The Tutor's Ward, Vol. 1

Felicia Skene

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CHAPTER I.

THE life of almost every human being is governed by one master thought—the life, we say, of human beings, not human vegetables, of which many flourish in our soil, making a very goodly show, notwithstanding their respectable unconsciousness of all but their material existence. Every thinking mortal has a sovereign thought, to which all others are subservient. Sometimes its nature causes it to be as a guardian angel to the man, one that walks, serene and bright, side by side with his soul through the tempests and the turmoil of life; on through the dark valley where the great shadow lies, and beyond it, perhaps, where our eyes follow not.

Sometimes its mission seems to be that of a demon, and its foul presence follows the spirit through the glittering joys and the sunshine of life on to the dark valley—and—with what a dread power beyond it, perhaps!

Now, the thought which had ruled the life and soul of John Forde for many years past, looked very like an angel, not only long ago when it was clothed with the beauty and brightness of hope, but even now when it came in its mourning garments to brood over his heart that was as the grave of a dream long dead. It was angel−like still—for what is so bright or so fair of all the fair things of earth, as sweet human love? and it was all the more lovely to his soul that it had been so vain. We know how much more beautiful in death the treasures seem to grow which we have cherished for their living beauty. Yes, the deep love which was the master thought of his existence, had ever seemed to him an angel, but had he looked a little closer, he would have found that the demon's mark was upon it—for had it not taken his life and made it as sad, and useless, and aimless as though it were a gift but given to be squandered away; and had it not absorbed every higher faculty, and feeling, and desire of his mind so entirely, that he lived exactly like a man who had never heard that there was any other world than this, or any other existence save that which was passing for him in such a dull, cold apathy.

What a strange, dreamy−looking individual he seemed as he sat there gazing intently on the fire which he had forgotten to replenish, and watching how the flame appeared to feed even upon the ashes. There was a strong likeness between himself and his Newfoundland dog, who was also engaged in a meditative manner in looking at the dying embers; the expression and the colour of their eyes was at least precisely the same, and the resemblance was height− ened by the long, black hair which hung in much disorder round John Forde's plain, but not inexpressive, countenance.

He was very tall and ungainly, his great ill−shaped hands and feet seemed not to fit him properly, and his head was set uncomfortably on his shoulders. He was wont to go about the world as if he could not conceive for what reason he had been brought into it. He lived quite alone, holding no intercourse with any one, and seeking the acquaintance of none: to all appearance he had no occupation whatever, and he seemed always half asleep. In reality, however, he had a most engrossing employment, which absorbed him entirely. From morning till night did he sit day−dreaming, weaving golden visions of an impossible joy—none knew better than himself how impossible it was; but that bright ideal was all that life could give him of happiness now, and he learnt to lose himself in these glowing fancies so completely, that he had well nigh forgotten the truth of his existence. The reality was cold and objectless and dark, for he had known no other sunshine save the light of one sweet smile, and that had passed away, and therefore he ever fled from it to the visionary world he had made, where he could call back that vanished brightness from the far vista of the past, and in the inner chambers of his soul he had built, as it were, a dwelling for the fair image which was his idol, and there night and day he communed with her.

It was strange to what an extent his abstraction from the things of sense had arrived; he was scarce conscious of external circumstances, and long habit had so increased his power of imagination, that he would carry on the same series of ideal scenes for days together, living over again in his dreams by night what he fancied in his visions of the day, and only waking from them to give a sort of sobbing sigh for their untruth, and then straightway relapsing into their false enchantment.

He had lived for the last ten years in his present abode, which was a small and comfortable house, placed in one of the quietest streets in London. It had come into his possession, along with a moderate fortune which he had inherited from an uncle, whose death had thus rendered him independent, and had saved him from the life of toil and drudgery to which he seemed destined.

Previously to this event, John Forde had been private tutor in a family of much respectability.

The night was chill and dark, for it was late in the month of October, and wild gusts of wind and rain drove

past the windows, whilst the decaying light upon the hearth served only to render the room more cheerless; but although the great dog occasionally looked wistfully round when the blast howled with increasing violence, John Forde seemed unconscious of all that was passing; his bodily presence was there, but his soul was far away. The song of summer birds was in his ears, the scent of summer flowers in the air, the light of a laughing eye was shining on Ms spirit, and his heart was beating high with the ardour of a long−departed youth. An old, well−worn Latin Grammar lay open on his knees, and from its pages he had been gleaning with the strange power of association many a record of the bright days when he had studied that same book with his young pupil; now in the deepening shadow the lines had grown indistinct, and he had abandoned himself to a fair vision where she who had looked with him upon. those pages was seated by his side once more, and the holy bonds of an indissoluble union had melted away in his day−dream as though they had never been, while the wife and mother listened as a young girl, fancy free, to his own pleading voice.

Suddenly, as he sat there, the bell of the outer door was rung, apparently by an impatient hand; for it sent a quick, sharp peal through the house. John started involuntarily; he had literally not a friend in the world, so far as he knew at least, and it was an unusual hour for any tradesman to have left his home. He did not move, however: it could be nothing to interest him, for whom life had no interest, and he listened quietly. He heard the door opened;—after a few minutes' parley, in which he distinguished only his servant's voice, it closed again; and then there came a sound of steps upon the stair: they fell heavily, but rapid and hurried, as of one upon an urgent errand, yet at intervals they ceased entirely, as though the person were unable to proceed.

What was there in that step, so heavy and uncertain, that brought back to him with vivid startling power the remembrance of a day—one of the gladdest in his life—when bounding along the green grass with feet light as the fleetest fawn, he had seen a bright form come dancing towards him, and the sweet ringing voice that now for ever was echoing deep in his soul, called him gaily to come with her far into the woods, where she feared to stray alone? What was there in the footfall on the stairs that night which made him think of this?—why did he grow pale, and shiver from head to foot, as though something unearthly were at hand?

His hands grasped the table for support; his head turned round mechanically, his eyes fixed themselves upon the door; some one had paused behind it; he could hear the quick breathing, the deep−drawn sigh, as if the person were utterly exhausted; a hand was placed upon the lock; he verily expected to see a ghost come in, and was it not a ghost which entered? The ghost of youth, and hope, and beauty, the ghost of a life that had been so full of promise, and now was perishing in such dark night. It was a woman of some thirty years of age. She looked as if she had just arisen from her dying bed; and so in truth she had. Her face was ghastly livid, the fever spot burning on her cheek, and the cold dew gathering on her brow. It seemed extraordinary that she should have had strength to come there. She had been beautiful—how beautiful the throbbing heart of poor John Forde could best have told, but it was all gone now. The large eyes were sunk in their hollow cavities, the features so thin and sharp, the mouth so drawn and distorted with continued pain.

Yet he knew her at once. It was more than ten years since he had looked upon that face, but still had he not seen it in his dreams every day, nay, every hour? He saw no change in her; he only felt it was herself; he saw not that some terrible disease was killing her—that some strange event must have brought her there at such an hour—that some great agony must have nerved her to leave her couch of sickness and come hither through the dark night with the tempest raging round her; he thought nothing of all this; he forgot all, save that he saw before him the living reality of that fair image which was the star of all his visions.

He forgot who she was, and what he was himself, and all the changes which these ten years had wrought for her, if not for him. He forgot that his dreams were dreams, and he thought that the truth had been a falsity, and that his own dear falsehood was the truth. He thought that she had come to realize it all now, to reward him for his deep, long, patient love; he wondered he had never seen it must end thus, and that none could love so well and be for ever hated,—his heart grew faint with joy, he stretched out his trembling hands towards her, his voice faltered like that of a child when it proffers some request which it desires intensely—but he murmured only, "Millicent, my Millicent, have you come at last?"

And she answered with her sobs, deep, bursting sobs, that seemed as if they would have carried away the little life that still was lingering in her sinking frame. She wept for that faithful love, so despised and so rejected—for her own past scorn in the pride of her happiness. She wept for the days that were to come no more, when her heart was so full of hope she had no thought for his despair, when the love she had chosen from the many hearts offered

to her seemed so pure and so true; she wept for the memories that crowded upon her—how she stood a happy bride and cared naught for his anguish—and now, like the stricken bird with the vulture pursuing, she came mourning to him for pity and help. Oh, her youth and her bloom, her hope and her joy, where were they! The friends that were round her had vanished away, and the husband that was more than the world together, what had he become! She wept so bitterly she could not stand,—all this time she had held in her arms a child, who was peacefully sleeping,—she staggered towards a sofa, and laid it down; when he saw her movement, he thought that she was going to leave him, that, as she had ever done in the unreal visions where he had dwelt with her, she was about to pass suddenly from before his eyes, and abandon him to his waking reality of hopeless solitude.

He bounded towards her, but his feet were powerless to support him, so bewil− dered and overcome was he with intense emotion; he fell down, and grasping her dress, he clung to it as an infant terrified to be left alone in the darkness clings to a mother's hand;—truly, it is a very awful thing, as well as a deadly sin, for an immortal soul to deliver up its whole self to such love as this for any earthly being.

"Do not leave me!" he gasped out. "Oh, you know not what days and nights I have passed waiting for this hour—you know not the chill and the gloom of this world without you. I deserve that you should stay with me, if ever patient, longing, and bitter watching by the grave of the past where your image lay entombed, and such faithfulness of heart as chose this solitude with one deep thought of you, rather than all the pleasures life could give, deserved compassion! Do not leave me! It cannot be that any human heart should be so cruel as thus to come and thus to pass away." His words were incoherent, as he poured forth his entreaties, but still with his clinging hands he held her frantically.

She bent over him with a look intensely mournful, and murmured soothingly, "My poor John—my poor, faithful friend!"

She did not remember that once before she had uttered these words in his heating, these very words. It was on the morning of her wedding day;—as she came down the stairs in her bridal dress to enter the carriage that was to take her to the church,—her eye caught a glimpse of the pale, tear−stained face of the poor, despised tutor, whose mad and pertinacious attachment to herself had hitherto only called forth her scorn and even ridicule. He was cowering down amongst the crowd of servants and dependents who had assembled to see her pass; he had hid himself behind them, that, unnoticed in this his bitter hour, he might look for the last time on the face of his worshipped idol—**his worshipped idol**! What words are these to be used from human clay to human clay! Who shall say what judgment they will not call down? who shall say what curse they will not carry on to the third or fourth generation? yet will any affirm that no such feeling was ever cherished for a fellow mortal? Let men look to it who would so scorn the making of graven images and the exalting of carved idols to worship them!—let them look to it whether the love of any earthly thing hath not set itself up supreme in their affections, so that their spirit bows before it, forgetting all other adoration.

He was there shivering from head to foot, his hands clasped tightly over his heaving breast, his head bent forward, and his eyes, through gushing tears, fixing on the young bride their most wistful gaze; for the first time she was touched. She had ever treated him with the utmost haughtiness and contempt, but she could not look unmoved on this extremity of anguish. Perhaps some sympathetic chord was wakened by the latent power of suffering not yet developed in her own young heart; but whatever prompted her, as she passed him walking over the flowers they had strewn beneath her feet, she held out her hand to him, and said, "My poor John—my poor faithful friend." He could not touch her hand. he trembled too much; so she passed on, and he saw her face no more; but the words rang on his ears with an indestructible sound; they had lived with him through these ten long years; he had heard them in his dreams last night, and now he heard them again in actual reality.

They brought back the truth to his bewildered mind; the mists and the clouds which his long habit of visionary life had gathered on his spirit, seemed to clear away as that voice came sounding on his ear; the utter confusion which her sudden appearance had caused in his thoughts, passed suddenly from him. He knew and remembered all. He raised himself up, and with a shaking hand brushed the tears from his eyes, and then he looked on her; he saw and understood who she was. These many years she had been the wife of another man, of one whom she had loved as he loved her! and yet more,—had none other ever come to gain the precious gift of her dear love, it had availed him nothing. Those conventional, unrighteous laws which men have made as barriers, raised to ward off from them their kind, had placed a gulf between the proud, beautiful heiress and himself. He knew and felt it all; he had boldly won her to himself in his sweet dreams; he had chosen to forget that ever she was other than the

fair, young girl of his early days, but in actual life he knew how it must be—the requirements of the world's code of virtues exacted from him an outward conformity to the circumstances of their outward position; this it required, that in appearance he should seek no part in the existence of that wedded wife, but with this much it would be well content;—it would ask no reason of a ten years' longing for an unpermitted lot, of a ten years' coveting of a happiness denied; of a ten years' cherishing of an unauthorized affection. It was enough if, in the sight of men, he had resigned himself to his appointed destiny; if outwardly he had made no murmuring for the treasure taken from him; if he had never so much as sought to look again on that which never could be his; not only would men say this was enough, but they would talk with admiration, possibly, of his long, patient, silent, hopeless love. They would say it was a noble thing to see how true a human heart could be, how constant, even in despair! Oh, false teaching of a most unholy world! And was the love permitted? And what availed the conformity of outward seeming when the heart was thus rebellious; and because John Forde had never breathed a word or moved a step to gain the idol of his life, was it less in him a heavy sin so to crave for a happiness refused, and not alone refused by distinct and high decree, but made a thing he had no right to crave for? and because he was so patient and so humble, and so quiet, was he less an arrogant, presumptuous rebel who gave the soul and heart that should have worshipped nought on earth, to be an offering to such human dust! Ah! that fair outward veil of a world's virtue—veiling what hideousness!—it may serve right well to clothe the flesh until we reach the grave−door, but there, where the flesh itself must be stripped off; woe to the soul that has no better garment for the covering of its unholiness than this! But John Forde remembered with the words she had uttered, what the Millicent of his early love was to him in the world's sight, and mechanically he drew back and murmured, hesitatingly, "Mrs. Grey."

