was ushered into the darkened room where the sick man lay, so altered from his former self, with fiercely

flushed face and wildly-gleaming eyes—he instinctively clung to me, and stood looking on his father with a countenance expressive of far more awe than pleasure.

'Come here, Arthur,' said the latter, extending his hand towards him. The child went, and timidly touched that burning hand, but almost started in alarm, when his father suddenly clutched his arm and drew him nearer to his side.

'Do you know me?' asked Mr. Huntingdon, intently perusing his features.

'Yes.'

'Who am I?'

'Papa.'

'Are you glad to see me?'

'Yes.'

'You're not!' replied the disappointed parent, relaxing his hold, and darting a vindictive glance at me.

Arthur, thus released, crept back to me and put his hand in mine. His father swore I had made the child hate him, and abused and cursed me bitterly. The instant he began I sent our son out of the room; and when he paused to breathe, I calmly assured him that he was entirely mistaken; I had never once attempted to prejudice his child against him.

'I did indeed desire him to forget you,' I said, 'and especially to forget the lessons you taught him; and for that cause, and to lessen the danger of discovery, I own I have generally discouraged his inclination to talk about you; but no one can blame me for that, I think.'

The invalid only replied by groaning aloud, and rolling his head on a pillow in a paroxysm of impatience.

'I am in hell, already!' cried he. 'This cursed thirst is burning my heart to ashes! Will nobody—?'

Before he could finish the sentence I had poured out a glass of some acidulated, cooling drink that was on the table, and brought it to him. He drank it greedily, but muttered, as I took away the glass,—'I suppose you're heaping coals of fire on my head, you think?'

Not noticing this speech, I asked if there was anything else I could do for him.

'Yes; I'll give you another opportunity of showing your Christian magnanimity,' sneered he: 'set my pillow straight, and these confounded bed-clothes.' I did so. 'There: now get me another glass of that slop.' I complied. 'This is delightful, isn't it?' said he with a malicious grin, as I held it to his lips; 'you never hoped for such a glorious opportunity?'

'Now, shall I stay with you?' said I, as I replaced the glass on the table: 'or will you be more quiet if I go and send the nurse?'

'Oh, yes, you're wondrous gentle and obliging! But you've driven me mad with it all!' responded he, with an impatient toss.

'I'll leave you, then,' said I; and I withdrew, and did not trouble him with my presence again that day, except for a minute or two at a time, just to see how he was and what he wanted.

Next morning the doctor ordered him to be bled; and after that he was more subdued and tranquil. I passed half the day in his room at different intervals. My presence did not appear to agitate or irritate him as before, and he accepted my services quietly, without any bitter remarks: indeed, he scarcely spoke at all, except to make known his wants, and hardly then. But on the morrow, that is to say, in proportion as he recovered from the state of exhaustion and stupefaction, his ill-nature appeared to revive.

'Oh, this sweet revenge!' cried he, when I had been doing all I could to make him comfortable and to remedy the carelessness of his nurse. 'And you can enjoy it with such a quiet conscience too, because it's all in the way of duty.'

'It is well for me that I am doing my duty,' said I, with a bitterness I could not repress, 'for it is the only comfort I have; and the satisfaction of my own conscience, it seems, is the only reward I need look for!'

He looked rather surprised at the earnestness of my manner.

'What reward did you look for?' he asked.

'You will think me a liar if I tell you; but I did hope to benefit you: as well to better your mind as to alleviate your present sufferings; but it appears I am to do neither; your own bad spirit will not let me. As far as you are concerned, I have sacrificed my own feelings,

and all the little earthly comfort that was left me, to no purpose; and every little thing I do for you is ascribed to self-righteous malice and refined revenge!'

'It's all very fine, I daresay,' said he, eyeing me with stupid amazement; 'and of course I ought to be melted to tears of penitence and admiration at the sight of so much generosity and superhuman goodness; but you see I can't manage it. However, pray do me all the good you can, if you do really find any pleasure in it; for you perceive I am almost as miserable just now as you need wish to see me. Since you came, I confess, I have had better attendance than before, for these wretches neglected me shamefully, and all my old friends seem to have fairly forsaken me. I've had a dreadful time of it, I assure you: I sometimes thought I should have died: do you think there's any chance?'

'There's always a chance of death; and it is always well to live with such a chance in view.'

'Yes, yes! but do you think there's any likelihood that this illness will have a fatal termination?'

'I cannot tell; but, supposing it should, how are you prepared to meet the event?'

'Why, the doctor told me I wasn't to think about it, for I was sure to get better if I stuck to his regimen and prescriptions.'

'I hope you may, Arthur; but neither the doctor nor I can speak with certainty in such a case; there is internal injury, and it is difficult to know to what extent.'

'There now! you want to scare me to death.'

'No; but I don't want to lull you to false security. If a consciousness of the uncertainty of life can dispose you to serious and useful thoughts, I would not deprive you of the benefit of such reflections, whether you do eventually recover or not. Does the idea of death appal you very much?'

'It's just the only thing I can't bear to think of; so if you've any—'

'But it must come some time,' interrupted I, 'and if it be years hence, it will as certainly overtake you as if it came to-day,—and no doubt be as unwelcome then as now, unless you—'

‘Oh, hang it! don’t torment me with your preachments now, unless you want to kill me outright. I can’t stand it, I tell you. I’ve sufferings enough without that. If you think there’s danger, save me from it; and then, in gratitude, I’ll hear whatever you like to say.’

I accordingly dropped the unwelcome topic. And now, Frederick, I think I may bring my letter to a close. From these details you may form your own judgment of the state of my patient, and of my own position and future prospects. Let me hear from you soon, and I will write again to tell you how we get on; but now that my presence is tolerated, and even required, in the sick-room, I shall have but little time to spare between my husband and my son,—for I must not entirely neglect the latter: it would not do to keep him always with Rachel, and I dare not leave him for a moment with any of the other servants, or suffer him to be alone, lest he should meet them. If his father get worse, I shall ask Esther Hargrave to take charge of him for a time, till I have reorganised the household at least; but I greatly prefer keeping him under my own eye.

I find myself in rather a singular position: I am exerting my utmost endeavours to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed, what shall I do? My duty, of course,—but how? No matter; I can perform the task that is before me now, and God will give me strength to do whatever He requires hereafter. Good-by, dear Frederick.

Helen Huntingdon.

‘What do you think of it?’ said Lawrence, as I silently refolded the letter.

‘It seems to me,’ returned I, ‘that she is casting her pearls before swine. May they be satisfied with trampling them under their feet, and not turn again and rend her! But I shall say no more against her: I see that she was actuated by the best and noblest motives in what she has done; and if the act is not a wise one, may heaven protect her from its consequences! May I keep this letter, Lawrence?—you see she has never once mentioned me throughout—or made the most distant allusion to me; therefore, there can be no impropriety or harm in it.’

‘And, therefore, why should you wish to keep it?’

‘Were not these characters written by her hand? and were not these words conceived in her mind, and many of them spoken by her lips?’

‘Well,’ said he. And so I kept it; otherwise, Halford, you could never have become so thoroughly acquainted with its contents.

‘And when you write,’ said I, ‘will you have the goodness to ask her if I may be permitted to enlighten my mother and sister on her real history and circumstance, just so far as is necessary to make the neighbourhood sensible of the shameful injustice they have done her? I want no tender messages, but just ask her that, and tell her it is the greatest favour she could do me; and tell her—no, nothing more. You see I know the address, and I might write to her myself, but I am so virtuous as to refrain.’

‘Well, I’ll do this for you, Markham.’

‘And as soon as you receive an answer, you’ll let me know?’

‘If all be well, I’ll come myself and tell you immediately.’

CHAPTER XLVIII

Five or six days after this Mr. Lawrence paid us the honour of a call; and when he and I were alone together—which I contrived as soon as possible by bringing him out to look at my cornstacks—he showed me another letter from his sister. This one he was quite willing to submit to my longing gaze; he thought, I suppose, it would do me good. The only answer it gave to my message was this:—

'Mr. Markham is at liberty to make such revelations concerning me as he judges necessary. He will know that I should wish but little to be said on the subject. I hope he is well; but tell him he must not think of me.'

I can give you a few extracts from the rest of the letter, for I was permitted to keep this also—perhaps, as an antidote to all pernicious hopes and fancies.

* * * * *

He is decidedly better, but very low from the depressing effects of his severe illness and the strict regimen he is obliged to observe—so opposite to all his previous habits. It is deplorable to see how completely his past life has degenerated his once noble constitution, and vitiated the whole system of his organization. But the doctor says he may now be considered out of danger, if he will only continue to observe the necessary restrictions. Some stimulating cordials he must have, but they should be judiciously diluted and sparingly used; and I find it very difficult to keep him to this. At first, his extreme dread of death rendered the task an easy one; but in proportion as he feels his acute suffering abating, and sees the danger receding, the more intractable he becomes. Now, also, his appetite for food is beginning to return; and here, too, his long habits of self-indulgence are greatly against him. I watch and restrain him as well as I can, and often get bitterly abused for my rigid severity; and sometimes he contrives to elude my vigilance, and sometimes acts in opposition to my will. But he is now so completely reconciled to my attendance in general that he is never satisfied when I am not by his side. I am obliged to be a little stiff with him sometimes, or he would make a complete slave of me; and I know it would be unpardonable weakness to give up all other interests for him. I have the servants to overlook, and my little Arthur to attend to,—and my own health too, all of which would be entirely neglected were I to satisfy his exorbitant demands. I do not generally sit up at night, for I think the nurse who has made it her business is better qualified for such undertakings than I am;—but still, an unbroken night's rest is what I but seldom enjoy, and never can venture to reckon upon; for my patient makes no scruple of calling me up at an hour when his wants or his fancies require my presence. But he is manifestly afraid of my displeasure; and if at one time he tries my patience by his unreasonable exactions, and fretful complaints and reproaches,

at another he depresses me by his abject submission and deprecatory self-abasement when he fears he has gone too far. But all this I can readily pardon; I know it is chiefly the result of his enfeebled frame and disordered nerves. What annoys me the most, is his occasional attempts at affectionate fondness that I can neither credit nor return; not that I hate him: his sufferings and my own laborious care have given him some claim to my regard—to my affection even, if he would only be quiet and sincere, and content to let things remain as they are; but the more he tries to conciliate me, the more I shrink from him and from the future.

'Helen, what do you mean to do when I get well?' he asked this morning. 'Will you run away again?'

'It entirely depends upon your own conduct.'

'Oh, I'll be very good.'

'But if I find it necessary to leave you, Arthur, I shall not "run away": you know I have your own promise that I may go whenever I please, and take my son with me.'

'Oh, but you shall have no cause.' And then followed a variety of professions, which I rather coldly checked.

'Will you not forgive me, then?' said he.

'Yes,—I have forgiven you: but I know you cannot love me as you once did—and I should be very sorry if you were to, for I could not pretend to return it: so let us drop the subject, and never recur to it again. By what I have done for you, you may judge of what I will do—if it be not incompatible with the higher duty I owe to my son (higher, because he never forfeited his claims, and because I hope to do more good to him than I can ever do to you); and if you wish me to feel kindly towards you, it is deeds not words which must purchase my affection and esteem.'

His sole reply to this was a slight grimace, and a scarcely perceptible shrug. Alas, unhappy man! words, with him, are so much cheaper than deeds; it was as if I had said, 'Pounds, not pence, must buy the article you want.' And then he sighed a querulous, self-commiserating sigh, as if in pure regret that he, the loved and courted of so many worshippers, should be now abandoned to the mercy of a harsh, exacting, cold-hearted woman like that, and even glad of what kindness she chose to bestow.

‘It’s a pity, isn’t it?’ said I; and whether I rightly divined his musings or not, the observation chimed in with his thoughts, for he answered—‘It can’t be helped,’ with a rueful smile at my penetration.

* * * * *

I have seen Esther Hargrave twice. She is a charming creature, but her blithe spirit is almost broken, and her sweet temper almost spoiled, by the still unremitting persecutions of her mother in behalf of her rejected suitor—not violent, but wearisome and unremitting like a continual dropping. The unnatural parent seems determined to make her daughter’s life a burden, if she will not yield to her desires.