She sighed heavily. "Yes, it is even so, it is I—myself; but the hour is passing, and my time is short, how short, alas! alas! in every way. I came here with an earnest purpose, and it must be fulfilled, and I have little strength, and much, so much to say; will you listen, patiently, my good, dear, John, as in that happy, olden time?"

"Oh, Millicent, Millicent!" he said, and trembled violently.

"Do you remember," she went on, with a smile more sad than ever dying sunbeam on a fading autumn sky, "you called me your queen in those bright days! and all I ever wished for was done by you, almost before I knew my own thoughts had desired it."

"And so it shall be still," he said. "All that I was to you when we last met, I still must be, not now alone, but ever while I live and breathe. I am unchanged, most miserable that I am, unchanged!"

"I knew it," she answered, sadly; "some instinct told me so, but I must tell you why I came, and my strength is failing. There is One waiting for me who will admit of no delay. And Death himself must not stop the words upon my lips till you have heard my one petition and granted it, if for the dying woman you indeed can feel what once was felt for the blooming girl; sit there," she continued, "and I must be at your feet, for I am come a suppliant."

He took the chair to which she pointed, apparently scarce knowing what he did, for he was stunned by the events of the last half hour, and truly such an interview, breaking in upon the solitude and silence of so many years, might well have bewildered a stronger mind than his; he seemed now to have no power but to look upon her face and listen to her voice. She took a low seat and placed herself upon it at his feet.

CHAPTER II.

THE firelight gleamed on the face of the dying woman as she sat there, and showed how very near death she really was. She had fortified herself with some powerful stimulant for this exertion, but it was clear that its effect would not last long; she had taken off her bonnet, and her hair falling loosely round her denoted that she had risen in much haste from her sick bed. The large cloak with which she had sought to screen herself from the wind and rain was of some coarse material, evidently chosen as a disguise; she held it with one hand folded over her breast, that rose and fell with the convulsive heavings of fever. What a contrast she was to the bright and joyous bride John Forde last recollected her! Then she stood so radiant and so blooming in her fair white robes, on the threshold of a life of promise, with sunny hope and joy as handmaids at her side,—now she stood on the threshold of another life unto whose promise she dared not look, and her attendants were in mourning garments—deep penitence and deep remorse.

She sat leaning her head on her hand; looking up into his face with her mournful eyes—mournful as are only the eyes of the dying, or of those who, living, weep that they have not died more utterly to all the evil they abhor. The sight of John Forde seemed to have recalled so many memories of her happy youth, that when she spoke it was musingly, as though she were but communing with herself.

"How true it has all proved, how strangely, sadly true—your words have proved, dear father! You said we had no right to take our life into our own hands and say, 'I am free; I will make of it what I please. I will play what game with it I will—it is for myself alone. I will seek happiness in my own way, and if I fail I alone shall suffer.' You said, one might perhaps with impunity risk suffering, but not sin,—and I risked both and have escaped from neither; poor father, you strove to struggle then with my heart's deep love—you might as well have striven to fathom or to stem the wild waters of the sea. You said that noble, talented, fair to all eyes, as was my lover, William Grey, it never would prosper me to be his wife; for that he was one who scoffed at holy things, who only sought to drink deep draughts of this life's pleasure, whose heart was full of idols—and himself unto himself the chief. You said that none could touch the burning flame and be unscathed—none be wedded to corruption and remain unsullied; and I said that because he scoffed I need not scoff—because he sinned I need not sin—but rather I would lead him right. Alas, alas! and where has he led me!" She bowed her head upon her hands for a few minutes, and then suddenly looked up.

"John, I would not have you think I love him, my husband, less than in that hour when I told my poor, fond father, in all the pride of my rebellious, selfish will, that I would be his wife, or never that of mortal man. No, I will say, as you said even now, I am unchanged, most miserable that I am, unchanged; nor yet would I have you think he led me wilfully to any evil. My outward life has been unstained and bright; the world will tell you I have been a blameless wife and mother, most assiduous in my little pleasing duties, most courteous, most benevolent; and it is very true—I have been all this, and more—I never injured any, I have striven to relieve and comfort some; I never murmured when he slighted and neglected me; but if you would know the crime for which I suffer now in bitter penitence, it was but this—I forgot there was a heaven or a hell. He loved the world so fondly, he taught me to love it fondly too; and it is a jealous world, it must have the whole heart or none at all—it had all mine! He arranged our plan of life, that it should be one ever varying scene of pleasure and amusement. We had wealth at our command, surrounding us with every luxury, making us forget that there was suffering or evil anywhere. Ah, that prosperity, how terrible a snare it is!"

She had spoken these last sentences in a dreamy, musing tone, rolling herself to and fro as if in pain, and John Forde sat listening to her with large tears, of which he was all unconscious, stealing down his cheeks; her voice was so very sad, so like to the rise and fall of the sighing wind on a dreary night, none could have heard it unmoved—how far less could he! Suddenly the little child who lay sleeping on the sofa, moved in its slumber, and slightly moaned.

The mother started at the sound, as if a voice had called her angrily; her pale cheek crimsoned; her eye sparkled with a sudden energy; she clasped her hands like one who asks forgiveness.

"My child, my child! that any thought of other days, that any memory of departed hope, sweet though it be, should lead me to forget how on this hour hangs your whole life's destiny! Alas, to think that one could be so weak as thus to sit dreaming by the side of her own yawning grave!" She turned and raised herself so that she was

almost kneeling before him.

"John, I need not tell you that I am sinking under a mortal disease—that the grasp of death is tightening on my heart most rapidly—that a few days must terminate my life. It is therefore the petition of a dying woman that I beseech of you to grant—of one who never will live to ask another. Listen, then, while I tell you briefly, as those must speak for whom the worms await, what is my heart's desire—the desire you alone can grant. To explain it, you must know that my husband, not content with luxury and dissipation, and a life wherein no master was acknowledged but his own corrupt and lawless will, soon passed to deeper shades of crime. There is no standing still, no passive inaction for the soul! On, on, by the steep ascent and the toilsome path, from a longing after purity unto the purity itself, or downward by the smooth alluring way from indifference to forgetfulness, from forgetfulness to hate; and it was so with him. He hates now all that is not evil. Gambling, revelry, and the allurements of sin in every shape, have gotten him in their possession. My house from day to day is filled with those who live but for the pleasures of the world; and there is one among them with a face as fair as her hidden soul is black, to whom he will give my place when I am gone. I know it—know it well." She bowed her head, and the deep sobs burst forth again; but soon driving back the burning tears, she went on:

"I took pleasure in that society; I made my joy and my delight in that brilliant life of gaiety for many years; I never thought of looking what depths might be beneath that sparkling surface; I never thought of saying to my spirit, Is all well with thee? art thou ready when the dark−winged angel comes? But at last he did come whose office is to strip the covering of beauty from all deceitful things. Death came, and then I learnt to know what I had been so long, and am. I must not tell you of myself—he leaves me not the time. I must not tell you all that I would give to stand once more beside you as I stood upon my wedding morning, a bride, not yet a wife; knowing so little evil, an innocent girl in an honourable, quiet home, with that good old father warding off unhallowed things. How would I tear away the bridal veil, and fling aside the bridal robe, and betake me to the sackcloth and the ashes, if beneath them I could keep my heart in purity. No, I must tell you only of one deep thought that came as it were hand in hand with death, and that has eaten into my very soul since then. It is for my child—my little angel child—pure as the stainless lily, guileless and sportive as the tender lamb—it is for her—that she may never, never live as I have lived, and never come to be what I now am. But I am dying. Who will watch her?—who will guard her?—who will save her—save her from her father!—yes, from him! Do you know what he once said? It was one day after I knew that I was going fast where the soul can make to itself no fair deception, that suddenly my love for him, unquenchable, came swelling so strongly through my heart, I could not bear that he should risk such perishing, and I flung my arms round him, and besought him, with many an imploring word and truthful argument, to think on all that was to come; but oh! with what bitter anger did he fling me from him, and ask if I were mad, to speak such hateful folly in his ears; and then—he well knew how best to be revenged on me. He took my child, my little child, and held her in his arms, as though for a witness to his oath, and swore that in her, at least, he would have no canting hypocrite, that she should never so much as hear the things that were so odious to him. A merry life should she lead—no fear of aught before her eyes! And **she** to whom he will give my place when I am gone, she, too, was there, and said, with such a smile, it were well, in truth, for once to educate a child free from the foolish trammels and the needless burden of a faith and a required duty;—and I helpless in my shroud, what should I do?

"Oh, John, dear John, my agony was very great for many days, and then the thought of you came like a sunbeam to my soul—of you, my faithful, truest friend; for you must save her, you must take her, you must guard her from her father. Yes, my child must be stolen from her father; there is no other means. Whole days and nights I have lain and thought upon it, racking my very soul to find a method of escape for her—and there is none save this. I know not if it be not in itself a crime to steal a child from its surviving parent—I have no power now to discern between right and wrong; I only know she must not stay with him, he would fulfill his impious oath! for his soul's ease he would,—that none might ever warn him. Oh, she must not stay with him; she must never breathe the atmosphere of that unhappy house, my most unhallowed home; she must be taken now in her young innocence, and reared as the spotless snowdrop in some hidden nook, where no polluting breath shall ever stain my snow−white flower; and you must take her, John, dear John,—there is none other who could conceal her from her father. I have arranged it all—you shall have no trouble —my fortune is secured to her—and I will leave a letter for her aunt, a letter to be given when I am buried,—for none refuse the dead who cry to them,—telling her all the truth, and praying her to watch, though at a distance, over my sweet child, and never to reveal her residence

until her father's death—then she will take her from you, John, and you shall be free again,—only that my spirit will continue still to bless you. Oh, I scarce can speak with the intensity of my desire; say that you will grant my prayer, dear John, my dying prayer, speak peace to my poor aching heart; you know not how I love that child. They say the dead will rest whatever be; I think that I could rest whatever passed on earth, excepting it were that little one in danger. Ah, tempt me not to take her with me, to brand my soul undying with the stain of murder, and thus to save hers from contamination; tempt me not to this, but take her, take her now this night—to−morrow, go with her across the sea, to some far distant country, where her father and her father's wife shall never hear of her. There guard her in innocence, in holiness, in peace, and such blessings as a mother's heart alone could conceive in recompense shall, with my dying breath, be yours."

She had spoken with such exceeding vehemence, her abrupt and rapid utterance had gained such energy from the fever raging in her veins, that now the false strength went from her utterly: she sank down breathless, panting, and exhausted.

As for John Forde, his whole frame was shaking with emotion; that she should have been so wretched, that she should come praying to him for succour, that she should doubt his willingness to die for her—all these thoughts filled his heart to bursting, and he could not speak. At length she lifted up her face; she knew not what his silence meant, and the anguish of suspense was most unbearable. Her countenance showed that the exertions of this night had greatly shortened her brief remaining life; her eyes had brightened as though all the soul had gathered there, but the pale lips could scarcely articulate.

"Speak—say—will you—will you grant my prayer, and save my child?" She joined her hands, and lifted them in supplication; "for the sake of the dear love wherewith you loved me in brighter days!"

The look which he gave her was describable; there was in it such a world of unutterable affection, of mournful reproach, of anguish for her suffering most intense, but because of the very depth and strength of the feelings struggling in his heart, his answer was very simple, "Are you not, Millicent?"

It was enough, quite enough; she rose at once, and going to the sofa she knelt down beside her child and laid her pale brow, damp with the dews of death, upon the little, soft hands folded in that sleep of guilelessness; and then no sound was heard save the infant's gentle breathing, that sounded not as if this life could ever make it swell out to a bitter sigh. When she rose she was very calm, but spent and worn, she spoke with difficulty.