‘Mamma does all she can,’ said she, ‘to make me feel myself a burden and incumbrance to the family, and the most ungrateful, selfish, and undutiful daughter that ever was born; and Walter, too, is as stern and cold and haughty as if he hated me outright. I believe I should have yielded at once if I had known, from the beginning, how much resistance would have cost me; but now, for very obstinacy’s sake, I will stand out!’

‘A bad motive for a good resolve,’ I answered. ‘But, however, I know you have better motives, really, for your perseverance: and I counsel you to keep them still in view.’

‘Trust me I will. I threaten mamma sometimes that I’ll run away, and disgrace the family by earning my own livelihood, if she torments me any more; and then that frightens her a little. But I will do it, in good earnest, if they don’t mind.’

‘Be quiet and patient a while,’ said I, ‘and better times will come.’

Poor girl! I wish somebody that was worthy to possess her would come and take her away—don’t you, Frederick?

* * * * *

If the perusal of this letter filled me with dismay for Helen’s future life and mine, there was one great source of consolation: it was now in my power to clear her name from every foul aspersion. The Millwards and the Wilsons should see with their own eyes the bright sun bursting from the cloud—and they should be scorched and dazzled by its beams;—and my own friends too should see it—they whose suspicions had been such gall and wormwood to my soul. To effect this I had only to drop the seed into the ground, and it would soon become a stately, branching herb: a few words to my mother and sister, I knew, would suffice to spread the news throughout the whole neighbourhood, without any further exertion on my part.

Rose was delighted; and as soon as I had told her all I thought proper—which was all I affected to know—she flew with alacrity to put on her bonnet and shawl, and hasten to carry the glad tidings to the Millwards and Wilsons—glad tidings, I suspect, to none but herself and Mary Millward—that steady, sensible girl, whose sterling worth had been so quickly perceived and duly valued by the supposed Mrs. Graham, in spite of her plain outside; and who, on her part, had been better able to see and appreciate that lady's true character and qualities than the brightest genius among them.

As I may never have occasion to mention her again, I may as well tell you here that she was at this time privately engaged to Richard Wilson—a secret, I believe, to every one but themselves. That worthy student was now at Cambridge, where his most exemplary conduct and his diligent perseverance in the pursuit of learning carried him safely through, and eventually brought him with hard-earned honours, and an untarnished reputation, to the close of his collegiate career. In due time he became Mr. Millward's first and only curate—for that gentleman's declining years forced him at last to acknowledge that the duties of his extensive parish were a little too much for those vaunted energies which he was wont to boast over his younger and less active brethren of the cloth. This was what the patient, faithful lovers had privately planned and quietly waited for years ago; and in due time they were united, to the astonishment of the little world they lived in, that had long since declared them both born to single blessedness; affirming it impossible that the pale, retiring bookworm should ever summon courage to seek a wife, or be able to obtain one if he did, and equally impossible that the plain-looking, plain-dealing, unattractive, unconciliating Miss Millward should ever find a husband.

They still continued to live at the vicarage, the lady dividing her time between her father, her husband, and their poor parishioners,—and subsequently her rising family; and now that the Reverend Michael Millward has been gathered to his fathers, full of years and honours, the Reverend Richard Wilson has succeeded him to the vicarage of Linden-hope, greatly to the satisfaction of its inhabitants, who had so long tried and fully proved his merits, and those of his excellent and well-loved partner.

If you are interested in the after fate of that lady's sister, I can only tell you—what perhaps you have heard from another quarter—that some twelve or thirteen years ago she relieved the happy couple of her presence by marrying a wealthy tradesman of L—; and I don't envy him his bargain. I fear she leads him a rather uncomfortable life, though, happily, he is too dull to perceive the extent of his misfortune. I have little enough to do with her myself: we have not met for many years; but, I am well assured, she has not yet forgotten or forgiven either her former lover, or the lady whose superior qualities first opened his eyes to the folly of his boyish attachment.

As for Richard Wilson's sister, she, having been wholly unable to recapture Mr. Lawrence, or obtain any partner rich and elegant enough to suit her ideas of what the husband of Jane Wilson ought to be, is yet in single blessedness. Shortly after the death of her mother she withdrew the light of her presence from Ryecote Farm, finding it impossible any longer to endure the rough manners and unsophisticated habits of her honest brother Robert and his worthy wife, or the idea of being identified with such vulgar people in the eyes of the world, and took lodgings in — the county town, where she lived, and still lives, I suppose, in a kind of close-fisted, cold, uncomfortable gentility, doing no good to others, and but little to herself; spending her days in fancy-work and scandal; referring frequently to her 'brother the vicar,' and her 'sister, the vicar's lady,' but never to her brother the farmer and her sister the farmer's wife; seeing as much company as she can without too much expense, but loving no one and beloved by none—a cold-hearted, supercilious, keenly, insidiously censorious old maid.

CHAPTER XLIX

Though Mr. Lawrence's health was now quite re-established, my visits to Woodford were as unremitting as ever; though often less protracted than before. We seldom talked about Mrs. Huntingdon; but yet we never met without mentioning her, for I never sought his company but with the hope of hearing something about her, and he never sought mine at all, because he saw me often enough without. But I always began to talk of other things, and waited first to see if he would introduce the subject. If he did not, I would casually ask, 'Have you heard from your sister lately?' If he said 'No,' the matter was dropped: if he said 'Yes,' I would venture to inquire, 'How is she?' but never 'How is her husband?' though I might be burning to know; because I had not the hypocrisy to profess any anxiety for his recovery, and I had not the face to express any desire for a contrary result. Had I any such desire?—I fear I must plead guilty; but since you have heard my confession, you must hear my justification as well —a few of the excuses, at least, wherewith I sought to pacify my own accusing conscience.

In the first place, you see, his life did harm to others, and evidently no good to himself; and though I wished it to terminate, I would not have hastened its close if, by the lifting of a finger, I could have done so, or if a spirit had whispered in my ear that a single effort of the will would be enough,—unless, indeed, I had the power to exchange him for some other victim of the grave, whose life might be of service to his race, and whose death would be lamented by his friends. But was there any harm in wishing that, among the many thousands whose souls would certainly be required of them before the year was over, this wretched mortal might be one? I thought not; and therefore I wished with all my heart that it might please heaven to remove him to a better world, or if that might not be, still to take him out of this; for if he were unfit to answer the summons now, after a warning sickness, and with such an angel by his side, it seemed but too certain that he never would be—that, on the contrary, returning health would bring returning lust and villainy, and as he grew more certain of recovery, more accustomed to her generous goodness, his feelings would become more callous, his heart more flinty and impervious to her persuasive arguments—but God knew best. Meantime, however, I could not but be anxious for the result of His decrees; knowing, as I did, that (leaving myself entirely out of the question), however Helen might feel interested in her husband's welfare, however she might deplore his fate, still while he lived she must be miserable.

A fortnight passed away, and my inquiries were always answered in the negative. At length a welcome 'yes' drew from me the second question. Lawrence divined my anxious thoughts, and appreciated my reserve. I feared, at first, he was going to torture me by unsatisfactory replies, and either leave me quite in the dark concerning what I wanted to know, or force me to drag the information out of him, morsel by morsel, by direct inquiries. 'And serve you right,' you will say; but he was more merciful; and in a

little while he put his sister's letter into my hand. I silently read it, and restored it to him without comment or remark. This mode of procedure suited him so well, that thereafter he always pursued the plan of showing me her letters at once, when 'inquired' after her, if there were any to show—it was so much less trouble than to tell me their contents; and I received such confidences so quietly and discreetly that he was never induced to discontinue them.

But I devoured those precious letters with my eyes, and never let them go till their contents were stamped upon my mind; and when I got home, the most important passages were entered in my diary among the remarkable events of the day.

The first of these communications brought intelligence of a serious relapse in Mr. Huntingdon's illness, entirely the result of his own infatuation in persisting in the indulgence of his appetite for stimulating drink. In vain had she remonstrated, in vain she had mingled his wine with water: her arguments and entreaties were a nuisance, her interference was an insult so intolerable that, at length, on finding she had covertly diluted the pale port that was brought him, he threw the bottle out of the window, swearing he would not be cheated like a baby, ordered the butler, on pain of instant dismissal, to bring a bottle of the strongest wine in the cellar, and affirming that he should have been well long ago if he had been let to have his own way, but she wanted to keep him weak in order that she might have him under her thumb—but, by the Lord Harry, he would have no more humbug—seized a glass in one hand and the bottle in the other, and never rested till he had drunk it dry. Alarming symptoms were the immediate result of this 'imprudence,' as she mildly termed it—symptoms which had rather increased than diminished since; and this was the cause of her delay in writing to her brother. Every former feature of his malady had returned with augmented virulence: the slight external wound, half healed, had broken out afresh; internal inflammation had taken place, which might terminate fatally if not soon removed. Of course, the wretched sufferer's temper was not improved by this calamity—in fact, I suspect it was well nigh insupportable, though his kind nurse did not complain; but she said she had been obliged at last to give her son in charge to Esther Hargrave, as her presence was so constantly required in the sick-room that she could not possibly attend to him herself; and though the child had begged to be allowed to continue with her there, and to help her to nurse his papa, and though she had no doubt he would have been very good and quiet, she could not think of subjecting his young and tender feelings to the sight of so much suffering, or of allowing him to witness his father's impatience, or hear the dreadful language he was wont to use in his paroxysms of pain or irritation.

The latter (continued she) most deeply regrets the step that has occasioned his relapse; but, as usual, he throws the blame upon me. If I had reasoned with him like a rational

creature, he says, it never would have happened; but to be treated like a baby or a fool was enough to put any man past his patience, and drive him to assert his independence even at the sacrifice of his own interest. He forgets how often I had reasoned him 'past his patience' before. He appears to be sensible of his danger; but nothing can induce him to behold it in the proper light. The other night, while I was waiting on him, and just as I had brought him a draught to assuage his burning thirst, he observed, with a return of his former sarcastic bitterness, 'Yes, you're mighty attentive now! I suppose there's nothing you wouldn't do for me now?'

'You know,' said I, a little surprised at his manner, 'that I am willing to do anything I can to relieve you.'

'Yes, now, my immaculate angel; but when once you have secured your reward, and find yourself safe in heaven, and me howling in hell-fire, catch you lifting a finger to serve me then! No, you'll look complacently on, and not so much as dip the tip of your finger in water to cool my tongue!'

'If so, it will be because of the great gulf over which I cannot pass; and if I could look complacently on in such a case, it would be only from the assurance that you were being purified from your sins, and fitted to enjoy the happiness I felt.—But are you determined, Arthur, that I shall not meet you in heaven?'

'Humph! What should I do there, I should like to know?'

'Indeed, I cannot tell; and I fear it is too certain that your tastes and feelings must be widely altered before you can have any enjoyment there. But do you prefer sinking, without an effort, into the state of torment you picture to yourself?'

'Oh, it's all a fable,' said he, contemptuously.

'Are you sure, Arthur? are you quite sure? Because, if there is any doubt, and if you should find yourself mistaken after all, when it is too late to turn—'

'It would be rather awkward, to be sure,' said he; 'but don't bother me now—I'm not going to die yet. I can't and won't,' he added vehemently, as if suddenly struck with the appalling aspect of that terrible event. 'Helen, you must save me!' And he earnestly seized my hand, and looked into my face with such imploring eagerness that my heart bled for him, and I could not speak for tears.

* * * * *

The next letter brought intelligence that the malady was fast increasing; and the poor sufferer's horror of death was still more distressing than his impatience of bodily pain. All his friends had not forsaken him; for Mr. Hattersley, hearing of his danger, had come to see him from his distant home in the north. His wife had accompanied him, as much for the pleasure of seeing her dear friend, from whom she had been parted so long, as to visit her mother and sister.