"I am so feeble, I think death is at hand, and the little strength I have, must now be given to take me home; they must not know I ever left it. I said I would be alone, that I wished to sleep a few hours quietly; I bade them come again at midnight, and so they went, and I stole softly out and came on wandering hither. Thankful I am I came to find such peace—oh, thankful as no words can say; but now I must return, that they may find me when they come—her they will not find, and never shall. Oh, joy unspeakable!—Her old nurse is below, a faithful creature, whom I trust entirely; she loves me well, and she will go with you wherever you may take my child. She will tell you all, better far than I can now. My words must be few, for he is devouring the breath upon my lips; say once again, dear John, that you will take her from this city and this land to−morrow."

And he answered at once, "To−morrow!" but as he saw her raise those eyes so peaceful, now that they were beautiful once more, with a long, fixed gaze of thankfulness, and then move slowly to depart, he suddenly rose with convulsive energy from his place. His breath came thick and fast from his labouring chest, his eyes were wild with their look of terror. The concentrated anguish of that moment could scarcely find vent in words; he only said, "Millicent, do not go," but he grasped her arm at the same time with a strength of which he was unconscious. She saw at once, that unless she had power to overcome his overwhelming emotion, a scene would ensue which must kill her; gently she took his hand, calmly she looked into his face, and the mild gaze of her dear eyes soothed him. Softly she spoke in a low, sweet voice, "John, I know it is a sad thing for you that I should go, very sad that I should die, but you have deepest comfort in knowing how strangely happy you have made that death, and you can make it happier still, you can brighten yet more the dark way for me—you will, I know you will, when I have told you how. Dear John, when we last parted I went with a smile and you with tears, and often since, those tears of yours have fallen on my spirit very bitterly; their recollection filled me with remorse, and now, to−night, I have wept many such, and your kind hand has wiped them all away; let me see you smile then as I go forth. Let me think no more with vain regret upon your bitter weeping for my scorn and cruel neglect; let me carry with me the remembrance of your smile, because to−day I have acknowledged all your faithfulness and truth, and thanked and blessed you for it; it will lighten the shadows deepening round me in mysterious gloom, if I can remember the last

look of your face in gladness. Smile on me, good, dear John, and so shall be our kind farewell,"

He had never disobeyed her, nor did he now, but there are no words to say what that obedience cost him. He looked on her and smiled; her own face brightened strangely as she met his gaze—she stooped till her cold lips touched his hand, then pointed to the sleeping child, and so going forth she left them both and went her way. He never looked upon her face again.

CHAPTER III.

A SUMMER'S evening in Provence—what a bright, sweet vision these words bring up before the memory of those who know that smiling land! such a breathless, cloudless beauty over earth and sky, such a softness in the breeze that steals along, wandering to find the orange flowers and rob them of their fragrance; such a brightness in the lingering of the sunset and in the dawning of the moon and stars, and over all so calm and soothing a repose; an intensity of rest and quiet best suited to those who, in the decline of life, are fain to take their ease in stillness after the long, sore journey, or who, in the decline of hope, are weary of the world's tumult, and would be alone to see if their own heart can tell them nothing better; that evening's quietude, however, was by no means congenial to the gay, young girl who sat there beneath the olive−trees. It was in a large garden attached to one of the best houses in the quaint old town of Aix, a pleasant spot, not far from the noble church, whose deep bell, tolling nightly, failed not to send its solemn echoes through those quiet bowers.

Millicent Grey had never known another home; at least she remembered none save this, and every object which surrounded her was most familiar; her great, restless eyes, sparkling with the first ardour of youth and hope, went ranging impatiently from side to side as if in search of something new. At last she turned and fixed them on the old French bonne who sat in state before her as her appointed companion. There was something irresistibly attractive in this little old woman: she was so neat, so trim, in her pretty Provencâl costume. Her small, piercing black eyes twinkled with an expression of such comical merriment, though set in a countenance which certainly was uncommonly ugly, whilst her wide mouth, with its range of splendid white teeth, gave evidence of the most determined good humour. She sat knitting some indescribable piece of work with extraordinary speed, and every now and then looked up at her young charge with a gay, happy smile, which had in it no particular meaning, but was only designed to express her perfect contentment with the world in general. Millicent looked at her for a long time: then suddenly starting from her seat she threw herself down on the grass at her feet, and taking her by the two hands, exclaimed—

"Oh, Nanette, Nanette,—how I wish you would change your face!"

"Ma chérie!" said the old woman in astonishment, and then laughed merrily; "and why?"

"Because it is always the same face, every day the same, it never tells me anything new—nothing ever does; everything goes on the same."

"Ah bien, mais que veux tu? I would do anything to amuse you, but as to this —" She shrugged her shoulders with a comical grimace.

"No, no," said Millicent, putting her arms round her. "I was joking, good Nanette, I would not change your dear, old face, not even if I could, I lave it much too well—no—but I know what I do wish," she added, with a sigh.

"And what is it?" asked Nanette, "sure you shall have it if it is not quite so impossible as the last."

"That I am sure it is," said Millicent, "so I need not think about it; but what I should like would be that some one should come here, some one very grave and wise and good,—some one from England, I fancy they are very wise there—that such a person should come and answer all the questions I would put to him."

"And what would you ask?" said Nanette.

"What would I ask? Oh, everything; there is so much that bewilders and confuses me. I want to find out the meaning of the whole world, and the reason and purpose of all that goes on in it. You do not understand me, Nanette, and I do not think I quite understand myself; but I go living here all alone, so to speak, from day to day with such strange, restless thoughts working in me, that I scarce can bear it. Uncle Forde never talks to me, and I know all you could tell me, Nanette dear, which is not much; and everything I read and see only shows me the outward surface, it tells me that things are so, such life and death, and joy and sorrow, but it never tells me **why**! I am sure, in all existence, there is a hidden reason which I cannot penetrate."

"And why should you, my mignonne? At sixteen one ought to find out only the best way to amuse one's self. Ah, when I was sixteen—"

"You liked singing and dancing as well as I do now, did you not, chère Nanette? Well, but one cannot dance and sing all one's life; one did not come into the world for that alone, because then what would be the use of all the old, stiff people. Now, that is precisely what puzzles me, that is the very first question I should like to ask my

wise man if he would only come; I want to know what we are all living for! What is the use of life? What are we to do with it now we have got it?"

"Ah bien," said Nanette, looking quite bewildered; "and what does every one do with it?"

"What do they do with it? Why, they eat, and they drink, and they sleep, and they take a great deal of trouble to keep themselves alive now they are living, but then I say, what for? pourquoi? what is the use of living only to keep ourselves alive?"

"Sais−je moi," said Nanette, shrugging her shoulders; "but no, my petite, we do more than eating and sleeping; look, I am knitting!"

"Very well, so you are; now then, let us analyze the knitting. I am not going to touch it, don't be afraid, I am only going to pull it morally to pieces. This piece of knitting, what is it?"

"Why, a stocking, and that is very useful, I am sure; it will keep my feet warm."

"Yes, but you are obliged to keep your feet warm, because you are alive; you don't live to keep your feet warm."

This sort of reasoning was quite bewildering to Nanette: she looked comically at her work for a few minutes as if she ought to be disgusted with it, but its hold on her affections was far too firm. She gave a careless smile, seeming to intimate that, however unworthy, her knitting must ever be dear to her, and taking it up again, plied her needles vigorously. Millicent went on, "It is the same in everything; now when M. le Roux died last year, his wife came here making such lamentations. Oh, he was such a loss, what would the world do without him; a man of such taste, such an elegant mind, and always busy, never idle a moment; he had built that great house and laid out those beautiful grounds; he had superintended the placing of every stone himself. It had taken him ever so many years, but it was a charming place to live in when it was done, and then he had grown so used to the occupation, that after the house was finished he kept adding room upon room only for employment. Well, M. le Roux spent all his life there in making himself a place to live in, and died of old age when it was about ready; his wife married and they sold the house, and even M. le Roux's bones did not get a comfortable grave there. So I just ask you, Nanette, don't you think M. le Roux might quite as well not have lived at all?"

"Ah, poor M. Le Roux!" said Nanette, deprecatingly.

"Bien! but there was also young Adolphe, who was thrown from his horse and killed; what a state every one was in about him, how they all said it was such a misfortune, such a fine young man, any one could have been better spared; but what did M. Adolphe ever do, excepting play billiards and try to valser à deux temps? What was the good of his living? What was the use of him?"

"My dear," said Nanette, imposingly, with the air of a person who is sure of her position; "the père André has often told me nothing was ever made without a use."

"Then I wish some one would tell me my use," said Millicent, with a sigh; "for here I go on eating and sleeping and living, for no purpose that I can see."

"I will tell you what," said Nanette, briskly; "the use of living is that we may be happy, which we could not be unless we were alive. I am sure it is that; I am convinced of "

"Well, I could understand, that," ex− claimed Millicent, "for it is such a charming thing to feel so happy as I do sometimes. But then every one is not happy—nor any one always, not even you and I, Nanette; and look at Uncle Forde, what a wretched man he is. And then, again, to be happy, there is a something wanting, I don't know what it is, a something which one's inmost heart requires, and which nothing external can procure. One cannot sit down and say—now I am going to be so happy, I am determined to be so very happy—you may be sure one would feel terribly discontented if one did. There is a vacancy, a restlessness in one's spirit, which is not satisfied with only a pleasant aspect to the outer world. I cannot understand it."

She turned suddenly, and raising her bright young face, to which some earnest thought had given a look of gravity quite foreign to her usual expression, she said, in a low tone:—

"Nanette, I am certain of this; there is a secret in life which I do not comprehend, and perhaps never shall."

Nanette stooped to kiss her fondly, and then smoothing the flowing hair that shaded the young girl's face, she said:—

"I cannot bear that you should not know everything you want to know, my darling. Why don't you ask M. Forde? Perhaps he could tell you. He must surely grow very wise, sitting so silent, thinking all day long. It makes me go to sleep to look at him; so he must be very leaned, for I always go to sleep when I read a grave book. I

should ask him, if I were you; perhaps he could explain it all."

"Perhaps he could," said Millicent, thoughtfully. "It is worth the trial, at all events. I will go to him."

She returned the embrace of the old bonne with warm affection, and bounding across the garden, entered the house: then very gently and quietly she opened the door, and stole into the room where she knew she should find her guardian.

His hands folded on his knee, his eyes fixed, his bead drooping on his breast, John Forde sat in exactly the same attitude as we saw him fourteen years before, when the dying mother of the young girl who now stood by his side, came, in her last extremity, to implore the succour of him she had so despised.

The singular plan which she had adopted in order to save her child from that most unnatural misfortune, a father's evil influence, had been strangely successful; at least, in so far as that Millicent Grey had been conveyed from England the very next day, and had remained at Aix ever since, without having held the slightest communication with Mr. Grey. The letter which Mrs. Grey had written to Mrs. Egerton, her half−sister, on behalf of the child over whom she could watch no more, had produced its full effect, as she expected. Mrs. Egerton was not a person to lend her assistance willingly to any project that looked romantic, or to burden herself any more duties than those which her position in life imposed upon her, and which she most ably performed, at least so she was wont to certify herself by many significant hints. But an appeal from the grave is never unheeded: there are scarce any who could dare to slight it, albeit unconscious of the motive which constrains them so scrupulously to perform to the very letter the last wishes of the departed. They believe that they are thus careful because they consider it a sacred duty (how sacred in truth they little know), but were they to analyze their feelings a little more closely, they would find that they were chiefly actuated by a superstitious dread, an unacknowledged terror that their midnight rest would be disturbed by the pale phantom, whose wishes they had neglected, coming to gaze on them with reproachful eyes, because they had no compassion for the great helplessness of death.

Whatever might have been Mrs. Egerton's motives, however, she was determined rigidly to follow the instructions of her dying sister with regard to Millicent Grey. The letter informed her that Aix was to be the place of the child's abode, and charged her most carefully to conceal all knowledge of the fact from her father. There was to be a regular correspondence between John Forde and Mrs. Egerton, so that she might always be certain that the child was well cared for, and at the death of Mr. Grey, whenever that might occur, she was entreated to receive Millicent into her own home. Should she die herself first, another relation was to be appointed to undertake the charge, for which the fortune secured to the young girl could give an ample remuneration. But Mrs. Grey plainly foresaw that a life so dissipated and reckless as that of her husband could not be greatly prolonged. She herself survived only a few days after her interview with John Forde, and it was some time before Mr. Grey rightly understood that she had really taken means to place the child out of his reach. His anger was at first excessive; but having ascertained, as he was enabled to do without much difficulty, that she had been established somewhere on the continent, he found it would be a great deal of trouble to have her restored to himself, and gradually he ceased to wish it. The care of a young child was by no means a duty congenial to his tastes, and in process of time he almost forgot her existence, excepting to wish, when he found himself a ruined man, that he could obtain possession of the fortune Millicent inherited from her mother. He married again, as the instinct of the neglected wife's affection had prophesied, and his bride was even less than himself disposed to undertake the burden of a step−daughter's education.

Thus John Forde remained perfectly unmolested with his young charge; and no change whatever had occurred in their position since the first day that he established himself at Aix with the little infant whom he diplomatically called his niece.

For the first few years he imagined himself exonerated from making any attempt to educate her. He left her entirely to the motherly care of Nanette, who had replaced the English nurse soon after their arrival, and only took measures every day to ascertain that she was alive, and likely to live. He had recourse to various extraordinary expedients in order to convince himself of this fact, sometimes making the most horrible grimaces, in order that the frightened child might attest to the strength of her lungs by loud screams of terror, or else giving vent to an unearthly howl, that he might have the comfort of seeing her run vigorously away. With some one such effort made every day he acquitted himself to his own satisfaction of his duties as guardian for a considerable time. At last, however, several startling remarks made by Millicent began to awaken him to the fact that she was fast advancing out of infancy, and that it was absolutely necessary to give her some instruction. It was now that John

was sorely perplexed; he was nearly certain that something ought to come before all the Latin and mathematics with which he proposed to enlighten her ultimately, but he vainly endeavoured to discover what was the first branch of science in which young ladies were usually instructed. To his infinite relief, however, when he came to examine into the matter, he found that Nanette had taken it into her own hands, and that she had already taught the child to read and write, to embroider, and to sing with a voice sweet and clear as the notes of a wild spring bird.

Soon after, he was also further relieved from his responsibility by the intervention of a very clever and amiable French lady, whose little daughter was Millicent's playmate, and who, compassionating the neglected condition of the clever English child, proposed to John that his niece should take lessons along with her own little girls from the various masters whose services she considered necessary. He was too happy to agree to this plan, and the result was, that Millicent, at sixteen, had all the accomplishments which the world requires from persons in her station, and withal a great deal of curious information in the abstruser sciences, for which she was indebted to the teaching of John himself. She was naturally clever; and with a fund of vivacity and light−heartedness she also combined great depth of thought, and an active penetrating mind; but there was one peculiarity in her education which was destined to have a most powerful influence on her whole future destiny. Whilst ample learning was given her to supply her intellectual wants as an inhabiter of this world, her young earnest soul was altogether shut out from the vast range of spiritual knowledge.

A fitting teacher truly, in the faith of an immortal soul, would John Forde have been, who had never known any other worship save the idolatry of heart wherewith he bowed himself before the creature of clay; for it mattered not what he professed himself—of professors we have enough; and very fair and angel−like this race of man would be if only the hidden spirit, sullied and dust−cleaving, had some little affinity with that universal profession; but we do not make poison into wine by putting a label on the bottle to that effect. It had never occurred to John Forde to think what he really was in this respect himself; his soul chained to its human idol had no power to look around or upward; but in considering the education of Millicent Grey, it did strike him that the faith of her fathers was one of the things she must be taught. Well, he would teach it to her. This was easily done. It should take its course along with other sciences.

There were several standard works which gave her the various doctrines in their regular order; and he had found her so apt a scholar, when he instructed her in the rudiments of chemistry and astronomy, that he doubted not she would learn religion without much trouble. He taught it to her as a species of moral mathematics; and so soon as she was thoroughly conversant with the leading principles—accurate in her knowledge of the more important facts—and quite dear, especially respecting dates and localities, he conceived he had abundantly done his duty, and recurred to the subject no more.

To Millicent Grey it was therefore what it is to three parts of the world, an abstract theory, which had no more to do with the hidden life of her spirit, than those astronomical calculations in which she was often engaged, and a matter as completely external from herself as the code of virtues which she was taught to admire in the heathen philosophers of old. Like the millions who have gone before her and the millions who will come after, she treated it usa manual of useful knowledge not likely to be immediately in requisition, and therefore to be laid aside with much respect till such time as she should reach the Gate of the Tomb, when it would serve as a passport to that other life in which she duly believed, and of which she never thought. It is not **natural** to the young heart to look beyond this present world, this palpable, visible reality, with its manifold attractions, because no bitter experience has ever taught them that it can never, with all its bright things, fill their own immensity of longing. The cloudless eyes for whom no tears of disappointment have dimmed the brightness of this mortal home, turn not easily from the fair, ideal future in which they hope on earth.

Youth has a faith and a worship of its own; the worship is the adoration of happiness, and they imagine this god of their idolatry to be enthroned among the sunny bowers of this world, which is so beautiful, so sorrowful, (but beautiful only to their trusting innocence,) little dreaming that a mild, pure angel, distant as angels are, it wanders even now in far greener pastures. The faith is in life, this mortal life in which they believe as containing the sure promise of all the joy which their imagination pictures, and for which their living spirit craves.

It was so with Millicent Grey; there was a restlessness in that fresh untamed nature, a questioning in that warm, loving heart, a stumbling even in the spring time of her days at the mystery of life, but she sought its solution only in the narrow compass of the visible; it never occurred to her that one mystery might unlock the other, and the problem of death solve that of life.

And so the bright−eyed, sunny−hearted girl stole up to the old, way−worn man and stood looking at him. John Forde was still the same weary traveler into the unattainable regions of the past, the same hapless dweller in a land of shadows; day by day and night by night had only witnessed the deepening madness of his soul.

One would have thought that when his idol crumbled into dust he would have ceased to worship it, but it was not so. When the news of her death first reached him, he was stunned and bewildered, like a man stricken with sudden blindness. Her ideal presence, in which he had so long dwelt, had been to him all in all; he had learnt to concentrate therein every joy of which the various faculties of the heart are capable. Now, in his visions, she was the embodiment of hope to him; now hope realized; now sympathy, when in fancy he told her all he had suffered and she wept for and with him; now happiness, full and complete, when he saw her stealing towards him with the sweet promise on her lips that she would never leave him more! and when he heard that she was gone from earth, all this seemed to have past away with her—he suddenly found himself alone as in a desert where no light was, a rayless, silent waste.

The spirit cannot rest on vacancy, and this mental solitude was unendurable; he knew not where to turn for relief; shut out from that enchanted land where he had taught his soul to dwell more fondly than it would have done perhaps in joys that were real, he seemed lost in some dark immensity. For days and nights he wandered about like one beside himself, seeming as though his wild, staring eyes were ever in search of some lost treasure. At length utterly exhausted with the very bewilderment of his sorrow, he laid himself down on the floor and slept; in that sleep he dreamt one night, and dreamt of her. She came to him radiant and blooming as though no death hue were on the cheek of the shrouded corpse whose representative she was; again her smile lit up the boundless world of his fancy, and life became once more a glad possession!

And when he awoke from this sweet vision, he could not bear to part from it. He buried his face in his hands and went on dreaming, and soon he found that for his strange, ideal life, it mattered little whether the image, which was the sun in that world of his creation, were the phantom likeness of one living and absent, or of a cold and coffined corpse. Where all was most unreal, the actual truth could have no influence, and his imagination could lift her out of her dark grave, rigid and helpless as she was, and deck her mouldering form in hues of youth and health, filling her marble hands with the flowers she was wont to love, as easily as once it drew her from her husband's side and from the cradle of her child, to pass before his eyes a playful, merry girl.

From that hour he relapsed into his former visionary state, and the excess of this mental enjoyment seems to have deadened his other faculties completely. He lived as though he were a stranger among men, having no share in the common existence. He was ever listening so intently to the sweet voice murmuring deep within his soul, that most often he heard naught of what was passing round him; and the one image on which his longing eyes were ever fixed, shut out from his sight all things more palpable and real.

Millicent had stood by his side sometime quite unobserved, gazing at him with her bright, restless eyes. Of all the problems which life seemed to offer for her great bewilderment, none was so completely inexplicable to her as the existence of John Forde. The knitting of stockings did give a certain interest to Nanette's life, but her strange, old uncle had not even the excitement of dropping a stitch occasionally. There seemed nothing in the whole world for which he wished to live, and yet he took just as much trouble to preserve existence, by due supplies of nourishment, as others did. Some one great thought certainly occupied him entirely, and she had a vague conviction, in her own mind, that if she could discover it she would gain some insight into that secret use of life which was as yet such a mystery to her. She sat down at his feet and taking his listless hand, looked up into his face.

"Dear uncle, please to wake up: I want to speak to you."

Millicent was somewhat of a spoilt child. John Forde had never dreamt of controlling her, and Nanette had but one wish in the world, which was to see her look happy. The good little woman would have put herself to the extremest torture rather than have darkened, in any way, the smile upon the sunny face she loved so well. Fortunately, however, Millicent's generous disposition and most unselfish, loving heart, had saved her from many of the evils such indulgence is apt to produce. John turned at the sound of her voice, and was going to ask her what she wanted, but as he looked on her face, he began, dreamily, to trace out the likeness between herself and her dead mother, and soon forgot all else. She pressed his hand somewhat impatiently.

"Would you try to hear me only for one moment? There is something I want so very much to know, and I have no one but yourself to ask, or indeed I would not trouble you."

Millicent was really in earnest, and there was something plaintive in the tone of her voice which stung him with a sort of remorse. He roused himself at once.

"My dear child, tell me all you would say. You are not unhappy, Millicent; surely, surely you are not unhappy! What should I do, most wretched that I am, if there were any sorrow in your heart? She said she could not rest if there were evil near you!"

"No, no! do not look distressed, dear uncle; how wrong I was to disturb you so. I am not unhappy! I do not well know what sorrow means, only I have been bewildered about many things of late, and you are so wise I am sure you can explain them all. I will tell you how it is. I am passing out of childhood now, and I feel that the days are flitting on without my having found out for what purpose they are given me. Until now I have been happy whenever the day was bright and the sunbeams sparkling, when the birds were merry and the flowers blooming; and only sad and weary when the rain came down and crushed my poor, sweet blossoms to the ground, and sent the nightingales all fluttering to their nests. But now I feel somehow that there must be another sunshine for our lives than only the sunshine of the sky; my mind is restless, and I know not why. I have a wish, a longing, and I cannot tell for what; I feel convinced that there is some great good, some happiness in life which must be the reason of our living; and each morning I think—perhaps I shall know of it to−day, and when I go to sleep at night, I think—will it not come to me to−morrow? Now tell me what it is."

"Alas, my child," said John, as he stroked her waving hair, "and can it be that already you are seeking that which men chase from the cradle to the grave, that unattainable—the spirit's rest!"

"The spirit's rest!" said Millicent, while a sort of fear crept over her, she knew not why. "Uncle, what is that?"

"It is the good which all are seeking, and I know not if any find. I can but tell, I sought and found it not, long ago, Millicent, when all my thoughts were not devoured by one thought, and all my mind was not absorbed by one idea. I could have told you of the various shapes in which this desire of all hearts appears to human eyes, and how men struggle panting after it, many fainting by the way; but now mine own eyes, looking ever inward on the great darkness that is on my soul, have grown as it were blind to all other sights; and I can only tell you what a shipwreck I have made, who freighted all my life upon one hope."

"And where did you seek it, then?" said Millicent, with a trembling voice.

"In her love!" he answered, almost fiercely. He gazed for a moment fixedly into vacancy, then, pushing her from him, buried his face in his hands.

"Child, child, why have you come to awaken me out of that enchantment, the very surpassing sweetness of whose delusion makes the knowledge of its falsity so bitter? Why have you come to remind me that it was a shipwreck truly, and that the ocean of vain delights on which I seek to keep that shattered bark afloat does hide indeed most hideous depths, where I must sink and be engulfed one day. Go—what can I do for you? If the universal restlessness has fastened on your heart already, I cannot save you from its fruits. They may not be poisonous for you—I cannot tell. You must abide your destiny. You will soon go out into the world, and your unpractised eyes will not so readily perhaps pierce the mask of outward calm which instinct teaches men to wear. It will seem to you that life is a gay and tranquil thing for many, when you see them dwell at ease in happy homes, but, trust my words, their spirit resteth not: wearily, wearily, to and fro, it wandereth, seeking repose. Soon yours will go roaming sadly with the others; it may be for weal or woe. I cannot guide or help you. I can but counsel you out of the bitter knowledge of my own experience: take heed how you make your rest on the hard rock of a human heart." He laid back his head and wept in silence, for he had grown well−nigh childish, through long−indulgence of his feelings.

Millicent dared not further trouble him; she crept away far more thoughtful than befitted sixteen summers. He had done a cruel thing in flinging that fear into her mind; yet it seemed to her that she had gained the knowledge of one great fact from this strange conversation with her incomprehensible guardian.

She had gathered from it this conviction, that the repose in which her whole being was to rest, and be as it were absorbed, the mysterious repose for which her spirit craved with a longing that deepened every day, was to be found in **human love**. It was natural that she should come to this conclusion, as it must necessarily seem to her that there could be no greater good than that for which John Forde mourned with the mourning of his whole existence.