Mrs. Huntingdon expressed herself glad to see Milicent once more, and pleased to behold her so happy and well. She is now at the Grove, continued the letter, but she often calls to see me. Mr. Hattersley spends much of his time at Arthur's bed-side. With more good feeling than I gave him credit for, he evinces considerable sympathy for his unhappy friend, and is far more willing than able to comfort him. Sometimes he tries to joke and laugh with him, but that will not do; sometimes he endeavours to cheer him with talk about old times, and this at one time may serve to divert the sufferer from his own sad thoughts; at another, it will only plunge him into deeper melancholy than before; and then Hattersley is confounded, and knows not what to say, unless it be a timid suggestion that the clergyman might be sent for. But Arthur will never consent to that: he knows he has rejected the clergyman's well-meant admonitions with scoffing levity at other times, and cannot dream of turning to him for consolation now.

Mr. Hattersley sometimes offers his services instead of mine, but Arthur will not let me go: that strange whim still increases, as his strength declines—the fancy to have me always by his side. I hardly ever leave him, except to go into the next room, where I sometimes snatch an hour or so of sleep when he is quiet; but even then the door is left ajar, that he may know me to be within call. I am with him now, while I write, and I fear my occupation annoys him; though I frequently break off to attend to him, and though Mr. Hattersley is also by his side. That gentleman came, as he said, to beg a holiday for me, that I might have a run in the park, this fine frosty morning, with Milicent and Esther and little Arthur, whom he had driven over to see me. Our poor invalid evidently felt it a heartless proposition, and would have felt it still more heartless in me to accede to it. I therefore said I would only go and speak to them a minute, and then come back. I did but exchange a few words with them, just outside the portico, inhaling the fresh, bracing air as I stood, and then, resisting the earnest and eloquent entreaties of all three to stay a little longer, and join them in a walk round the garden, I tore myself away and returned to my patient. I had not been absent five minutes, but he reproached me bitterly for my levity and neglect. His friend espoused my cause.

'Nay, nay, Huntingdon,' said he, 'you're too hard upon her; she must have food and sleep, and a mouthful of fresh air now and then, or she can't stand it, I tell you. Look at her, man! she's worn to a shadow already.'

‘What are her sufferings to mine?’ said the poor invalid. ‘You don’t grudge me these attentions, do you, Helen?’

‘No, Arthur, if I could really serve you by them. I would give my life to save you, if I might.’

‘Would you, indeed? No!’

‘Most willingly I would.’

‘Ah! that’s because you think yourself more fit to die!’

There was a painful pause. He was evidently plunged in gloomy reflections; but while I pondered for something to say that might benefit without alarming him, Hattersley, whose mind had been pursuing almost the same course, broke silence with, ‘I say, Huntingdon, I would send for a parson of some sort: if you didn’t like the vicar, you know, you could have his curate, or somebody else.’

‘No; none of them can benefit me if she can’t,’ was the answer. And the tears gushed from his eyes as he earnestly exclaimed, ‘Oh, Helen, if I had listened to you, it never would have come to this! and if I had heard you long ago—oh, God! how different it would have been!’

‘Hear me now, then, Arthur,’ said I, gently pressing his hand.

‘It’s too late now,’ said he despondingly. And after that another paroxysm of pain came on; and then his mind began to wander, and we feared his death was approaching: but an opiate was administered: his sufferings began to abate, he gradually became more composed, and at length sank into a kind of slumber. He has been quieter since; and now Hattersley has left him, expressing a hope that he shall find him better when he calls to-morrow.

‘Perhaps I may recover,’ he replied; ‘who knows? This may have been the crisis. What do you think, Helen?’ Unwilling to depress him, I gave the most cheering answer I could, but still recommended him to prepare for the possibility of what I inly feared was but too certain. But he was determined to hope. Shortly after he relapsed into a kind of doze, but now he groans again.

There is a change. Suddenly he called me to his side, with such a strange, excited manner, that I feared he was delirious, but he was not. ‘That was the crisis, Helen!’ said he, delightedly. ‘I had an infernal pain here—it is quite gone now. I never was so easy

since the fall—quite gone, by heaven!' and he clasped and kissed my hand in the very fulness of his heart; but finding I did not participate in his joy, he quickly flung it from him, and bitterly cursed my coldness and insensibility. How could I reply? Kneeling beside him, I took his hand and fondly pressed it to my lips—for the first time since our separation—and told him, as well as tears would let me speak, that it was not that that kept me silent: it was the fear that this sudden cessation of pain was not so favourable a symptom as he supposed. I immediately sent for the doctor: we are now anxiously awaiting him. I will tell you what he says. There is still the same freedom from pain, the same deadness to all sensation where the suffering was most acute.

My worst fears are realised: mortification has commenced. The doctor has told him there is no hope. No words can describe his anguish. I can write no more.

* * * * *

The next was still more distressing in the tenor of its contents. The sufferer was fast approaching dissolution—dragged almost to the verge of that awful chasm he trembled to contemplate, from which no agony of prayers or tears could save him. Nothing could comfort him now; Hattersley's rough attempts at consolation were utterly in vain. The world was nothing to him: life and all its interests, its petty cares and transient pleasures, were a cruel mockery. To talk of the past was to torture him with vain remorse; to refer to the future was to increase his anguish; and yet to be silent was to leave him a prey to his own regrets and apprehensions. Often he dwelt with shuddering minuteness on the fate of his perishing clay—the slow, piecemeal dissolution already invading his frame: the shroud, the coffin, the dark, lonely grave, and all the horrors of corruption.

'If I try,' said his afflicted wife, 'to divert him from these things—to raise his thoughts to higher themes, it is no better:—"Worse and worse!" he groans. "If there be really life beyond the tomb, and judgment after death, how can I face it?"—I cannot do him any good; he will neither be enlightened, nor roused, nor comforted by anything I say; and yet he clings to me with unrelenting pertinacity—with a kind of childish desperation, as if I could save him from the fate he dreads. He keeps me night and day beside him. He is holding my left hand now, while I write; he has held it thus for hours: sometimes quietly, with his pale face upturned to mine: sometimes clutching my arm with violence—the big drops starting from his forehead at the thoughts of what he sees, or thinks he sees, before him. If I withdraw my hand for a moment it distresses him.

'"Stay with me, Helen," he says; "let me hold you so: it seems as if harm could not reach me while you are here. But death will come—it is coming now—fast, fast!—and—oh, if I could believe there was nothing after!"

“‘Don’t try to believe it, Arthur; there is joy and glory after, if you will but try to reach it!”

“‘What, for me?” he said, with something like a laugh. “Are we not to be judged according to the deeds done in the body? Where’s the use of a probationary existence, if a man may spend it as he pleases, just contrary to God’s decrees, and then go to heaven with the best—if the vilest sinner may win the reward of the holiest saint, by merely saying, “I repent!”’”

“‘But if you sincerely repent—”

“‘I can’t repent; I only fear.”

“‘You only regret the past for its consequences to yourself?”

“‘Just so—except that I’m sorry to have wronged you, Nell, because you’re so good to me.”

“‘Think of the goodness of God, and you cannot but be grieved to have offended Him.”

“‘What is God?—I cannot see Him or hear Him.—God is only an idea.”

“‘God is Infinite Wisdom, and Power, and Goodness—and Love; but if this idea is too vast for your human faculties—if your mind loses itself in its overwhelming infinitude, fix it on Him who condescended to take our nature upon Him, who was raised to heaven even in His glorified human body, in whom the fulness of the Godhead shines.”

‘But he only shook his head and sighed. Then, in another paroxysm of shuddering horror, he tightened his grasp on my hand and arm, and, groaning and lamenting, still clung to me with that wild, desperate earnestness so harrowing to my soul, because I know I cannot help him. I did my best to soothe and comfort him.

“‘Death is so terrible,” he cried, “I cannot bear it! You don’t know, Helen—you can’t imagine what it is, because you haven’t it before you! and when I’m buried, you’ll return to your old ways and be as happy as ever, and all the world will go on just as busy and merry as if I had never been; while I—” He burst into tears.

“‘You needn’t let that distress you,” I said; “we shall all follow you soon enough.”

“‘I wish to God I could take you with me now!” he exclaimed: “you should plead for me.”

‘“No man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him,” I replied: “it cost more to redeem their souls—it cost the blood of an incarnate God, perfect and sinless in Himself, to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one:—let Him plead for you.”

‘But I seem to speak in vain. He does not now, as formerly, laugh these blessed truths to scorn: but still he cannot trust, or will not comprehend them. He cannot linger long. He suffers dreadfully, and so do those that wait upon him. But I will not harass you with further details: I have said enough, I think, to convince you that I did well to go to him.’

* * * * *

Poor, poor Helen! dreadful indeed her trials must have been! And I could do nothing to lessen them—nay, it almost seemed as if I had brought them upon her myself by my own secret desires; and whether I looked at her husband’s sufferings or her own, it seemed almost like a judgment upon myself for having cherished such a wish.

The next day but one there came another letter. That too was put into my hands without a remark, and these are its contents:—

Dec. 5th.

He is gone at last. I sat beside him all night, with my hand fast looked in his, watching the changes of his features and listening to his failing breath. He had been silent a long time, and I thought he would never speak again, when he murmured, faintly but distinctly,—‘Pray for me, Helen!’

‘I do pray for you, every hour and every minute, Arthur; but you must pray for yourself.’

His lips moved, but emitted no sound;—then his looks became unsettled; and, from the incoherent, half-uttered words that escaped him from time to time, supposing him to be now unconscious, I gently disengaged my hand from his, intending to steal away for a breath of air, for I was almost ready to faint; but a convulsive movement of the fingers, and a faintly whispered ‘Don’t leave me!’ immediately recalled me: I took his hand again, and held it till he was no more—and then I fainted. It was not grief; it was exhaustion, that, till then, I had been enabled successfully to combat. Oh, Frederick! none can imagine the miseries, bodily and mental, of that death-bed! How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? it would drive me mad. But, thank God, I have hope—not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may

be doomed to pass—whatever fate awaits it—still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end!

His body will be consigned on Thursday to that dark grave he so much dreaded; but the coffin must be closed as soon as possible. If you will attend the funeral, come quickly, for I need help.

Helen Huntingdon.

CHAPTER L

On reading this I had no reason to disguise my joy and hope from Frederick Lawrence, for I had none to be ashamed of. I felt no joy but that his sister was at length released from her afflictive, overwhelming toil—no hope but that she would in time recover from the effects of it, and be suffered to rest in peace and quietness, at least, for the remainder of her life. I experienced a painful commiseration for her unhappy husband (though fully aware that he had brought every particle of his sufferings upon himself, and but too well deserved them all), and a profound sympathy for her own afflictions, and deep anxiety for the consequences of those harassing cares, those dreadful vigils, that incessant and deleterious confinement beside a living corpse—for I was persuaded she had not hinted half the sufferings she had had to endure.

'You will go to her, Lawrence?' said I, as I put the letter into his hand.

'Yes, immediately.'

'That's right! I'll leave you, then, to prepare for your departure.'

'I've done that already, while you were reading the letter, and before you came; and the carriage is now coming round to the door.'

Inly approving his promptitude, I bade him good-morning, and withdrew. He gave me a searching glance as we pressed each other's hands at parting; but whatever he sought in my countenance, he saw there nothing but the most becoming gravity—it might be mingled with a little sternness in momentary resentment at what I suspected to be passing in his mind.

Had I forgotten my own prospects, my ardent love, my pertinacious hopes? It seemed like sacrilege to revert to them now, but I had not forgotten them. It was, however, with a gloomy sense of the darkness of those prospects, the fallacy of those hopes, and the vanity of that affection, that I reflected on those things as I remounted my horse and slowly journeyed homewards. Mrs. Huntingdon was free now; it was no longer a crime to think of her—but did she ever think of me? Not now—of course it was not to be expected—but would she when this shock was over? In all the course of her correspondence with her brother (our mutual friend, as she herself had called him) she had never mentioned me but once—and that was from necessity. This alone afforded strong presumption that I was already forgotten; yet this was not the worst: it might have been her sense of duty that had kept her silent: she might be only trying to forget; but in addition to this, I had a gloomy conviction that the awful realities she had seen and felt, her reconciliation with the man she had once loved, his dreadful sufferings and

death, must eventually efface from her mind all traces of her passing love for me. She might recover from these horrors so far as to be restored to her former health, her tranquillity, her cheerfulness even—but never to those feelings which would appear to her, henceforth, as a fleeting fancy, a vain, illusive dream; especially as there was no one to remind her of my existence—no means of assuring her of my fervent constancy, now that we were so far apart, and delicacy forbade me to see her or to write to her, for months to come at least. And how could I engage her brother in my behalf? how could I break that icy crust of shy reserve? Perhaps he would disapprove of my attachment now as highly as before; perhaps he would think me too poor—too lowly born, to match with his sister. Yes, there was another barrier: doubtless there was a wide distinction between the rank and circumstances of Mrs. Huntingdon, the lady of Grassdale Manor, and those of Mrs. Graham, the artist, the tenant of Wildfell Hall. And it might be deemed presumption in me to offer my hand to the former, by the world, by her friends, if not by herself; a penalty I might brave, if I were certain she loved me; but otherwise, how could I? And, finally, her deceased husband, with his usual selfishness, might have so constructed his will as to place restrictions upon her marrying again. So that you see I had reasons enough for despair if I chose to indulge it.