Thus Millicent Grey prepared to begin life with one great mistake.

CHAPTER IV.

SOME three years later a letter arrived one morning at the house Rue St. Michel, in the bonne ville d'Aix, where Millicent Grey had dwelt for so long a period. It was one of no small importance to her, for it announced the death of her father, and further contained the request, or rather the commands, of Mrs. Egerton that she should forthwith repair under suitable escort to England, there to take up her abode in the family of her aunt, according to the request of her dying mother.

There was now, however, an additional reason for such an arrangement, as Mr. Egerton had by this event become her lawful guardian, which John Forde was not. Mr. Grey, remembering on his deathbed the child on whom he had bestowed no thought in life, had sent for his brother−in−law, and entreated him to repair somewhat of his own neglect towards his daughter by undertaking the care of her and her fortune, at least until she should be of age. Mr. Egerton therefore added a few lines to his wife's letter, to say that she would be expected as soon as possible at Rookcliffe, his country residence in ——shire.

In compliance with these instructions Millicent Grey found herself, on a fine evening in the month of May, after a rapid journey through France, on board of the steamer which was to convey her from Hâvre to London.

John Forde was not with her—he could not have accompanied her to her uncle's house, and his task was, in fact, completely over—he had fulfilled his promise—he need fear no mournful reproaching gaze from the eyes that were ever looking at him out of that grave—neither the dead nor the living Millicent would claim more from him than he had done; and he was well pleased that now that young, ardent life should be separated from his own apathetical and cold existence. He felt little affection for her, most lovable as she certainly was, so warm−hearted and full of noble generous feeling, but he could spare no love from the buried mother for the blooming daughter, and his mind had become so completely enervated by his long indulgence that he was incapable of the smallest exertion. Human sounds grated powerfully on his ear, human sights were hateful to him, he desired an entire solitude, and such he knew he should have at Aix, when Millicent left him. He roused himself to wish her well through a world where he himself had been taken in a snare so perilous, and then turned away to think of her and of all other living forms no more.

Millicent herself wept much at parting with him. She kissed his unresisting hands again and again, and almost felt as if the delight of going at last to visit this wonderful world, of which she had dreamt so long, were sadly lessened by the separation from her childhood's guardian.

Yet Nanette remarked, somewhat maliciously, that her tears flowed quite as freely when they passed the grande statue in the Plâce on their way out of the town. In fact, at Millicent's age, and with her loving disposition, it was impossible for her not to attach herself to the only person with whom she had shared her home besides her bonne,—but it could not possibly be a deep−rooted affection, or a lasting regret; for John Forde had been nothing in her existence, monotonous as it was. After the first natural pang of separation was over it could make little difference that her eyes no longer turned occasionally on the dull motionless figure of her silent guardian.

As for Nanette, despite her feeling of extreme mental helplessness after she quitted Père André,—despite her dread of English heretics and coal fires, and her invincible horror for some creature of her imagination which she was wont to denominate *bif staiks*, she would as soon have thought of changing her faith as of quitting her well−beloved charge. Her warm attachment was fully reciprocated by Millicent, and it was really a touching thing to see those two, so different in age and station and in every circumstance of life, yet linked so closely by this tender friendship. So they stood together on board of the London packet as it smoked and panted preparatory to starting from the shores of France. As usual, humanity in its least fascinating aspect was to be found on deck. It is marvelous how speedily the atmosphere of refinement and polished courtesy, which counterfeits so admirably the virtues men ought to possess, will evaporate from around a party of individuals, entire strangers to one another, who find themselves huddled together in an uncomfortable steamer, with the prospect of a stormy night. Nowhere, perhaps, does human nature appear with so little disguise. There is no occasion here for the universal and never−failing politeness, which is so apt a representation of a pure and generous unselfishness; every one feels at liberty to occupy themselves solely with the real object of their solicitude, and one by one they are seen to ensconce themselves in their own cloaks and their own sulkiness, each man drawing on his traveling cap in its own peculiar style of hideousness.

There was the usual assemblage to−night. There stands the young Englishman who might have been seen, a few days since, stalking like any heathen through the prostrate groups of kneeling worshippers in St. Peter's, his spy−glass in his eye; and his hands in his pockets. At his side yawns another of our enlightened countrymen, who lately made an excursion to Athens for the purpose of shooting Greek owls; a happy expedient of which he bethought himself when he had exhausted the usual Britannic excitements of shaving his head, dressing like a Turk, and otherwise astonishing the natives, and who in that renowned city having been induced by the earnest entreaties of his valet−de−place to visit the Parthenon, looked around him on these ruins of mournful beauty, and taking his cigar from his mouth, listlessly inquired what they called this place.

Further on is the brisk young clergyman, who, with his aristocratic pupil, spent two months not long since in the Holy City, and employed the interval in falling in love with, and marrying the daughter of a missionary there established; the sentimental preliminaries having been carried on during an excursion to Bethlehem, and the declaration and acceptance having taken place at the foot of the Mount of Olives, such being the habits of the clerical pilgrims of modern times. That sharp cross looking man with green spectacles and a huge note−book under his arm, has been visiting the Syrian monasteries, where he has been treated with the utmost kindness and hospitality, having been nursed through a six weeks' fever by the good brethren on Mount Carmel. He is now returning to England, where he proposes to enlarge the public mind with a volume of travels, which is to contain a sneering denunciation of the monkish superstition of his late venerable hosts; and further, such an account of their theory and practice as a total ignorance of all languages save his native guttural, and a fund of deeply toothed prejudice, shall enable him to produce.

In the midst of these various indviduals it was a pleasant sight to see young Millicent Grey, as she stood at the side of the vessel, looking over the foaming water towards the yet unseen shores of England, braving, with child−like pleasure, the rough visiting of the fresh breeze that blew upon her bright face, whilst her sparkling eye and glowing cheek told how high her heart was beating with its ardent hope, and with what energy and vigour she was preparing for the life−struggle to which she was now advancing fast. She was at this time somewhere between nineteen and twenty years of age, and notwithstanding that she had great depth and intensity of feeling, as well as a shrewd penetrating mind, she was still guileless and simple as when we saw her listening to the mournful words, never afterwards forgotten, of poor John Forde.

No one was prepared to enter on the world with less idea of the consequences than Millicent Grey; in fact, her peculiar education had been of a nature to render her well nigh incapable of understanding the whole artificial frame−work of society. She was essentially truthful,—it never occurred to her to speak otherwise than she thought, although her due share of womanly timidity and reserve prevented her from communicating much of what she felt; and above all, she was accustomed to see things exactly as they were, without being in any degree influenced by popular fallacies or received opinion. She was joyous and lighthearted now, as those are only who have not tried their strength in the sore strife and conflicts that await them,—yet haply none would exchange the tempered gladness which falls on all, who have seen their guardian hope make itself wings and fly up into heaven, for that first sparkling buoyancy which hath no abiding charm: the one is like the dazzling lustre of the sunbeams, that fades before the clouds, the other, less brilliant but more pure, is like the sweet, tranquil light of the stars on a clear cold night.

She stood, casting her free glance over the sea, and already in imagination her bounding feet were treading the golden plains of her ideal future,—strange! if any one had suddenly mapped out before her eyes then, what that future was to be. Ah! who, in the dawn of life, could look on such a sight and not turn sickening from it? Who that could foresee the process of their discipline would have the heart to turn and live? When the actual trial comes the strength comes with it to endure; when the piercing wound is made then flows the healing balm; and when the earth flowers fade, that lure us from the homeward path, how sweetly spring to life the blossoms of celestial bloom, whose fragrance penetrates the soul with soothing power, so that backward looking, when the journey's ended, we can see how each sharp arrow has been winged by love. But in that hour of hope and bright expectancy, had it been given to Millicent Grey to look upon her future years, she had found it hard to resist the temptation of plunging with one bound into those boiling waters to hide herself within their breast from the wilder tempests and the colder blasts that soon would meet her in her life's career.

She was not long allowed to stand indulging in her brilliant fancies; the bustle of starting was just over, and the steamer fairly under way, when Nanette came rushing up to her in a state of great excitement exclaiming,—

"*Ma chérie*, we must be coming near to England now, for there is a *gros Anglais* come on board, and he is making inquiries for roast beef."

"Yes," said Millicent, "We shall be there to−morrow. Oh, Nanette!" she added, turning round her beaming face, "life **is** going to begin now."

"My dear young lady, I sincerely hope you may not be heartily tired of it before it is done," said a strange voice at her side. She looked round hastily, and found that the speaker was an old gentleman, supported on crutches, who had been watching her animated looks with much interest for some time past. He raised his hat courteously as her eyes met his.

"I really beg your pardon," he said, "for having taken the liberty of addressing you. It was quite involuntary, I assure you, but I was struck by your remark, which contrasted so vividly with my own state of feeling."

He was an aristocratic looking old man, who had once been handsome, but he was entirely crippled by palsy; his countenance, which was by no means unpleasing, had an expression of great firmness, accompanied by a slight degree of irritability; he looked as if he were thoroughly accustomed to have his own way in all things, and his long−protracted state of suffering had no doubt rendered him somewhat capricious in his desires. On the whole, however, he looked thoroughly estimable and benevolent, and for the moment seemed very anxious that Millicent should not take offence at his unceremonious speech.

She hastened to assure him that such was not the case, and feeling convinced, by the sort of freemasonry which exists in a certain class of society, that he was a person with whom she might very safely associate, she readily entered into conversation with him. They sat down amicably together, and although of course, being such entire strangers, they could only talk on indifferent topics, yet the old man was soon altogether charmed with Millicent,—there was such a freshness and simplicity in her impressions of England, the new country she was going to explore, and at the same time so much depth in her observations, whilst her frank manner and ready smile were of themselves really very captivating.

"Why, you talk of visiting England and its natives as if you were going to inquire into the manners and customs of the Chinese," said the old man, at last, smiling at her animation.

"Well, it is pretty much like visiting China or Kamschatka, or any other foreign country, to me. I have never been there since I was quite a little child; of course it is my native land, and I am quite ready to love it very much beforehand, but at the same time I am rather curious to see it, because I expect it will explain to me a great many things which I don't understand in the world. There is an immense deal of good sense in England, is there not?"

"Why, I believe there is upon the whole; and yet people do foolish things enough there. I could tell you of a few," he added, shrugging his shoulders with a comical smile.

"Oh, I should not like it if they did not," said Millicent; "but what I expect will prove so instructive to me is, that I am told the English all live upon system. In France, you know, they live *pour passer le temps*; and in Italy, I believe, their existence is one of impulse; but in England, I hear, they all think very seriously, and make up their minds what they ought to do, and do it. I believe there is system in everything—great systems for legislation, national education, and so on—and little private systems for the life of each person. Is it so?"

" Well, I declare I can scarcely tell. Like M. Jourdain, who was not aware he had been talking *de la prose*, I hardly know whether I have been living on system or not; and yet now I think of it, I certainly have; and, what is more, I can tell you very distinctly the nature of it. My system undoubtedly is, to make myself as comfortable as I possibly can, at all times and in all places. With these withered limbs of mine it is not very easy; and yet, by the help of a good cook and pleasant society, I manage pretty well. Yes, that is clearly my principle. I must thank you for making it known to me."

"Ah, the system of making one's self comfortable is very common in England, I believe," said Millicent, musingly; "but now, pray excuse me for asking it, I should like so much to know why you thought I should tire of life before it was done."

"Simply because I am very tired of it myself," said the old gentleman, laughing; "not that I want to be rid of it however, oh dear, no!" and he looked round with a sort of terror, as if he was afraid some one would take him at his word, and relieve him of what was clearly a beloved burden; "But the truth is, that in early life I made one very great mistake, and I have suffered for it ever since."

Millicent gave a timid glance of inquiry, but he shook his head, smiling.

"No, really I dare not, on so short an acquaintance, make you acquainted with all the secrets of my history.

Should we meet again, as I trust, or rather, to tell you the truth, as I am determined we shall, I have no doubt I should be inclined to make you wise by my past experience."

"*Ma chérie*," put in Nanette, at this juncture, who saw that Millicent was gaining some information from her new friend, "Ask Monsieur if that is the way in which Englishmen amuse themselves?" She pointed to where two of the passengers were engaged over a game at chess. "I heard them say, let us amuse ourselves; but if that is their amusement, *ma foi! c'est que c'est bien lugubre*; they have not spoken one word, or smiled one smile, since they began, but they have shaken their heads, and nodded to one another with, oh, such a solemnity!"