Nevertheless, it was with no small degree of impatience that I looked forward to Mr. Lawrence's return from Grassdale: impatience that increased in proportion as his absence was prolonged. He stayed away some ten or twelve days. All very right that he should remain to comfort and help his sister, but he might have written to tell me how she was, or at least to tell me when to expect his return; for he might have known I was suffering tortures of anxiety for her, and uncertainty for my own future prospects. And when he did return, all he told me about her was, that she had been greatly exhausted and worn by her unremitting exertions in behalf of that man who had been the scourge of her life, and had dragged her with him nearly to the portals of the grave, and was still much shaken and depressed by his melancholy end and the circumstances attendant upon it; but no word in reference to me; no intimation that my name had ever passed her lips, or even been spoken in her presence. To be sure, I asked no questions on the subject; I could not bring my mind to do so, believing, as I did, that Lawrence was indeed averse to the idea of my union with his sister.

I saw that he expected to be further questioned concerning his visit, and I saw too, with the keen perception of awakened jealousy, or alarmed self-esteem, or by whatever name I ought to call it, that he rather shrank from that impending scrutiny, and was no less pleased than surprised to find it did not come. Of course, I was burning with anger, but pride obliged me to suppress my feelings, and preserve a smooth face, or at least a stoic calmness, throughout the interview. It was well it did, for, reviewing the matter in my sober judgment, I must say it would have been highly absurd and improper to have quarrelled with him on such an occasion. I must confess, too, that I wronged him in my

heart: the truth was, he liked me very well, but he was fully aware that a union between Mrs. Huntingdon and me would be what the world calls a mesalliance; and it was not in his nature to set the world at defiance; especially in such a case as this, for its dread laugh, or ill opinion, would be far more terrible to him directed against his sister than himself. Had he believed that a union was necessary to the happiness of both, or of either, or had he known how fervently I loved her, he would have acted differently; but seeing me so calm and cool, he would not for the world disturb my philosophy; and though refraining entirely from any active opposition to the match, he would yet do nothing to bring it about, and would much rather take the part of prudence, in aiding us to overcome our mutual predilections, than that of feeling, to encourage them. 'And he was in the right of it,' you will say. Perhaps he was; at any rate, I had no business to feel so bitterly against him as I did; but I could not then regard the matter in such a moderate light; and, after a brief conversation upon indifferent topics, I went away, suffering all the pangs of wounded pride and injured friendship, in addition to those resulting from the fear that I was indeed forgotten, and the knowledge that she I loved was alone and afflicted, suffering from injured health and dejected spirits, and I was forbidden to console or assist her: forbidden even to assure her of my sympathy, for the transmission of any such message through Mr. Lawrence was now completely out of the question.

But what should I do? I would wait, and see if she would notice me, which of course she would not, unless by some kind message intrusted to her brother, that, in all probability, he would not deliver, and then, dreadful thought! she would think me cooled and changed for not returning it, or, perhaps, he had already given her to understand that I had ceased to think of her. I would wait, however, till the six months after our parting were fairly passed (which would be about the close of February), and then I would send her a letter, modestly reminding her of her former permission to write to her at the close of that period, and hoping I might avail myself of it—at least to express my heartfelt sorrow for her late afflictions, my just appreciation of her generous conduct, and my hope that her health was now completely re-established, and that she would, some time, be permitted to enjoy those blessings of a peaceful, happy life, which had been denied her so long, but which none could more truly be said to merit than herself—adding a few words of kind remembrance to my little friend Arthur, with a hope that he had not forgotten me, and perhaps a few more in reference to bygone times, to the delightful hours I had passed in her society, and my unfading recollection of them, which was the salt and solace of my life, and a hope that her recent troubles had not entirely banished me from her mind. If she did not answer this, of course I should write no more: if she did (as surely she would, in some fashion), my future proceedings should be regulated by her reply.

Ten weeks was long to wait in such a miserable state of uncertainty; but courage! it must be endured! and meantime I would continue to see Lawrence now and then, though not so often as before, and I would still pursue my habitual inquiries after his sister, if he had lately heard from her, and how she was, but nothing more.

I did so, and the answers I received were always provokingly limited to the letter of the inquiry: she was much as usual: she made no complaints, but the tone of her last letter evinced great depression of mind: she said she was better: and, finally, she said she was well, and very busy with her son's education, and with the management of her late husband's property, and the regulation of his affairs. The rascal had never told me how that property was disposed, or whether Mr. Huntingdon had died intestate or not; and I would sooner die than ask him, lest he should misconstrue into covetousness my desire to know. He never offered to show me his sister's letters now, and I never hinted a wish to see them. February, however, was approaching; December was past; January, at length, was almost over—a few more weeks, and then, certain despair or renewal of hope would put an end to this long agony of suspense.

But alas! it was just about that time she was called to sustain another blow in the death of her uncle—a worthless old fellow enough in himself, I daresay, but he had always shown more kindness and affection to her than to any other creature, and she had always been accustomed to regard him as a parent. She was with him when he died, and had assisted her aunt to nurse him during the last stage of his illness. Her brother went to Staningley to attend the funeral, and told me, upon his return, that she was still there, endeavouring to cheer her aunt with her presence, and likely to remain some time. This was bad news for me, for while she continued there I could not write to her, as I did not know the address, and would not ask it of him. But week followed week, and every time I inquired about her she was still at Staningley.

'Where is Staningley?' I asked at last.

'In —shire,' was the brief reply; and there was something so cold and dry in the manner of it, that I was effectually deterred from requesting a more definite account.

'When will she return to Grassdale?' was my next question.

'I don't know.'

'Confound it!' I muttered.

'Why, Markham?' asked my companion, with an air of innocent surprise. But I did not deign to answer him, save by a look of silent, sullen contempt, at which he turned away,

and contemplated the carpet with a slight smile, half pensive, half amused; but quickly looking up, he began to talk of other subjects, trying to draw me into a cheerful and friendly conversation, but I was too much irritated to discourse with him, and soon took leave.

You see Lawrence and I somehow could not manage to get on very well together. The fact is, I believe, we were both of us a little too touchy. It is a troublesome thing, Halford, this susceptibility to affronts where none are intended. I am no martyr to it now, as you can bear me witness: I have learned to be merry and wise, to be more easy with myself and more indulgent to my neighbours, and I can afford to laugh at both Lawrence and you.

Partly from accident, partly from wilful negligence on my part (for I was really beginning to dislike him), several weeks elapsed before I saw my friend again. When we did meet, it was he that sought me out. One bright morning, early in June, he came into the field, where I was just commencing my hay harvest.

'It is long since I saw you, Markham,' said he, after the first few words had passed between us. 'Do you never mean to come to Woodford again?'

'I called once, and you were out.'

'I was sorry, but that was long since; I hoped you would call again, and now I have called, and you were out, which you generally are, or I would do myself the pleasure of calling more frequently; but being determined to see you this time, I have left my pony in the lane, and come over hedge and ditch to join you; for I am about to leave Woodford for a while, and may not have the pleasure of seeing you again for a month or two.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Grassdale first,' said he, with a half-smile he would willingly have suppressed if he could.

'To Grassdale! Is she there, then?'

'Yes, but in a day or two she will leave it to accompany Mrs. Maxwell to F— for the benefit of the sea air, and I shall go with them.' (F— was at that time a quiet but respectable watering-place: it is considerably more frequented now.)

Lawrence seemed to expect me to take advantage of this circumstance to entrust him with some sort of a message to his sister; and I believe he would have undertaken to

deliver it without any material objections, if I had had the sense to ask him, though of course he would not offer to do so, if I was content to let it alone. But I could not bring myself to make the request, and it was not till after he was gone, that I saw how fair an opportunity I had lost; and then, indeed, I deeply regretted my stupidity and my foolish pride, but it was now too late to remedy the evil.

He did not return till towards the latter end of August. He wrote to me twice or thrice from F—, but his letters were most provokingly unsatisfactory, dealing in generalities or in trifles that I cared nothing about, or replete with fancies and reflections equally unwelcome to me at the time, saying next to nothing about his sister, and little more about himself. I would wait, however, till he came back; perhaps I could get something more out of him then. At all events, I would not write to her now, while she was with him and her aunt, who doubtless would be still more hostile to my presumptuous aspirations than himself. When she was returned to the silence and solitude of her own home, it would be my fittest opportunity.

When Lawrence came, however, he was as reserved as ever on the subject of my keen anxiety. He told me that his sister had derived considerable benefit from her stay at F— that her son was quite well, and—alas! that both of them were gone, with Mrs. Maxwell, back to Staningley, and there they stayed at least three months. But instead of boring you with my chagrin, my expectations and disappointments, my fluctuations of dull despondency and flickering hope, my varying resolutions, now to drop it, and now to persevere—now to make a bold push, and now to let things pass and patiently abide my time,—I will employ myself in settling the business of one or two of the characters introduced in the course of this narrative, whom I may not have occasion to mention again.

Some time before Mr. Huntingdon's death Lady Lowborough eloped with another gallant to the Continent, where, having lived a while in reckless gaiety and dissipation, they quarrelled and parted. She went dashing on for a season, but years came and money went: she sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness. But this might be only a report: she may be living yet for anything I or any of her relatives or former acquaintances can tell; for they have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could. Her husband, however, upon this second misdemeanour, immediately sought and obtained a divorce, and, not long after, married again. It was well he did, for Lord Lowborough, morose and moody as he seemed, was not the man for a bachelor's life. No public interests, no ambitious projects, or active pursuits,—or ties of friendship even (if he had had any friends), could compensate to him for the absence of domestic comforts and endearments. He had a son and a nominal daughter, it is true, but they too painfully reminded him of their mother, and

the unfortunate little Annabella was a source of perpetual bitterness to his soul. He had obliged himself to treat her with paternal kindness: he had forced himself not to hate her, and even, perhaps, to feel some degree of kindly regard for her, at last, in return for her artless and unsuspecting attachment to himself; but the bitterness of his self-condemnation for his inward feelings towards that innocent being, his constant struggles to subdue the evil promptings of his nature (for it was not a generous one), though partly guessed at by those who knew him, could be known to God and his own heart alone;—so also was the hardness of his conflicts with the temptation to return to the vice of his youth, and seek oblivion for past calamities, and deadness to the present misery of a blighted heart a joyless, friendless life, and a morbidly disconsolate mind, by yielding again to that insidious foe to health, and sense, and virtue, which had so deplorably enslaved and degraded him before.

The second object of his choice was widely different from the first. Some wondered at his taste; some even ridiculed it—but in this their folly was more apparent than his. The lady was about his own age—i.e., between thirty and forty—remarkable neither for beauty, nor wealth, nor brilliant accomplishments; nor any other thing that I ever heard of, except genuine good sense, unswerving integrity, active piety, warm-hearted benevolence, and a fund of cheerful spirits. These qualities, however, as you way readily imagine, combined to render her an excellent mother to the children, and an invaluable wife to his lordship. He, with his usual self-depreciation, thought her a world too good for him, and while he wondered at the kindness of Providence in conferring such a gift upon him, and even at her taste in preferring him to other men, he did his best to reciprocate the good she did him, and so far succeeded that she was, and I believe still is, one of the happiest and fondest wives in England; and all who question the good taste of either partner may be thankful if their respective selections afford them half the genuine satisfaction in the end, or repay their preference with affection half as lasting and sincere.

If you are at all interested in the fate of that low scoundrel, Grimsby, I can only tell you that he went from bad to worse, sinking from bathos to bathos of vice and villainy, consorting only with the worst members of his club and the lowest dregs of society—happily for the rest of the world—and at last met his end in a drunken brawl, from the hands, it is said, of some brother scoundrel he had cheated at play.

As for Mr. Hattersley, he had never wholly forgotten his resolution to ‘come out from among them,’ and behave like a man and a Christian, and the last illness and death of his once jolly friend Huntingdon so deeply and seriously impressed him with the evil of their former practices, that he never needed another lesson of the kind. Avoiding the temptations of the town, he continued to pass his life in the country, immersed in the usual pursuits of a hearty, active, country gentleman; his occupations being those of

farming, and breeding horses and cattle, diversified with a little hunting and shooting, and enlivened by the occasional companionship of his friends (better friends than those of his youth), and the society of his happy little wife (now cheerful and confiding as heart could wish), and his fine family of stalwart sons and blooming daughters. His father, the banker, having died some years ago and left him all his riches, he has now full scope for the exercise of his prevailing tastes, and I need not tell you that Ralph Hattersley, Esq., is celebrated throughout the country for his noble breed of horses.

CHAPTER LI

We will now turn to a certain still, cold, cloudy afternoon about the commencement of December, when the first fall of snow lay thinly scattered over the blighted fields and frozen roads, or stored more thickly in the hollows of the deep cart-ruts and footsteps of men and horses impressed in the now petrified mire of last month's drenching rains. I remember it well, for I was walking home from the vicarage with no less remarkable a personage than Miss Eliza Millward by my side. I had been to call upon her father,—a sacrifice to civility undertaken entirely to please my mother, not myself, for I hated to go near the house; not merely on account of my antipathy to the once so bewitching Eliza, but because I had not half forgiven the old gentleman himself for his ill opinion of Mrs. Huntingdon; for though now constrained to acknowledge himself mistaken in his former judgment, he still maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step—nor even that, for in such a case she ought to appeal to the laws for protection. But it was not of him I intended to speak; it was of his daughter Eliza. Just as I was taking leave of the vicar, she entered the room, ready equipped for a walk.

'I was just coming to see, your sister, Mr. Markham,' said she; 'and so, if you have no objection, I'll accompany you home. I like company when I'm walking out—don't you?'

'Yes, when it's agreeable.'

'That of course,' rejoined the young lady, smiling archly.

So we proceeded together.

'Shall I find Rose at home, do you think?' said she, as we closed the garden gate, and set our faces towards Linden-Car.

'I believe so.'

'I trust I shall, for I've a little bit of news for her—if you haven't forestalled me.'

'I?'

'Yes: do you know what Mr. Lawrence is gone for?' She looked up anxiously for my reply.

‘Is he gone?’ said I; and her face brightened.

‘Ah! then he hasn’t told you about his sister?’

‘What of her?’ I demanded in terror, lest some evil should have befallen her.

‘Oh, Mr. Markham, how you blush!’ cried she, with a tormenting laugh. ‘Ha, ha, you have not forgotten her yet. But you had better be quick about it, I can tell you, for—alas, alas!—she’s going to be married next Thursday!’

‘No, Miss Eliza, that’s false.’

‘Do you charge me with a falsehood, sir?’

‘You are misinformed.’

‘Am I? Do you know better, then?’

‘I think I do.’

‘What makes you look so pale then?’ said she, smiling with delight at my emotion. ‘Is it anger at poor me for telling such a fib? Well, I only “tell the tale as ’twas told to me:” I don’t vouch for the truth of it; but at the same time, I don’t see what reason Sarah should have for deceiving me, or her informant for deceiving her; and that was what she told me the footman told her:—that Mrs. Huntingdon was going to be married on Thursday, and Mr. Lawrence was gone to the wedding. She did tell me the name of the gentleman, but I’ve forgotten that. Perhaps you can assist me to remember it. Is there not some one that lives near—or frequently visits the neighbourhood, that has long been attached to her?—a Mr.—oh, dear! Mr.—’

‘Hargrave?’ suggested I, with a bitter smile.

‘You’re right,’ cried she; ‘that was the very name.’

‘Impossible, Miss Eliza!’ I exclaimed, in a tone that made her start.

‘Well, you know, that’s what they told me,’ said she, composedly staring me in the face. And then she broke out into a long shrill laugh that put me to my wit’s end with fury.

‘Really you must excuse me,’ cried she. ‘I know it’s very rude, but ha, ha, ha!—did you think to marry her yourself? Dear, dear, what a pity!—ha, ha, ha! Gracious, Mr.

Markham, are you going to faint? Oh, mercy! shall I call this man? Here, Jacob—' But checking the word on her lips, I seized her arm and gave it, I think, a pretty severe squeeze, for she shrank into herself with a faint cry of pain or terror; but the spirit within her was not subdued: instantly rallying, she continued, with well-feigned concern, 'What can I do for you? Will you have some water—some brandy? I daresay they have some in the public-house down there, if you'll let me run.'

'Have done with this nonsense!' cried I, sternly. She looked confounded—almost frightened again, for a moment. 'You know I hate such jests,' I continued.

'Jests indeed! I wasn't jesting!'

'You were laughing, at all events; and I don't like to be laughed at,' returned I, making violent efforts to speak with proper dignity and composure, and to say nothing but what was coherent and sensible. 'And since you are in such a merry mood, Miss Eliza, you must be good enough company for yourself; and therefore I shall leave you to finish your walk alone—for, now I think of it, I have business elsewhere; so good-evening.'

With that I left her (smothering her malicious laughter) and turned aside into the fields, springing up the bank, and pushing through the nearest gap in the hedge. Determined at once to prove the truth—or rather the falsehood—of her story, I hastened to Woodford as fast as my legs could carry me; first veering round by a circuitous course, but the moment I was out of sight of my fair tormentor cutting away across the country, just as a bird might fly, over pasture-land, and fallow, and stubble, and lane, clearing hedges and ditches and hurdles, till I came to the young squire's gates. Never till now had I known the full fervour of my love—the full strength of my hopes, not wholly crushed even in my hours of deepest despondency, always tenaciously clinging to the thought that one day she might be mine, or, if not that, at least that something of my memory, some slight remembrance of our friendship and our love, would be for ever cherished in her heart. I marched up to the door, determined, if I saw the master, to question him boldly concerning his sister, to wait and hesitate no longer, but cast false delicacy and stupid pride behind my back, and know my fate at once.

'Is Mr. Lawrence at home?' I eagerly asked of the servant that opened the door.

'No, sir, master went yesterday,' replied he, looking very alert.

'Went where?'

'To Grassdale, sir—wasn't you aware, sir? He's very close, is master,' said the fellow, with a foolish, simpering grin. 'I suppose, sir—'

But I turned and left him, without waiting to hear what he supposed. I was not going to stand there to expose my tortured feelings to the insolent laughter and impertinent curiosity of a fellow like that.

But what was to be done now? Could it be possible that she had left me for that man? I could not believe it. Me she might forsake, but not to give herself to him! Well, I would know the truth; to no concerns of daily life could I attend while this tempest of doubt and dread, of jealousy and rage, distracted me. I would take the morning coach from L— (the evening one would be already gone), and fly to Grassdale—I must be there before the marriage. And why? Because a thought struck me that perhaps I might prevent it—that if I did not, she and I might both lament it to the latest moment of our lives. It struck me that someone might have belied me to her: perhaps her brother; yes, no doubt her brother had persuaded her that I was false and faithless, and taking advantage of her natural indignation, and perhaps her desponding carelessness about her future life, had urged her, artfully, cruelly, on to this other marriage, in order to secure her from me. If this was the case, and if she should only discover her mistake when too late to repair it—to what a life of misery and vain regret might she be doomed as well as me; and what remorse for me to think my foolish scruples had induced it all! Oh, I must see her—she must know my truth even if I told it at the church door! I might pass for a madman or an impertinent fool—even she might be offended at such an interruption, or at least might tell me it was now too late. But if I could save her, if she might be mine!—it was too rapturous a thought!

Winged by this hope, and goaded by these fears, I hurried homewards to prepare for my departure on the morrow. I told my mother that urgent business which admitted no delay, but which I could not then explain, called me away.

My deep anxiety and serious preoccupation could not be concealed from her maternal eyes; and I had much ado to calm her apprehensions of some disastrous mystery.

That night there came a heavy fall of snow, which so retarded the progress of the coaches on the following day that I was almost driven to distraction. I travelled all night, of course, for this was Wednesday: to-morrow morning, doubtless, the marriage would take place. But the night was long and dark: the snow heavily clogged the wheels and balled the horses' feet; the animals were consumedly lazy; the coachman most execrably cautious; the passengers confoundedly apathetic in their supine indifference to the rate of our progression. Instead of assisting me to bully the several coachmen and urge them forward, they merely stared and grinned at my impatience: one fellow even ventured to rally me upon it—but I silenced him with a look that quelled him for the rest

of the journey; and when, at the last stage, I would have taken the reins into my own hand, they all with one accord opposed it.

It was broad daylight when we entered M— and drew up at the 'Rose and Crown.' I alighted and called aloud for a post-chaise to Grassdale. There was none to be had: the only one in the town was under repair. 'A gig, then—a fly—car—anything—only be quick!' There was a gig, but not a horse to spare. I sent into the town to seek one: but they were such an intolerable time about it that I could wait no longer—I thought my own feet could carry me sooner; and bidding them send the conveyance after me, if it were ready within an hour, I set off as fast as I could walk. The distance was little more than six miles, but the road was strange, and I had to keep stopping to inquire my way; hallooing to carters and clodhoppers, and frequently invading the cottages, for there were few abroad that winter's morning; sometimes knocking up the lazy people from their beds, for where so little work was to be done, perhaps so little food and fire to be had, they cared not to curtail their slumbers. I had no time to think of them, however; aching with weariness and desperation, I hurried on. The gig did not overtake me: and it was well I had not waited for it; vexatious rather, that I had been fool enough to wait so long.

At length, however, I entered the neighbourhood of Grassdale. I approached the little rural church—but lo! there stood a train of carriages before it; it needed not the white favours bedecking the servants and horses, nor the merry voices of the village idlers assembled to witness the show, to apprise me that there was a wedding within. I ran in among them, demanding, with breathless eagerness, had the ceremony long commenced? They only gaped and stared. In my desperation, I pushed past them, and was about to enter the churchyard gate, when a group of ragged urchins, that had been hanging like bees to the window, suddenly dropped off and made a rush for the porch, vociferating in the uncouth dialect of their country something which signified, 'It's over—they're coming out!'

If Eliza Millward had seen me then she might indeed have been delighted. I grasped the gate-post for support, and stood intently gazing towards the door to take my last look on my soul's delight, my first on that detested mortal who had torn her from my heart, and doomed her, I was certain, to a life of misery and hollow, vain repining—for what happiness could she enjoy with him? I did not wish to shock her with my presence now, but I had not power to move away. Forth came the bride and bridegroom. Him I saw not; I had eyes for none but her. A long veil shrouded half her graceful form, but did not hide it; I could see that while she carried her head erect, her eyes were bent upon the ground, and her face and neck were suffused with a crimson blush; but every feature was radiant with smiles, and gleaming through the misty whiteness of her veil were clusters of golden ringlets! Oh, heavens! it was not my Helen! The first glimpse made

me start—but my eyes were darkened with exhaustion and despair. Dare I trust them? 'Yes—it is not she! It was a younger, slighter, rosier beauty—lovely indeed, but with far less dignity and depth of soul—without that indefinable grace, that keenly spiritual yet gentle charm, that ineffable power to attract and subjugate the heart—my heart at least. I looked at the bridegroom—it was Frederick Lawrence! I wiped away the cold drops that were trickling down my forehead, and stepped back as he approached; but, his eyes fell upon me, and he knew me, altered as my appearance must have been.

'Is that you, Markham?' said he, startled and confounded at the apparition—perhaps, too, at the wildness of my looks.

'Yes, Lawrence; is that you?' I mustered the presence of mind to reply.