Millicent and her new friend laughed heartily at Nanette's look of horror, who clearly thought that the most serious of affairs in France was merrier than amusements in England. They continued to converse together with much satisfaction, till the arrival of a tall servant, laden with cloaks and plaids, interrupted them. He ventured to hint, that the night air was dangerous to his master, and the old gentleman was obliged to confess it was somewhat imprudent in him to remain so late on deck. He therefore took leave of Millicent with all the courtier−like politeness of former days, and having been duly wrapped up in various mufflings, allowed himself to be carried off like a stout bundle, by the powerful footman.

We all know how speedily acquaintances are made in travelling; the frigid barriers which society raises between man and man are so completely thrown down when all are alike exposed to the same inconveniences, and it may be dangers. Who has not known what it is to swear an eternal friendship to the charming individual whose society has enlivened a ten days' voyage in a wretched steamer, or to feel as unhappy as though one had lost one's nearest relations, when the termination of a fortnight's quarantine separates us from the family who shared its miseries with us? Millicent and the old gentleman met next morning as though they had been acquainted for years, and cordially shook hands with mutual pleasure.

They had a bad passage, and did not arrive at their destination until several hours beyond the usual time, There was considerable confusion on board, and the tall servant was fully occupied in taking charge of numerous packages belonging to his master, in the course of which proceedings he tumbled several times over the active little Nanette, who invariably begged his pardon, and hoped, in an audible whisper, that all Englishmen were not to be so tall and so stiff. It thus happened that the poor old gentleman, whose infirmity rendered him quite helpless, would have been wholly without the attendance of which he stood so much in need, had not Millicent taken on herself the task of ministering to his comforts. She brought him his breakfast, put on his cloak, and ran after his hat, when the wind blew it away; in short, she made herself not only so useful, but so agreeable to him, that he looked as if he could not bear to part with her when the moment of separation came. He detained her for some time, when she rose to take leave of him previous to landing, and seemed uncertain whether he might venture to say what he wished. At last, summoning courage, he said,—

"I have a great favour to ask, and I must beg you to excuse me if it seems an impertinent request. I trust my motive, which you shall most certainly know hereafter, will quite exonerate me. Will you tell me your destination in England? In short, will you give me your address at your new abode?"

Millicent was too completely ignorant of the ways of the world to imagine that there could be any reason to prevent her doing as he wished, especially as Nanette, whose bright imagination had already conjured up visions of splendid *cadeaux* which this dear, sensible old **milord** was to bestow on her darling, was inciting her, by many significant looks and signs, to tell him immediately. Millicent, therefore, gave him her address at Mr. Egerton's, and so took her leave of him, never recollecting till she had left the steamer, that she herself had failed to obtain any information as to the name or position of her newly acquired friend.

CHAPTER V.

ROOKCLIFFE, the future abode of Millicent Grey, lay at a distance of some five miles from the nearest railway station, and it was late in the evening before she found herself in the carriage which her uncle had sent to convey her over the intervening space. Nanette, quite fatigued with the number of reverences she had made, with most unappreciated politeness, to the stoical gentlemen in glazed hats who had handed her out and in of the railway carriages, composed herself to sleep in a corner, whilst Millicent, leaning eagerly towards the window, gazed out into the darkness, and tried to distinguish the different objects on which the light of the lamps flashed rapidly as they whiffed along.

She felt, as she had done throughout this journey, that she was being carried on to her destiny, that she was traveling, as it were, over the first stage of life, and there was a feeling almost of rapture in the excitement which thrilled every nerve, as she thought of the unknown future to which she looked with such anxiety. She little knew how, somewhat later, with most ineffable calm, we learn to lay ourselves down on the breast of that dark stream, and, with hands all humbly crossed upon the bosom, scarred with many a half−closed wound, let the quick current bear us on and on, without an effort to direct its course, thinking only how deep, and clear, and smooth is the boundless ocean, to whose placid rest it bears us rapidly. Even the locality of her future abode was full of interest to Millicent, and she experienced an almost child−like pleasure in tracing the indistinct features of the landscape through which she was passing.

There is at all times a strange sensation in traveling by night through a peopled country; the contrast is so great between the lucid sky, where alone the remains of light are gathered, and the dark heavy earth, seeming to lie in sullen silence beneath its pail of shadows. The sight of those huge masses of building, whence no sound arises, but which we know to be so teeming with life, sentient, suffering, and mysterious, fills us with a sense of awe and, we fain with our dim eyes would pierce the outward matter to discern what manner of spirit is within.

How awful were a voice to come forth from each one of these dark piles of habitation, and proclaim the hidden truth of the living mysteries within, saying, "Here human love is agonizing; there infamy and vice walk rampant; here despair is writhing in the dust; there cankering want hath torn affection even from a mother's heart, and the child that asked not life from her is praying for its passing."

But no such voice is heard, at least, except we question it; and so, through scenes which, could we witness them, would make us turn away heart−sick to weep as it were tears of blood for our hapless brethren, we pass,—dreaming golden dreams, as Millicent did now!

The first mile or two carried her through a colliery district, and even in the dim light she could discern the miserable appearance of the miners' habitations, which were in fact but a set of wretched hovels crowded together; their numbers were, however, so great that she rightly estimated the population as being very considerable. A bleak common of no great extent divided this uninviting part of the county from a tract of land where the scenery was of a totally opposite character. Though still flat it was richly wooded, and beautifully undulating; in bright daylight it presented that fair, peaceful aspect so peculiar to the English landscape and to which the heart of the traveller returns with such a longing fondness amid all the magnificence of other climes. Not gorgeous Eastern skies, or Alpine mountains in their savage splendour, can ever be as lovely or as dear as the waving woods of England, so bright in their green luxuriance, with those quiet fields whose golden corn seems to have robbed the sunshine, and the voices wildly musical of rushing stream and sighing wind.

Even by night Millicent could distinguish some of the beauty of this scene, as the tall trees seemed to sweep past her, assuming a thousand fantastic shapes, and often obscuring the sky altogether with their thick branches. One object, however, before entering the wood, attracted her attention forcibly; it was a small church, situated on the borders of the common nearest the mines, in a very dreary and desolate position, and which to her astonishment was lighted up even at that hour. She was the more surprised as, on approaching the village adjoining Rookcliffe, she passed another, of far more imposing appearance, which was entirely in darkness. Very picturesque this village seemed to be; very captivating the pictures of homely, peaceful life, revealed through the half open cottage doors, whence the fire−light streamed out upon the dark road.

This village being Mr. Egerton's own property, and all these simple villagers, peering from their lattice windows as the travellers pass, being also Mr. Egerton's dependents, the coachman, sympathizing with that

gentleman's feelings, now causes the well appointed carriage to take a somewhat more aristocratic pace, and whirls it with noisy ostentation to the gate. The woman at the lodge is all ready to give it free entrance, and she curtsies in the dark with due respect to the wheels, which grind past her feet with so close a shave that she is not very sure for ten minutes afterwards whether she has them all safe, On it sweeps down the long avenue; and a sudden feeling of timidity and of terror, she knows not for what, strikes Millicent Grey as she catches a glimpse of the stately house, that rises up massive and gloomy before her. She grasps Nanette's little warm hand, and in another moment the carriage sweeps with an artistic flourish to the portico, and she finds herself at Rookcliffe. The door stood hospitably open to receive her, and on the threshold, in the centre of the blaze of light which streamed from the hall, Mr. Egerton was placed ready to welcome her to his house.

It was happy and striking coincidence, if this estimable individual was unaware of the pleasing picture which he presented in his benevolent attitude on the threshold, with his opaque person coming out darkly against the back−ground of glowing light, and the doorway forming a suitable framework around him.

He was a perfect type of the English country gentleman. There was such bland respectability teeming from his large glowing countenance, which seemed as though it were always reflecting the light of the fire after dinner, and such warmth and comfort diffused over the whole outer man, whilst his expression and general appearance gave ample evidence of the entire self−approbation and complacency which reigned within. He welcomed Millicent with precisely the proper amount of cordiality, and folded her in an embrace systematically paternal; then releasing her, he offered his hand with that hospitable flourish peculiar to individuals in his position, and with a cheerful countenance, which seemed to say—"Behold with what self−forgetting generosity I admit my friends to the bosom of my family!"—he conducted her towards Mrs. Egerton, who advanced from the drawing−room to meet her.

This lady was the personification of dignified propriety, and of composed, resolute acceptance of all the advantages and privileges, physical and moral, which were to be derived from her station in society. Stately looking, well dressed, never varying one hair's breadth from the routine of life, easy and luxurious, which is the settled system of existence for persons of her fortune and position, everything in her house, her person, her manners, and her religion, were arranged to meet the approving eye of the world.

Whether she were the urbane hostess, the careful mother, the mildly−reproving, silently−determined wife, or the benevolent dispenser of soup and blankets at Christmas−tide, (these benefits being transmitted to her awe−struck tenantry through the hands of a housekeeper in black satin and pink ribbons, who wore kid gloves in case she should accidentally touch any of the recipients of her bounty,) Mrs. Egerton still acted up to the one principle which guided her in all things, of making a faultless appearance in the sight of her fellow men, and obeying to the very letter all the requirements of established custom, according to her rank and circumstances. If there were any one quality peculiarly prominent in Mrs. Egerton's character, it was what is commonly called "proper pride," that mysterious virtue belonging we know not to what faith or to what tenets, which is held in such esteem by those who not the less, through some subtle calculation of their own accommodating mind, firmly expect that inheritance of the meek which is promised in the doctrines they profess.

Millicent received another measured English embrace from this stiff but comfortable looking representative of good feeling, dignity, and respectability, who was further remarkable for a serenity of aspect peculiar to herself, and which emanated, no doubt, from the pleasant conviction that every thing she had ever done, said, or thought, was exactly as it ought to have been. She was then ushered into the drawing−room, having just caught a glimpse of poor Nanette, hurried off, with despairing looks, by three or four gigantic footmen, to the care of a housekeeper, awful in satins and stateliness, who appeared dimly in the far perspective. The drawing−room seemed to Millicent blazing with light and full of people. She clung involuntarily to her uncle's arm, and stood looking round from under the masses of her long brown hair, with the shy, timid glance of a startled deer.

Mr. Egerton presented her in due form to the various members of his family; three daughters, Anne, Fanny, and Sophia; two sons, Charles and Arthur.

Anne, tall and frigid, looking by no means so young as she could have wished; unpleasantly handsome, having bold features and hawk's eyes, haughty and supercilious in manner, as though she had discovered some excellent reason why she was to consider herself superior to every one around her, and that, duly pious and Christianized as she was, she had received a special license for giving pain to others by coldness and contempt. This young lady was wont to delight herself solely in matters altogether beyond a woman's province, for she talked politics and

philosophy with an assurance which had its desired effect on the majority of her acquaintances. We may further add, that Miss Anne Egerton also fully expected to reap the reward of all the virtues, such as humility, gentleness, and self−denial, inculcated by the creed she professed with much Sunday ostentation.

Fanny, with indistinct hair and indefinite features, a small mind and a small voice, loving to sing small songs and to entrap unwary individuals into swearing an eternal friendship; all nerves and sensibility, continually declaring she must have sympathy; that she could not exist without it; that she was entirely dependent on her friends for happiness, and therefore, though she was sorry to be troublesome to them, yet really, constituted as she was, she must entreat of them to sacrifice themselves to her; she must really claim all their time and attention; whatever their avocations might be, they could never be so important as the necessity that she, in her highly−wrought state of mind, should have some one to whom she could tell her feelings:—Fanny fell into the common snare of imagining that she established a legitimate excuse for her caprice, self−indulgence, and thorough egotism, (qualified, of course, by far daintier names,) when she affirmed that they were inherent to her nature, and therefore indispensable evils, not to be resisted.

Sophia, decidedly plain, short, thick−set, and able−bodied, having a worthy look, which was a species of moral livery to the peculiar line she had chosen; for this young lady had discovered that her especial vocation was the improvement of mankind, and to this end she laboured with a noisy zeal, no detail of which was ever allowed to pass unobserved by her numerous acquaintance. She pursued her call− ing without the slightest references to established principles or authorities; for, as she loved to say, when setting at defiance those before whose grey hairs she should have bowed in reverent silence, she had a thoroughly independent mind, and acted in all cases on theories of her own. Her conversation never was of the most lively description, for as she was fully convinced apparently that no one would be so much acquainted with her own merits as herself, she habitually undertook the task of doing herself justice, and discharged the duty with extraordinary fidelity. She was at all times to be heard quietly detailing her own meritorious acts, never dreaming that any merit they might have possessed was turned to veriest poison by such an open display, and in her daily descent on the village, armed with medicines and tracts, and stocked with severe, overbearing admonitions, she gathered up material for much complacent haranguing at her father's luxurious table.

And thus she took to herself without misgiving the name of Charity;—that holy one, who with veiled face and noiseless steps glides unseen in the shadow of all who suffer;—fearing not, though snow−white are her garments, to steal into polluted haunts; appearing, as though warned by some tender instinct, wherever tears are falling, or aching hearts are wearying to rest; through long dark nights making a pillow of her gentle arm for the throbbing head, and over many a rough and distant path, speeding with the angel words of pity or of comfort; but ever voiceless, silent, having no name, save in the prayers of the fatherless and widow.