He smiled and coloured, as if half-proud and half-ashamed of his identity; and if he had reason to be proud of the sweet lady on his arm, he had no less cause to be ashamed of having concealed his good fortune so long.

'Allow me to introduce you to my bride,' said he, endeavouring to hide his embarrassment by an assumption of careless gaiety. 'Esther, this is Mr. Markham; my friend Markham, Mrs. Lawrence, late Miss Hargrave.'

I bowed to the bride, and vehemently wrung the bridegroom's hand.

'Why did you not tell me of this?' I said, reproachfully, pretending a resentment I did not feel (for in truth I was almost wild with joy to find myself so happily mistaken, and overflowing with affection to him for this and for the base injustice I felt that I had done him in my mind—he might have wronged me, but not to that extent; and as I had hated him like a demon for the last forty hours, the reaction from such a feeling was so great that I could pardon all offences for the moment—and love him in spite of them too).

'I did tell you,' said he, with an air of guilty confusion; 'you received my letter?'

'What letter?'

'The one announcing my intended marriage.'

'I never received the most distant hint of such an intention.'

'It must have crossed you on your way then—it should have reached you yesterday morning—it was rather late, I acknowledge. But what brought you here, then, if you received no information?'

It was now my turn to be confounded; but the young lady, who had been busily patting the snow with her foot during our short sotto-voce colloquy, very opportunely came to my assistance by pinching her companion's arm and whispering a suggestion that his friend should be invited to step into the carriage and go with them; it being scarcely agreeable to stand there among so many gazers, and keeping their friends waiting into the bargain.

'And so cold as it is too!' said he, glancing with dismay at her slight drapery, and immediately handing her into the carriage. 'Markham, will you come? We are going to Paris, but we can drop you anywhere between this and Dover.'

'No, thank you. Good-by—I needn't wish you a pleasant journey; but I shall expect a very handsome apology, some time, mind, and scores of letters, before we meet again.'

He shook my hand, and hastened to take his place beside his lady. This was no time or place for explanation or discourse: we had already stood long enough to excite the wonder of the village sight-seers, and perhaps the wrath of the attendant bridal party; though, of course, all this passed in a much shorter time than I have taken to relate, or even than you will take to read it. I stood beside the carriage, and, the window being down, I saw my happy friend fondly encircle his companion's waist with his arm, while she rested her glowing cheek on his shoulder, looking the very impersonation of loving, trusting bliss. In the interval between the footman's closing the door and taking his place behind she raised her smiling brown eyes to his face, observing, playfully,—'I fear you must think me very insensible, Frederick: I know it is the custom for ladies to cry on these occasions, but I couldn't squeeze a tear for my life.'

He only answered with a kiss, and pressed her still closer to his bosom.

'But what is this?' he murmured. 'Why, Esther, you're crying now!'

'Oh, it's nothing—it's only too much happiness—and the wish,' sobbed she, 'that our dear Helen were as happy as ourselves.'

'Bless you for that wish!' I inwardly responded, as the carriage rolled away—'and heaven grant it be not wholly vain!'

I thought a cloud had suddenly darkened her husband's face as she spoke. What did he think? Could he grudge such happiness to his dear sister and his friend as he now felt himself? At such a moment it was impossible. The contrast between her fate and his must darken his bliss for a time. Perhaps, too, he thought of me: perhaps he regretted

the part he had had in preventing our union, by omitting to help us, if not by actually plotting against us. I exonerated him from that charge now, and deeply lamented my former ungenerous suspicions; but he had wronged us, still—I hoped, I trusted that he had. He had not attempted to cheek the course of our love by actually damming up the streams in their passage, but he had passively watched the two currents wandering through life's arid wilderness, declining to clear away the obstructions that divided them, and secretly hoping that both would lose themselves in the sand before they could be joined in one. And meantime he had been quietly proceeding with his own affairs; perhaps, his heart and head had been so full of his fair lady that he had had but little thought to spare for others. Doubtless he had made his first acquaintance with her—his first intimate acquaintance at least—during his three months' sojourn at F—, for I now recollected that he had once casually let fall an intimation that his aunt and sister had a young friend staying with them at the time, and this accounted for at least one-half his silence about all transactions there. Now, too, I saw a reason for many little things that had slightly puzzled me before; among the rest, for sundry departures from Woodford, and absences more or less prolonged, for which he never satisfactorily accounted, and concerning which he hated to be questioned on his return. Well might the servant say his master was 'very close.' But why this strange reserve to me? Partly, from that remarkable idiosyncrasy to which I have before alluded; partly, perhaps, from tenderness to my feelings, or fear to disturb my philosophy by touching upon the infectious theme of love.

CHAPTER LII

The tardy gig had overtaken me at last. I entered it, and bade the man who brought it drive to Grassdale Manor—I was too busy with my own thoughts to care to drive it myself. I would see Mrs. Huntingdon—there could be no impropriety in that now that her husband had been dead above a year—and by her indifference or her joy at my unexpected arrival I could soon tell whether her heart was truly mine. But my companion, a loquacious, forward fellow, was not disposed to leave me to the indulgence of my private cogitations.

'There they go!' said he, as the carriages filed away before us. 'There'll be brave doings on yonder to-day, as what come to-morra.—Know anything of that family, sir? or you're a stranger in these parts?'

'I know them by report.'

'Humph! There's the best of 'em gone, anyhow. And I suppose the old missis is agoing to leave after this stir's gotten overed, and take herself off, somewhere, to live on her bit of a jointure; and the young 'un—at least the new 'un (she's none so very young)—is coming down to live at the Grove.'

'Is Mr. Hargrave married, then?'

'Ay, sir, a few months since. He should a been wed afore, to a widow lady, but they couldn't agree over the money: she'd a rare long purse, and Mr. Hargrave wanted it all to hisself; but she wouldn't let it go, and so then they fell out. This one isn't quite as rich, nor as handsome either, but she hasn't been married before. She's very plain, they say, and getting on to forty or past, and so, you know, if she didn't jump at this hopportunity, she thought she'd never get a better. I guess she thought such a handsome young husband was worth all 'at ever she had, and he might take it and welcome, but I lay she'll rue her bargain afore long. They say she begins already to see 'at he isn't not altogether that nice, generous, perlite, delightful gentleman 'at she thought him afore marriage—he begins a being careless and masterful already. Ay, and she'll find him harder and carelesser nor she thinks on.'

'You seem to be well acquainted with him,' I observed.

'I am, sir; I've known him since he was quite a young gentleman; and a proud 'un he was, and a wilful. I was servant yonder for several years; but I couldn't stand their niggardly ways—she got ever longer and worse, did missis, with her nipping and screwing, and watching and grudging; so I thought I'd find another place.'

‘Are we not near the house?’ said I, interrupting him.

‘Yes, sir; yond’s the park.’

My heart sank within me to behold that stately mansion in the midst of its expansive grounds. The park as beautiful now, in its wintry garb, as it could be in its summer glory: the majestic sweep, the undulating swell and fall, displayed to full advantage in that robe of dazzling purity, stainless and printless—save one long, winding track left by the trooping deer—the stately timber-trees with their heavy-laden branches gleaming white against the dull, grey sky; the deep, encircling woods; the broad expanse of water sleeping in frozen quiet; and the weeping ash and willow drooping their snow-clad boughs above it—all presented a picture, striking indeed, and pleasing to an unencumbered mind, but by no means encouraging to me. There was one comfort, however,—all this was entailed upon little Arthur, and could not under any circumstances, strictly speaking, be his mother’s. But how was she situated? Overcoming with a sudden effort my repugnance to mention her name to my garrulous companion, I asked him if he knew whether her late husband had left a will, and how the property had been disposed of. Oh, yes, he knew all about it; and I was quickly informed that to her had been left the full control and management of the estate during her son’s minority, besides the absolute, unconditional possession of her own fortune (but I knew that her father had not given her much), and the small additional sum that had been settled upon her before marriage.

Before the close of the explanation we drew up at the park-gates. Now for the trial. If I should find her within—but alas! she might be still at Staningley: her brother had given me no intimation to the contrary. I inquired at the porter’s lodge if Mrs. Huntingdon were at home. No, she was with her aunt in —shire, but was expected to return before Christmas. She usually spent most of her time at Staningley, only coming to Grassdale occasionally, when the management of affairs, or the interest of her tenants and dependents, required her presence.

‘Near what town is Staningley situated?’ I asked. The requisite information was soon obtained. ‘Now then, my man, give me the reins, and we’ll return to M—. I must have some breakfast at the “Rose and Crown,” and then away to Staningley by the first coach for —.’

At M— I had time before the coach started to replenish my forces with a hearty breakfast, and to obtain the refreshment of my usual morning’s ablutions, and the amelioration of some slight change in my toilet, and also to despatch a short note to my mother (excellent son that I was), to assure her that I was still in existence, and to

excuse my non-appearance at the expected time. It was a long journey to Staningley for those slow-travelling days, but I did not deny myself needful refreshment on the road, nor even a night's rest at a wayside inn, choosing rather to brook a little delay than to present myself worn, wild, and weather-beaten before my mistress and her aunt, who would be astonished enough to see me without that. Next morning, therefore, I not only fortified myself with as substantial a breakfast as my excited feelings would allow me to swallow, but I bestowed a little more than usual time and care upon my toilet; and, furnished with a change of linen from my small carpet-bag, well-brushed clothes, well-polished boots, and neat new gloves, I mounted 'The Lightning,' and resumed my journey. I had nearly two stages yet before me, but the coach, I was informed, passed through the neighbourhood of Staningley, and having desired to be set down as near the Hall as possible, I had nothing to do but to sit with folded arms and speculate upon the coming hour.

It was a clear, frosty morning. The very fact of sitting exalted aloft, surveying the snowy landscape and sweet sunny sky, inhaling the pure, bracing air, and crunching away over the crisp frozen snow, was exhilarating enough in itself; but add to this the idea of to what goal I was hastening, and whom I expected to meet, and you may have some faint conception of my frame of mind at the time—only a faint one, though: for my heart swelled with unspeakable delight, and my spirits rose almost to madness, in spite of my prudent endeavours to bind them down to a reasonable platitude by thinking of the undeniable difference between Helen's rank and mine; of all that she had passed through since our parting; of her long, unbroken silence; and, above all, of her cool, cautious aunt, whose counsels she would doubtless be careful not to slight again. These considerations made my heart flutter with anxiety, and my chest heave with impatience to get the crisis over; but they could not dim her image in my mind, or mar the vivid recollection of what had been said and felt between us, or destroy the keen anticipation of what was to be: in fact, I could not realise their terrors now. Towards the close of the journey, however, a couple of my fellow-passengers kindly came to my assistance, and brought me low enough.

'Fine land this,' said one of them, pointing with his umbrella to the wide fields on the right, conspicuous for their compact hedgerows, deep, well-cut ditches, and fine timber-trees, growing sometimes on the borders, sometimes in the midst of the enclosure: 'very fine land, if you saw it in the summer or spring.'

'Ay,' responded the other, a gruff elderly man, with a drab greatcoat buttoned up to the chin, and a cotton umbrella between his knees. 'It's old Maxwell's, I suppose.'

'It was his, sir; but he's dead now, you're aware, and has left it all to his niece.'

‘All?’

‘Every rood of it, and the mansion-house and all! every hatom of his worldly goods, except just a trifle, by way of remembrance, to his nephew down in —shire, and an annuity to his wife.’

‘It’s strange, sir!’

‘It is, sir; and she wasn’t his own niece neither. But he had no near relations of his own—none but a nephew he’d quarrelled with; and he always had a partiality for this one. And then his wife advised him to it, they say: she’d brought most of the property, and it was her wish that this lady should have it.’

‘Humph! She’ll be a fine catch for somebody.’

‘She will so. She’s a widow, but quite young yet, and uncommon handsome: a fortune of her own, besides, and only one child, and she’s nursing a fine estate for him in —. There’ll be lots to speak for her! ’fraid there’s no chance for uz’—(facetiously jogging me with his elbow, as well as his companion)—‘ha, ha, ha! No offence, sir, I hope?’—(to me). ‘Ahem! I should think she’ll marry none but a nobleman myself. Look ye, sir,’ resumed he, turning to his other neighbour, and pointing past me with his umbrella, ‘that’s the Hall: grand park, you see, and all them woods—plenty of timber there, and lots of game. Hallo! what now?’