Very charitable Sophia was pronounced to be; very estimable she was by all considered, and of late she had established herself as an authoress, by the publication of certain articles on the education of the aged ignorant, and one small volume, entitled "Hints to Bishops," which, as Rookcliffe was a pleasant house to visit in, obtained some little circulation in the neighbouring.

The woman who writes is always in an anomalous position; however powerful the motive which compels her to authorship, she has quitted her own sphere, and has taken to herself a vocation for which she is neither fitted nor intended, for her reasoning powers are weak, her knowledge limited, and her judgment swayed by her feelings; when once she becomes an object of public comment, she loses all claim to the consideration and delicacy due to her very name; but she does **not** lose the modest timidity, the natural reserve, which causes her a bitter pang each time that she is dragged before the public gaze.

She has gone beyond her own province, and therefore she must consent to belie her own nature. It would be a mockery to talk of shrinking from observation, when of her own will she has met the rude stare of strange eyes; absurd to say that she trembles to trust her own judgment or to guide her own faltering steps, when she who should have done the bidding of others, has come forth to govern and influence the minds of many. She has quitted the stronghold of her womanly reserve and privileges, and henceforth she dare not turn, with all the revolting of heart she feels, from the personal remarks, the fulsome flattering, and the impertinent scrutiny, to which she has exposed herself; she has given herself as fair game to be hunted down for the public amusement, and she has no right to complain if the noise and turmoil of the chase fills her with terror, and with a weary longing for the unnoticed retirement which is her rightful sphere.

Sophia, however, had a fund of self−sufficiency, which enabled her to pass through this ordeal with great equanimity; in fact, to sum up her character in a word, she was one of those persons who constrain free−born Englishmen to wish most heartily that a little of the Turkish discipline were established in their country, and that the ladies, even without yellow slippers and the fear of sacks before their eyes, should be restricted to such spheres of action, and such topics of conversation, as are within the bounds of their capacity and suitable attainments.

Millicent's bright visions of a loving companionship with her cousins began to melt away very rapidly after she had received Anne's chilling welcome, accompanied by a scrutinizing look which enveloped her whole person, and subsided into a sneer, and had also been subjected to Sophia's hard impressive shake of the hand, who already perceived in her a victim for future improvement; whilst Fanny declared that she had been put into such a flutter of spirits by the stranger's arrival, that she required the attention of all present for some time in order to restore her to composure.

But the introductions were not yet over. Mr. Egerton next presented his two sons. Charles, the eldest, was tall, rather good−looking, and studiously elegant. He was refined, exclusive, and supercilious, and, as a matter of course, always absurd, and often disagreeable. He was one of those men who render life an intolerable burden by maintaining that all the customs and rules of society, down to the most minute of unnecessary "convenances," must be rigidly obeyed at all times and in all places, His favourite amusements were fishing and shooting, and otherwise endangering the peace and health of many innocent creatures; and he was further much addicted to the pastime of morally dissecting his neighbours, whose faults and follies he would skilfully expose and ingeniously discuss, with an air and manner which seemed to intimate that he did not in any degree partake of the same nature as themselves. Arthur, the last of Millicent's new relations, was very slow in obeying his father's summons to come forward and make her acquaintance. He advanced towards her, evidently with no good will, and he bent down his head so much that she could not distinguish his features, though she was struck with his peculiarly ungainly and clumsy figure. Arthur merely gave his hand in silence, and was turning away, when Charles called out to him tauntingly, "Come, Arthur, this will never do; Miss Grey expects to see all her cousins to−night, and you are leaving her to speculate mysteriously on the probable peculiarities of the countenance you are hiding so assiduously. Perhaps she thinks you are afraid to dazzle her by the brilliancy of your appearance; let me recommend you to prevent her forming too glowing a picture by allowing her to see that expressive face of yours at once."

Millicent saw that the frame of the young man shook, she knew not with what emotion, as his brother spoke, but the next moment he slowly turned his head towards her, and she was startled by seeing a countenance more entirely devoid of all beauty than any she had ever looked upon;—a face so painfully and strikingly plain she could not have imagined, and she no longer wondered that her cousin shrank from observation. It was not possible that his appearance should fail to excite a feeling of repugnance in the minds of all who saw him; and that he was fully aware of this was plain from the look of hopeless despondency with which he turned away. Millicent was full of generous feeling, and she inwardly determined that she would show him the utmost cordiality and consideration in all her intercourse with him; but in the meantime she had to follow her aunt to the sofa, where she was to spend the remainder of the evening in great state by her side. Here she was provided with some very strong tea, which she felt herself constrained to accept, in case she should distress the fat butler, who had brought it expressly for her; and then commenced a dull, heavy, commonplace conversation, of that aimless, unprofitable species which seems the only legitimate and established occupation for the long hours after dinner, and which always has seemed to us the dreariest waste of time.

Most thankful was Millicent when the punctual Mr. Egerton, who never varied half a minute from the appointed hours, announced that it was time to retire. She bade her new friends good night with suspicious alacrity, and the feeling of depression and timidity which hung around her all the evening, was for the first time dissipated, when she found herself clasped in the ready embrace of her dear old *bonne*.

Ah! blessed human sympathy,—gentle, loving, kindly human sympathy,—what a marvelous treasure it is, without which, truly, we were poor indeed. It is a beautiful thing to think that to every living soul is given the power to alleviate suffering by that one heaven−taught influence! too many ignore their high calling in this respect,—too many forget what a noble power they possess, and that the weakest, the most unworthy, the poorest amongst may be, as a minister of consolation, wearing to the eyes all dim with weeping the form of a very angel.

For even if we have only words and looks to give, we must still let the look be one of tenderness and pity, and the words, of loving kindness; and the aching heart shall throb less madly, the heavy eyes shall turn to the light again.

We are so closely knit together in this world, dust so clings to dust, that the lightest token of a fellow creature's dear compassion is strangely precious to us. Shame on the niggard hearts that seek not to dispense this costly gift, and leave it withering beneath the cold, sullen influence of their indifference or their pride! They know not what an angel they are driving from their side when their selfish carelessness destroys the power of sympathy in their own breasts, for it is the one only joy this earth can give which naught can ever take away. They themselves may be most sad and lonely, the light of love and hope departed from before their eyes, and only that quiet gloom remaining which spreads itself upon this mortal life like some funereal pall, when the desire of earthly happiness is dead. Yet still more blessed far is so to pity and console than to enjoy the fond affection or the care of others, and they may make themselves a sunshine brighter than the sunshine of their youthful hopes, in the returning smiles of those whom they have cheered in sorrow, whilst in their sinking hearts the tears of gratitude shall fall more sweet than dew, refreshing flowers that droop at even.

Let us not mistrust our gift, however weak we feel ourselves to be; there never yet walked one on earth whose path was not darkened with the shadows of many sorrows not his own, and to these he has power to minister, were it but with the kindly pressure of his hand, or the murmured blessing, or the voice of tenderness, that soothes the troubled spirit like the soft wind breathing on the stormy ocean.

Poor little Nanette had nothing to offer for her darling's consolation, save a few cheerful words and a bright look of affection, but it was quite enough to dispel Millicent's passing depression, and she was soon laughing merrily at the details of her bonne's reception in the housekeeper's room.

She was left alone at last, and feeling that irresistible desire for a few minutes of quiet thought, which so often takes possession of us at night, she drew back the curtain from the window, and sat down to gaze out on the still, fair landscape.

No one yet ever looked up into the midnight heavens, so intensely pure, so awfully serene, where the great stars abide in changeless beauty, like the glorious hopes that float through the calm soul of a saint, without feeling the rising up within them of a strange desire,—a terror, an uneasiness,—which they can neither explain nor define; no one, at least, who is yet chained by a single thought, or hope, or wish to this world, and the things of it. Some there have been, and are, who have so learned to fling aside the clogging weight of earth's affections, that already their enfranchised spirit hath sought and found a home within those fields of light so far off and so peaceful.

Not so with Millicent, however; she was still seeking the solution of life's problem among the havens of this world, and as she gazed into the lucid skies, and on the dark earth stretching out before her, there crept over her that strange sense of loneliness which is an indwelling instinct in the heart, and which we feel most often in a crowd, in the presence of our fellow men, for it is the mysterious solitude of the spirit that nought material can ever fill.

It is this void and craving of the mind which causes men so to labour and to toil for the realization of their various hopes and visions; for they are ever seeking madly to hew out from the dust and clay around them an aliment for that vast spiritual hunger and desire.

Millicent had always felt most strongly the longing for that unknown good which she believed was to be found in life, else she knew not why the life had been given to her, and to−night it seemed to come upon her with an overwhelming power; for she had, she scarce knew why, been disap− pointed with her first evening in her new home. During the long, monotonous years she had spent at Aix, she had ever looked forward to her arrival in England as the event which was to open up for her the treasure−house of existence, where she might go in and find the mysterious riches that were to satisfy her heart's desire; and now she had come, and it did not seem to her that the elements of which the Egerton family were composed, were likely to afford her much insight into the uses and purposes of life. Already, with the vivid imagination of youth, she pictured to herself a daily routine of inoffensive occupations, similar to those which had oppressed her in France, and her thoughts flew back to the conversation she had held with John Forde, when he told her that the thing she longed for was the spirit's rest, and led her, by his ominous words, to believe that this rest, for which the soul feels such a dire necessity, was to be found only in human affection.

This conviction now re− turned with redoubled strength, as she felt the chill of that dreary solitude of mind; it

seemed to her that to live in the life of another a necessary law of her being,—that, in fact, the very power of existence must decay within her unless there were some outer life to which she might link herself, and in which she might exist.

There was the foreshadowing of a great truth in this belief of Millicent Grey's; it was the stirring within her of the instinctive knowledge that her soul could not subsist alone,—that, except in union with a Being not her own, even that immortal essence would expire and fade away. She struggling with the inborn necessity of adoration and worship which filled her spirit, and she prepared to seek an object for it in some form of human dust, flail and erring as herself.

She believed that her rest was only to be found in daily, hourly toil for the peace of some other,—that, in the entire devotion of her soul to the chosen friend of earth would be its entire satisfaction, and, like all women, the craving was strong within her to find a support and defence for her great weakness and helplessness in some stronger arm and firmer heart.

So Millicent Grey lay down that night with a bright dream in her mind of some such loving protection and repose of self−devotion; but she little thought how, by thus concentrating her whole faith and hope upon it, she was, in fact, preparing to stake her life at a single venture.

CHAPTER VI.

"**MY** dear Millicent," said Mrs. Egerton, the next morning, as she sailed into the room with an air of consequential satisfaction, as though she were aware that an invisible herald had preceded her in the minds of all present, announcing to them the exalted position she ought to hold in their esteem, "you will have little difficulty in becoming acquainted with our mode of life, for when you have passed one day with us, you will know our habitual routine of existence as completely as though you had lived with us for a year."

"Do you mean that every day in the year is exactly the same in this house: is there never a variety of any kind whatever?" exclaimed Millicent, in some alarm.

"Not any, I think, in the external arrangements, or what I would call the outward machinery of our existence," said Mrs. Egerton, pompously; "each hour seems to have its natural and fitting occupation, from which we seldom vary. Of course life is chequered at all times, and with us, as with others, there are occasional circumstances which create change, though without materially altering the ordinary course to which I alluded just now. For instance, an event will occur in our family next autumn, which will cause us all a very pleasing excitement."

Next autumn! no events until next autumn. This was dreary news to Millicent. Mrs. Egerton waited to be asked what this occurrence was, before she spoke; for she held it to be highly unprofitable to do anything gratuitously, and she loved that even her words should be demanded as a favour, and graciously accorded.

Millicent was not slow to gratify her; she was much interested in hearing what was her first prospect of excitement.

"It is the arrival of my fourth daughter, Juliet, from the Continent," said Mrs. Egerton.

"I did not know you had another daughter," said Millicent; "I thought I had seen all the family."

"All but this one, who is the youngest, and who has been passing some months in Italy with a friend. Until you have seen her, Millicent, you cannot understand how much reason, as a mother, I have to be proud. All my daughters are greatly above par; I am quite aware of that, but Juliet is something indeed remarkable, and totally unlike her sisters."

"Is she, then, very handsome?" asked Millicent.

"You innocent cousin!" said Charles, laughing heartily, "how very plainly you have told us what you think of those you have already seen."

Millicent felt she had done so, and coloured with annoyance at her own imprudent speech. Mrs. Egerton was content, however, with the implied compliment to her favourite daughter, and continued at once:—

"Handsome is not the word I should apply to her; she is much beyond that—she is strikingly beautiful. Charles, I appeal to you, if this is not the case, and you may rely on his opinion, Millicent, as he is peculiarly fastidious on the subject of beauty."