This exclamation was occasioned by the sudden stoppage of the coach at the park-gates.

‘Gen’leman for Staningley Hall?’ cried the coachman and I rose and threw my carpet-bag on to the ground, preparatory to dropping myself down after it.

‘Sickly, sir?’ asked my talkative neighbour, staring me in the face. I daresay it was white enough.

‘No. Here, coachman!’

‘Thank’ee, sir.—All right!’

The coachman pocketed his fee and drove away, leaving me, not walking up the park, but pacing to and fro before its gates, with folded arms, and eyes fixed upon the ground, an overwhelming force of images, thoughts, impressions crowding on my mind, and nothing tangibly distinct but this: My love had been cherished in vain—my hope was gone for ever; I must tear myself away at once, and banish or suppress all thoughts of

her, like the remembrance of a wild, mad dream. Gladly would I have lingered round the place for hours, in the hope of catching at least one distant glimpse of her before I went, but it must not be—I must not suffer her to see me; for what could have brought me hither but the hope of reviving her attachment, with a view hereafter to obtain her hand? And could I bear that she should think me capable of such a thing?—of presuming upon the acquaintance—the love, if you will—accidentally contracted, or rather forced upon her against her will, when she was an unknown fugitive, toiling for her own support, apparently without fortune, family, or connections; to come upon her now, when she was reinstated in her proper sphere, and claim a share in her prosperity, which, had it never failed her, would most certainly have kept her unknown to me for ever? And this, too, when we had parted sixteen months ago, and she had expressly forbidden me to hope for a re-union in this world, and never sent me a line or a message from that day to this. No! The very idea was intolerable.

And even if she should have a lingering affection for me still, ought I to disturb her peace by awakening those feelings? to subject her to the struggles of conflicting duty and inclination—to whichsoever side the latter might allure, or the former imperatively call her—whether she should deem it her duty to risk the slights and censures of the world, the sorrow and displeasure of those she loved, for a romantic idea of truth and constancy to me, or to sacrifice her individual wishes to the feelings of her friends and her own sense of prudence and the fitness of things? No—and I would not! I would go at once, and she should never know that I had approached the place of her abode: for though I might disclaim all idea of ever aspiring to her hand, or even of soliciting a place in her friendly regard, her peace should not be broken by my presence, nor her heart afflicted by the sight of my fidelity.

'Adieu then, dear Helen, forever! Forever adieu!'

So said I—and yet I could not tear myself away. I moved a few paces, and then looked back, for one last view of her stately home, that I might have its outward form, at least, impressed upon my mind as indelibly as her own image, which, alas! I must not see again—then walked a few steps further; and then, lost in melancholy musings, paused again and leant my back against a rough old tree that grew beside the road.

CHAPTER LIII

While standing thus, absorbed in my gloomy reverie, a gentleman's carriage came round the corner of the road. I did not look at it; and had it rolled quietly by me, I should not have remembered the fact of its appearance at all; but a tiny voice from within it roused me by exclaiming, 'Mamma, mamma, here's Mr. Markham!'

I did not hear the reply, but presently the same voice answered, 'It is indeed, mamma—look for yourself.'

I did not raise my eyes, but I suppose mamma looked, for a clear melodious voice, whose tones thrilled through my nerves, exclaimed, 'Oh, aunt! here's Mr. Markham, Arthur's friend! Stop, Richard!'

There was such evidence of joyous though suppressed excitement in the utterance of those few words—especially that tremulous, 'Oh, aunt'—that it threw me almost off my guard. The carriage stopped immediately, and I looked up and met the eye of a pale, grave, elderly lady surveying me from the open window. She bowed, and so did I, and then she withdrew her head, while Arthur screamed to the footman to let him out; but before that functionary could descend from his box a hand was silently put forth from the carriage window. I knew that hand, though a black glove concealed its delicate whiteness and half its fair proportions, and quickly seizing it, I pressed it in my own—ardently for a moment, but instantly recollecting myself, I dropped it, and it was immediately withdrawn.

'Were you coming to see us, or only passing by?' asked the low voice of its owner, who, I felt, was attentively surveying my countenance from behind the thick black veil which, with the shadowing panels, entirely concealed her own from me.

'I—I came to see the place,' faltered I.

'The place,' repeated she, in a tone which betokened more displeasure or disappointment than surprise.

'Will you not enter it, then?'

'If you wish it.'

'Can you doubt?'

‘Yes, yes! he must enter,’ cried Arthur, running round from the other door; and seizing my hand in both his, he shook it heartily.

‘Do you remember me, sir?’ said he.

‘Yes, full well, my little man, altered though you are,’ replied I, surveying the comparatively tall, slim young gentleman, with his mother’s image visibly stamped upon his fair, intelligent features, in spite of the blue eyes beaming with gladness, and the bright locks clustering beneath his cap.

‘Am I not grown?’ said he, stretching himself up to his full height.

‘Grown! three inches, upon my word!’

‘I was seven last birthday,’ was the proud rejoinder. ‘In seven years more I shall be as tall as you nearly.’

‘Arthur,’ said his mother, ‘tell him to come in. Go on, Richard.’

There was a touch of sadness as well as coldness in her voice, but I knew not to what to ascribe it. The carriage drove on and entered the gates before us. My little companion led me up the park, discoursing merrily all the way. Arrived at the hall-door, I paused on the steps and looked round me, waiting to recover my composure, if possible—or, at any rate, to remember my new-formed resolutions and the principles on which they were founded; and it was not till Arthur had been for some time gently pulling my coat, and repeating his invitations to enter, that I at length consented to accompany him into the apartment where the ladies awaited us.

Helen eyed me as I entered with a kind of gentle, serious scrutiny, and politely asked after Mrs. Markham and Rose. I respectfully answered her inquiries. Mrs. Maxwell begged me to be seated, observing it was rather cold, but she supposed I had not travelled far that morning.

‘Not quite twenty miles,’ I answered.

‘Not on foot!’

‘No, Madam, by coach.’

‘Here’s Rachel, sir,’ said Arthur, the only truly happy one amongst us, directing my attention to that worthy individual, who had just entered to take her mistress’s things.

She vouchsafed me an almost friendly smile of recognition—a favour that demanded, at least, a civil salutation on my part, which was accordingly given and respectfully returned—she had seen the error of her former estimation of my character.

When Helen was divested of her lugubrious bonnet and veil, her heavy winter cloak, &c., she looked so like herself that I knew not how to bear it. I was particularly glad to see her beautiful black hair, unstinted still, and unconcealed in its glossy luxuriance.

'Mamma has left off her widow's cap in honour of uncle's marriage,' observed Arthur, reading my looks with a child's mingled simplicity and quickness of observation. Mamma looked grave and Mrs. Maxwell shook her head. 'And aunt Maxwell is never going to leave off hers,' persisted the naughty boy; but when he saw that his pertness was seriously displeasing and painful to his aunt, he went and silently put his arm round her neck, kissed her cheek, and withdrew to the recess of one of the great bay-windows, where he quietly amused himself with his dog, while Mrs. Maxwell gravely discussed with me the interesting topics of the weather, the season, and the roads. I considered her presence very useful as a check upon my natural impulses—an antidote to those emotions of tumultuous excitement which would otherwise have carried me away against my reason and my will; but just then I felt the restraint almost intolerable, and I had the greatest difficulty in forcing myself to attend to her remarks and answer them with ordinary politeness; for I was sensible that Helen was standing within a few feet of me beside the fire. I dared not look at her, but I felt her eye was upon me, and from one hasty, furtive glance, I thought her cheek was slightly flushed, and that her fingers, as she played with her watch-chain, were agitated with that restless, trembling motion which betokens high excitement.

'Tell me,' said she, availing herself of the first pause in the attempted conversation between her aunt and me, and speaking fast and low, with her eyes bent on the gold chain—for I now ventured another glance—'Tell me how you all are at Linden-hope—has nothing happened since I left you?'

'I believe not.'

'Nobody dead? nobody married?'

'No.'

'Or—or expecting to marry?—No old ties dissolved or new ones formed? no old friends forgotten or supplanted?'

She dropped her voice so low in the last sentence that no one could have caught the concluding words but myself, and at the same time turned her eyes upon me with a dawning smile, most sweetly melancholy, and a look of timid though keen inquiry that made my cheeks tingle with inexpressible emotions.

'I believe not,' I answered. 'Certainly not, if others are as little changed as I.' Her face glowed in sympathy with mine.

'And you really did not mean to call?' she exclaimed.

'I feared to intrude.'

'To intrude!' cried she, with an impatient gesture. 'What—' but as if suddenly recollecting her aunt's presence, she checked herself, and, turning to that lady, continued—'Why, aunt, this man is my brother's close friend, and was my own intimate acquaintance (for a few short months at least), and professed a great attachment to my boy—and when he passes the house, so many scores of miles from his home, he declines to look in for fear of intruding!'

'Mr. Markham is over-modest,' observed Mrs. Maxwell.

'Over-ceremonious rather,' said her niece—'over—well, it's no matter.' And turning from me, she seated herself in a chair beside the table, and pulling a book to her by the cover, began to turn over the leaves in an energetic kind of abstraction.

'If I had known,' said I, 'that you would have honoured me by remembering me as an intimate acquaintance, I most likely should not have denied myself the pleasure of calling upon you, but I thought you had forgotten me long ago.'

'You judged of others by yourself,' muttered she without raising her eyes from the book, but reddening as she spoke, and hastily turning over a dozen leaves at once.

There was a pause, of which Arthur thought he might venture to avail himself to introduce his handsome young setter, and show me how wonderfully it was grown and improved, and to ask after the welfare of its father Sancho. Mrs. Maxwell then withdrew to take off her things. Helen immediately pushed the book from her, and after silently surveying her son, his friend, and his dog for a few moments, she dismissed the former from the room under pretence of wishing him to fetch his last new book to show me. The child obeyed with alacrity; but I continued caressing the dog. The silence might have lasted till its master's return, had it depended on me to break it; but, in half a

minute or less, my hostess impatiently rose, and, taking her former station on the rug between me and the chimney corner, earnestly exclaimed—

'Gilbert, what is the matter with you?—why are you so changed? It is a very indiscreet question, I know,' she hastened to add: 'perhaps a very rude one—don't answer it if you think so—but I hate mysteries and concealments.'

'I am not changed, Helen—unfortunately I am as keen and passionate as ever—it is not I, it is circumstances that are changed.'

'What circumstances? Do tell me!' Her cheek was blanched with the very anguish of anxiety—could it be with the fear that I had rashly pledged my faith to another?

'I'll tell you at once,' said I. 'I will confess that I came here for the purpose of seeing you (not without some monitory misgivings at my own presumption, and fears that I should be as little welcome as expected when I came), but I did not know that this estate was yours until enlightened on the subject of your inheritance by the conversation of two fellow-passengers in the last stage of my journey; and then I saw at once the folly of the hopes I had cherished, and the madness of retaining them a moment longer; and though I alighted at your gates, I determined not to enter within them; I lingered a few minutes to see the place, but was fully resolved to return to M— without seeing its mistress.'

'And if my aunt and I had not been just returning from our morning drive, I should have seen and heard no more of you?'

'I thought it would be better for both that we should not meet,' replied I, as calmly as I could, but not daring to speak above my breath, from conscious inability to steady my voice, and not daring to look in her face lest my firmness should forsake me altogether. 'I thought an interview would only disturb your peace and madden me. But I am glad, now, of this opportunity of seeing you once more and knowing that you have not forgotten me, and of assuring you that I shall never cease to remember you.'

There was a moment's pause. Mrs. Huntingdon moved away, and stood in the recess of the window. Did she regard this as an intimation that modesty alone prevented me from asking her hand? and was she considering how to repulse me with the smallest injury to my feelings? Before I could speak to relieve her from such a perplexity, she broke the silence herself by suddenly turning towards me and observing—

'You might have had such an opportunity before—as far, I mean, as regards assuring me of your kindly recollections, and yourself of mine, if you had written to me.'

‘I would have done so, but I did not know your address, and did not like to ask your brother, because I thought he would object to my writing; but this would not have deterred me for a moment, if I could have ventured to believe that you expected to hear from me, or even wasted a thought upon your unhappy friend; but your silence naturally led me to conclude myself forgotten.’

‘Did you expect me to write to you, then?’

‘No, Helen—Mrs. Huntingdon,’ said I, blushing at the implied imputation, ‘certainly not; but if you had sent me a message through your brother, or even asked him about me now and then—’

‘I did ask about you frequently. I was not going to do more,’ continued she, smiling, ‘so long as you continued to restrict yourself to a few polite inquiries about my health.’

‘Your brother never told me that you had mentioned my name.’

‘Did you ever ask him?’

‘No; for I saw he did not wish to be questioned about you, or to afford the slightest encouragement or assistance to my too obstinate attachment.’ Helen did not reply. ‘And he was perfectly right,’ added I. But she remained in silence, looking out upon the snowy lawn. ‘Oh, I will relieve her of my presence,’ thought I; and immediately I rose and advanced to take leave, with a most heroic resolution—but pride was at the bottom of it, or it could not have carried me through.

‘Are you going already?’ said she, taking the hand I offered, and not immediately letting it go.

‘Why should I stay any longer?’

‘Wait till Arthur comes, at least.’

Only too glad to obey, I stood and leant against the opposite side of the window.

‘You told me you were not changed,’ said my companion: ‘you are—very much so.’

‘No, Mrs. Huntingdon, I only ought to be.’

‘Do you mean to maintain that you have the same regard for me that you had when last we met?’

‘I have; but it would be wrong to talk of it now.’

‘It was wrong to talk of it then, Gilbert; it would not now—unless to do so would be to violate the truth.’

I was too much agitated to speak; but, without waiting for an answer, she turned away her glistening eye and crimson cheek, and threw up the window and looked out, whether to calm her own, excited feelings, or to relieve her embarrassment, or only to pluck that beautiful half-blown Christmas-rose that grew upon the little shrub without, just peeping from the snow that had hitherto, no doubt, defended it from the frost, and was now melting away in the sun. Pluck it, however, she did, and having gently dashed the glittering powder from its leaves, approached it to her lips and said:

‘This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.—Will you have it?’

I held out my hand: I dared not speak lest my emotion should overmaster me. She laid the rose across my palm, but I scarcely closed my fingers upon it, so deeply was I absorbed in thinking what might be the meaning of her words, and what I ought to do or say upon the occasion; whether to give way to my feelings or restrain them still. Misconstruing this hesitation into indifference—or reluctance even—to accept her gift, Helen suddenly snatched it from my hand, threw it out on to the snow, shut down the window with an emphasis, and withdrew to the fire.

‘Helen, what means this?’ I cried, electrified at this startling change in her demeanour.

‘You did not understand my gift,’ said she—‘or, what is worse, you despised it. I’m sorry I gave it you; but since I did make such a mistake, the only remedy I could think of was to take it away.’

‘You misunderstood me cruelly,’ I replied, and in a minute I had opened the window again, leaped out, picked up the flower, brought it in, and presented it to her, imploring her to give it me again, and I would keep it for ever for her sake, and prize it more highly than anything in the world I possessed.

‘And will this content you?’ said she, as she took it in her hand.

‘It shall,’ I answered.

‘There, then; take it.’

I pressed it earnestly to my lips, and put it in my bosom, Mrs. Huntingdon looking on with a half-sarcastic smile.

‘Now, are you going?’ said she.

‘I will if—if I must.’

‘You are changed,’ persisted she—‘you are grown either very proud or very indifferent.’

‘I am neither, Helen—Mrs. Huntingdon. If you could see my heart—’

‘You must be one,—if not both. And why Mrs. Huntingdon?—why not Helen, as before?’

‘Helen, then—dear Helen!’ I murmured. I was in an agony of mingled love, hope, delight, uncertainty, and suspense.

‘The rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart,’ said she; ‘would you take it away and leave me here alone?’

‘Would you give me your hand too, if I asked it?’

‘Have I not said enough?’ she answered, with a most enchanting smile. I snatched her hand, and would have fervently kissed it, but suddenly checked myself, and said,—

‘But have you considered the consequences?’

‘Hardly, I think, or I should not have offered myself to one too proud to take me, or too indifferent to make his affection outweigh my worldly goods.’

Stupid blockhead that I was!—I trembled to clasp her in my arms, but dared not believe in so much joy, and yet restrained myself to say,—

‘But if you should repent!’

‘It would be your fault,’ she replied: ‘I never shall, unless you bitterly disappoint me. If you have not sufficient confidence in my affection to believe this, let me alone.’

‘My darling angel—my own Helen,’ cried I, now passionately kissing the hand I still retained, and throwing my left arm around her, ‘you never shall repent, if it depend on me alone. But have you thought of your aunt?’ I trembled for the answer, and clasped her closer to my heart in the instinctive dread of losing my new-found treasure.

‘My aunt must not know of it yet,’ said she. ‘She would think it a rash, wild step, because she could not imagine how well I know you; but she must know you herself, and learn to like you. You must leave us now, after lunch, and come again in spring, and make a longer stay, and cultivate her acquaintance, and I know you will like each other.’

‘And then you will be mine,’ said I, printing a kiss upon her lips, and another, and another; for I was as daring and impetuous now as I had been backward and constrained before.

‘No—in another year,’ replied she, gently disengaging herself from my embrace, but still fondly clasping my hand.

‘Another year! Oh, Helen, I could not wait so long!’

‘Where is your fidelity?’

‘I mean I could not endure the misery of so long a separation.’

‘It would not be a separation: we will write every day: my spirit shall be always with you, and sometimes you shall see me with your bodily eye. I will not be such a hypocrite as to pretend that I desire to wait so long myself, but as my marriage is to please myself, alone, I ought to consult my friends about the time of it.’

‘Your friends will disapprove.’

‘They will not greatly disapprove, dear Gilbert,’ said she, earnestly kissing my hand; ‘they cannot, when they know you, or, if they could, they would not be true friends—I should not care for their estrangement. Now are you satisfied?’ She looked up in my face with a smile of ineffable tenderness.

‘Can I be otherwise, with your love? And you do love me, Helen?’ said I, not doubting the fact, but wishing to hear it confirmed by her own acknowledgment. ‘If you loved as I do,’ she earnestly replied, ‘you would not have so nearly lost me—these scruples of false delicacy and pride would never thus have troubled you—you would have seen that the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in

the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathising hearts and souls.'

'But this is too much happiness,' said I, embracing her again; 'I have not deserved it, Helen—I dare not believe in such felicity: and the longer I have to wait, the greater will be my dread that something will intervene to snatch you from me—and think, a thousand things may happen in a year!—I shall be in one long fever of restless terror and impatience all the time. And besides, winter is such a dreary season.'

'I thought so too,' replied she gravely: 'I would not be married in winter—in December, at least,' she added, with a shudder—for in that month had occurred both the ill-starred marriage that had bound her to her former husband, and the terrible death that released her—'and therefore I said another year, in spring.'

'Next spring?'

'No, no—next autumn, perhaps.'

'Summer, then?'

'Well, the close of summer. There now! be satisfied.'

While she was speaking Arthur re-entered the room—good boy for keeping out so long.

'Mamma, I couldn't find the book in either of the places you told me to look for it' (there was a conscious something in mamma's smile that seemed to say, 'No, dear, I knew you could not'), 'but Rachel got it for me at last. Look, Mr. Markham, a natural history, with all kinds of birds and beasts in it, and the reading as nice as the pictures!'

In great good humour I sat down to examine the book, and drew the little fellow between my knees. Had he come a minute before I should have received him less graciously, but now I affectionately stroked his curling looks, and even kissed his ivory forehead: he was my own Helen's son, and therefore mine; and as such I have ever since regarded him. That pretty child is now a fine young man: he has realised his mother's brightest expectations, and is at present residing in Grassdale Manor with his young wife—the merry little Helen Hattersley of yore.

I had not looked through half the book before Mrs. Maxwell appeared to invite me into the other room to lunch. That lady's cool, distant manners rather chilled me at first; but I did my best to propitiate her, and not entirely without success, I think, even in that first short visit; for when I talked cheerfully to her, she gradually became more kind and

cordial, and when I departed she bade me a gracious adieu, hoping ere long to have the pleasure of seeing me again.

'But you must not go till you have seen the conservatory, my aunt's winter garden,' said Helen, as I advanced to take leave of her, with as much philosophy and self-command as I could summon to my aid.

I gladly availed myself of such a respite, and followed her into a large and beautiful conservatory, plentifully furnished with flowers, considering the season—but, of course, I had little attention to spare for them. It was not, however, for any tender colloquy that my companion had brought me there:—

'My aunt is particularly fond of flowers,' she observed, 'and she is fond of Staningley too: I brought you here to offer a petition in her behalf, that this may be her home as long as she lives, and—if it be not our home likewise—that I may often see her and be with her; for I fear she will be sorry to lose me; and though she leads a retired and contemplative life, she is apt to get low-spirited if left too much alone.'

'By all means, dearest Helen!—do what you will with your own. I should not dream of wishing your aunt to leave the place under any circumstances; and we will live either here or elsewhere as you and she may determine, and you shall see her as often as you like. I know she must be pained to part with you, and I am willing to make any reparation in my power. I love her for your sake, and her happiness shall be as dear to me as that of my own mother.'

'Thank you, darling! you shall have a kiss for that. Good-by. There now—there, Gilbert—let me go—here's Arthur; don't astonish his infantile brain with your madness.'

But it is time to bring my narrative to a close. Any one but you would say I had made it too long already. But for your satisfaction I will add a few words more; because I know you will have a fellow-feeling for the old lady, and will wish to know the last of her history. I did come again in spring, and, agreeably to Helen's injunctions, did my best to cultivate her acquaintance. She received me very kindly, having been, doubtless, already prepared to think highly of my character by her niece's too favourable report. I turned

my best side out, of course, and we got along marvellously well together. When my ambitious intentions were made known to her, she took it more sensibly than I had ventured to hope. Her only remark on the subject, in my hearing, was—

'And so, Mr. Markham, you are going to rob me of my niece, I understand. Well! I hope God will prosper your union, and make my dear girl happy at last. Could she have been contented to remain single, I own I should have been better satisfied; but if she must marry again, I know of no one, now living and of a suitable age, to whom I would more willingly resign her than yourself, or who would be more likely to appreciate her worth and make, her truly happy, as far as I can tell.'

Of course I was delighted with the compliment, and hoped to show her that she was not mistaken in her favourable judgment.

'I have, however, one request to offer,' continued she. 'It seems I am still to look on Staningley as my home: I wish you to make it yours likewise, for Helen is attached to the place and to me—as I am to her. There are painful associations connected with Grassdale, which she cannot easily overcome; and I shall not molest you with my company or interference here: I am a very quiet person, and shall keep my own apartments, and attend to my own concerns, and only see you now and then.'

Of course I most readily consented to this; and we lived in the greatest harmony with our dear aunt until the day of her death, which melancholy event took place a few years after—melancholy, not to herself (for it came quietly upon her, and she was glad to reach her journey's end), but only to the few loving friends and grateful dependents she left behind.

To return, however, to my own affairs: I was married in summer, on a glorious August morning. It took the whole eight months, and all Helen's kindness and goodness to boot, to overcome my mother's prejudices against my bride-elect, and to reconcile her to the idea of my leaving Linden Grange and living so far away. Yet she was gratified at her son's good fortune after all, and proudly attributed it all to his own superior merits and endowments. I bequeathed the farm to Fergus, with better hopes of its prosperity than I should have had a year ago under similar circumstances; for he had lately fallen in love with the Vicar of L—'s eldest daughter—a lady whose superiority had roused his latent virtues, and stimulated him to the most surprising exertions, not only to gain her affection and esteem, and to obtain a fortune sufficient to aspire to her hand, but to

render himself worthy of her, in his own eyes, as well as in those of her parents; and in the end he was successful, as you already know. As for myself, I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us. We are just now looking forward to the advent of you and Rose, for the time of your annual visit draws nigh, when you must leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social retirement with us.

Till then, farewell,
Gilbert Markham.
Staningley: June 10th, 1847.

THE END