"There can be no question that Juliet is singularly beautiful," said Charles; "she is a remarkable person in every way: excessively clever, with an indomitable will, and the most consummate selfishness,—the whole concealed under a winning fascination of manner which I really believe has never been surpassed. I have always thought there was a good deal of the tiger in Juliet. The smooth, sleek, beautiful coat, and the cold heart beating with its cruel purpose beneath it, is a very apt simile for that captivating softness and most fair appearance which gain Juliet the hearts of all who see her, and which hide the most subtle calculations for her own continual gratification."

Charles piqued himself on his talent for analyzing and describing character in a graphic and energetic manner; he liked to treat individuals as a species of complex machinery which he was skilled in explaining, and he was rather pleased than otherwise when he had an opportunity of commenting on his nearest relations with the same supreme indifference which he was accustomed to manifest to the whole race of man. He merely slightly elevated his eyebrows in reply to his mother's vehement protestation against the extraordinary manner in which he had thought fit to qualify his sister, and sauntered away to receive his letters from Mr. Egerton's hand, who was unlocking the post−bag with a solemn and mysterious air, as though it were a matter of the first importance. All the family were now assembled, with the exception of Arthur; and Millicent began to watch their proceedings with the utmost anxiety, for Mrs. Egerton's intimation as to the uniformity of their habits had invested the most insignificant of their acts with an awful importance in her eyes.

She marveled at the pertinacity with which Mr. Egerton kept them all waiting for their letters, whilst he carefully examined the address of each one, and at the vivacity with which he literally threw himself upon the ball and rung it, as soon as the clock began to strike the hour appointed for the family prayers.

"Pray wait a moment before you ring," exclaimed Fanny, already too late with her request; "Arthur is just coming across the lawn; he will be here immediately."

"I never wait for any one," replied Mr. Egerton, shouldering a huge commentary (with which he daily confused the intellects of his servants,) and taking his accustomed seat. It afforded him the most exquisite pleasure to make this speech, for he shared in common with many estimable individuals a peculiarity of temper, which rendered it intensely pleasant to him to make little disagreeable speeches, which were often very cutting and humiliating to those whom he addressed, and which he flung at them from the high ground of his own superiority as the advocate of duty and propriety.

Punctuality was one of those virtues by which he succeeded in sinning comfortably every day, inasmuch as by his excessive punctiliousness on that head he caused the greatest discomfort and annoyance to his family.

Millicent walked to the window when prayers were over; and as it opened down to the ground, she went out a few steps to breathe the sweet morning air. She found Arthur standing moodily near it. He seemed to shrink from meeting her, and she was again most forcibly struck with his forbidding appearance, which was the more evident in the blaze of the sunlight; yet there was a soft and mournful expression in his eyes which touched her, and a certain thoughtfulness in his countenance that is the sure indication of mental powers.

She went up to him with a kind smile and a winning cordiality to which he seemed little accustomed, for a flush of delight passed over his pale face.

"You have been taking a long walk, I think," she said. "I quite envy you, it must have been so pleasant in these sunny, green fields, this morning."

"It was indeed," said Arthur, earnestly; "such an hour as I have passed might almost give one courage for the bitterness which the long dull day brings with it, at least to me," he went on, seeming to speak to himself, and not to her. "I have been deep in the woods, where there was not a sight or a sound save those of the fair nature, so glad and bright in its summer loveliness. I could breathe the fresh air with delight, feeling it was untainted with the sighs which, from a thousand bursting hearts, will have gone up to load it before the day is done, and brush away the dew without fearing that I was trampling over the spot, where some unnoticed agony had been poured out in secret tears."

Milicent looked at him in astonishment; such bitterness of feeling was quite inexplicable to her, for whom the existence of suffering was a mere matter of faith; but Arthur continued like one thinking aloud, and well nigh unconscious of her presence:—

"I could not help thinking, as I walked through those green paths this morning, what a glorious world this would be if only the human mind were in analogy to that sweet nature; were it pure, and in hope serene as those unclouded skies, bright with the light of truth as that calm sunshine; giving forth its fragrance in thoughts and words, gentle and lovely as the odours breathing from the flowers; dispensing its refreshing sympathy and intellectual aid upon the parched and drooping souls around, like the cool stream wandering with its life−giving waters among the forest trees,—and so that Spirit, which is beauty in the material world, shine forth as goodness in the man. But how far otherwise in actual fact! There was but one mortal footstep in the woodland path this morning, and, yet a very load of bitterness was carried even then, through that pure atmosphere!"

He paused, and Millicent stood silent, fixing her large wondering eyes on the speaker; but suddenly she was roused by the voice of Charles, who had approached unnoticed.

"Miss Grey, I see you are mute in astonishment, from which I infer that Arthur has been imparting to you some of his peculiar theories; I therefore consider it my duty, for your future peace of mind in all intercourse with him, announce to you that our respected brother is a poet. If you knew the world a little better, you would understand that this fact accounts for the very sombre hue of his existence, and for the fund of most melancholy information which it will be his delight to convey to you. For **poet**, in the present day, read—a well−fed, well−clothed, and highly discontented individual, who, having nothing to complain of, complains of everything, who conceives himself to be surrounded with the most bitter enemies in the bosom of his affectionate family, and feels himself desperately alone when seated at the tea−table, where his anxious mother is handing him a plate of muffins. Awful instances of the world's hollowness are to be found in the society of his unsympathetic maiden aunts, and

the early duplicity of some of his school−fellows leaves rankling wounds which time cannot efface."

Charles was an adept in the sneering coldness and contempt with which, in these our times, it is much the fashion to trample on the very souls of our fellow creatures. We doubt if many burdens will serve to weigh men down in their coffins so ably as the load of that murderous carelessness with which they wound the feelings of others, casting the blight of ridicule over things lovely and of good report, and destroying ofttimes in their fellow men that faith in the beautiful which they themselves have abandoned, in conformity with their levelling and sophistical creed. Millicent, however, with her fresh enthusiastic mind, was by no means disposed to adopt Charles's views on the subject, and she turned to Arthur with sparkling eyes.

"A poet! Oh, I am so glad! Are you indeed a poet?"

"I am so unfortunate," he replied, in a low voice.

"Unfortunate! That is not the word to use. How can you so mistake your calling? Oh, it is a glorious thing to be a poet, I know nothing of the world; but this, at least, I do believe and know: it is a noble thing to make your way into the hearts of thousands, and find an echo there to your own thoughts; a noble thing to be a conqueror, more than ever warrior with his armed force, and that by your sweet words only. Think what an empire of souls a poet wins to himself!"

"Miss Grey, you are rash, very rash," said Charles; "you little know how extremely dangerous the writing species are, or how slight an imprudence will place you in their power. I can see already, with prophetic foresight, the daily arrival of Arthur, with a long roll of MS. under his arm, to which he will hold you bound to listen, after this incautious speech. I remember once to have mentioned that I took some interest in scientific experiments before the author of a treatise on chemistry, and the consequences were awful."

Arthur turned hastily away as his brother spoke, but Millicent, whose gentle heart was pained for him, called him anxiously to her.

"Do not go," she said, "your brother does not at all understand what an intense charm there is for me in beautiful poetry. In fact, how can it be otherwise with any one! I am sure you do not yourself feel as you would have us think," she continued, turning with a bright smile to Charles; "not to appreciate poetry is to undervalue one of the sweetest things this world has to offer us,—it is the very music of the mind."

"My poor cousin," said Charles, compassionately; "what a very uncomfortable life you are preparing for yourself, if you continue at this unhealthy state of feeling. Let me exhort you to reflect that an inordinate interest in any thing or person, is wholly incompatible with that calm equanimity with which we can alone, at all times, attend to our own peace of mind, and constantly promote that condition of placid enjoyment which is quite attainable in this world if we know how to take proper care of ourselves; for instance, enthusiasm on any subject whatever is altogether a work of supererogation. It is most desirable to divest ourselves of it entirely, or it may be the cause of infinite trouble."

"You are not a believer in your own creed," said Millicent, laughing; "or if you are, you must feel exactly like a fish."

"Like a fish!" exclaimed Charles, startled out of his elegant repose of manner.

"Yes," said Millicent, "the analogy may not have occurred to you, but it strikes me forcibly, that peculiarly temperate state of mind to which you think it advisable to reduce yourself is extremely similar to the remarkable coolness of the atmosphere which pervades the whole existence of a fish. You will admit that they are essentially cool, externally and internally. I think we might even define the exact species which such a character as you have described would most resemble. I should say, now, an oyster—very calm, very cool—an oyster must be safely incased in his own shell, indifferent, we may believe, to the proceedings of the pikes and the turbots around; not likely, I should imagine, to be very enthusiastic, if even a mermaid were to sing by his side."

During this speech, which Millicent delivered with much gravity, Charles turned slowly round, aunt fixed his eyes full upon her. He met in return only a glance of quiet merriment, and an involuntary smile passed over his own face.

"Talking of fish," he said, "I think I shall go to breakfast."

"And now," said Millicent to Arthur, when they were left alone, "you will not say again it is unfortunate to be a poet."

"And is it no misfortune," exclaimed Arthur energetically, "to feel within you the stirring of a high and lofty gift, and to know of no channel or outlet whereby you may make it available for aught that is worth the seeking!

Is it nothing to know that you have a living power within you, which might subdue the minds of other men and mould them to your pleasure, and to know of no principle for whose upholding you would care to make the offering of your intellect,—or, rather, to have so little love for men, that you would never give the noble energies you feel within you, the needless effort of rousing them from the egotism and frivolity which makes them so pitiable in your sight?—Is it nothing for me to know that because of dire necessity my appearance,—my outward appearance only,—is most repulsive in their eyes, they have so shut their hearts against me, that I would rather my name were for ever forgotten; than they should insult my grave with the honour due even to the highest fame, when they made my life so desolate of all affection? Oh, Millicent! is it nothing to feel on all points more acutely than tongue can ever tell! to have an unhappy susceptibility, a miserable sensitiveness, which causes the light word carelessly spoken to fall upon the soul like molten lead, and the cold look unconsciously given to chill, as with the bleak wind of some desert, and to know that if ever you sought to make these feelings known, and to obtain that sympathy, which is to the heart what dew is to the flower, they would but mock, and could not understand you?—This is to be a poet, and this is what I am; therefore I said well that I am unfortunate."

Millicent had no time to answer, for Sophia appeared at the window with a request that Arthur would no longer detain his cousin from breakfast, which desire she expressed to him with all the harshness and ungentleness which is so common an accompaniment of that peculiar species of worth,—most especially understood and appreciated by the possessor thereof.

Arthur moved quickly on at the sound of her voice, but as he passed Millicent she showed him a flower, which she had just gathered, laden with the bright tears of the morning.

"Look," she said, "how heavy it is with these refreshing drops; so plentifully, while I live, the dew you spoke of shall fall upon your soul." He thanked her with a look of gratitude, and they returned into the dining−room together.

Now, both Millicent and Arthur were right; the one when she said it was a noble thing to be a poet, and the other that it was a great misfortune, for one or the other it will be to all who receive that perilous distinction at their birth,—either a most glorious gift, or a most fearful curse.

It has not always been a noble thing to be a poet; it has been a most debasing, a most despicable thing, when the rare talent and the winning power have been given as ministers to falsity and vice,—when they have ignored their high calling, their most glorious vocation, and for the exaltation of sophistry or scepticism, have used that harp of angels, which was placed in their hands, that with it they might echo in men's ears the songs angelic, and lure their souls with telling the surpassing beauty of celestial spheres,—.when, in a word, the intellect of the poet has been made a slave to the passions of the man.

And again, it is in one sense a bitter misfortune to be a poet, for Arthur spoke truly when he said that others of temperament less highly wrought, can never understand the acuteness of their feelings, the intensity of their affections; so that it ever seems to them as though they fell among rocks and stones when they seek to make themselves a rest in the friendships or the love of earth. They are cast in a finer mould than most men, and therefore is the world too rough and hard for them; their imagination is too ardent, their tenderness too deep, their susceptibility too keen; the evils that are trifles light as air to others, wound them to the very soul; and because their subtle shades of feeling and of suffering can never be conceived or shared, their existence is a continual solitude.

But from this misfortune, for doubtless in itself it is such, they may, if they will, extract a wondrous blessing. Since they cannot find repose in this world's treasures, and truly never shall, let them up, and betake them to that high path, where they shall meet and hold companionship with the Seraphim, rich in love, and the Cherubim in wisdom, and let them make it their right joyous task to draw after them, with their alluring voice of melody, the souls of many that else would struggle on amid clouds and shadows here, and never find that Way of Light!

Millicent was so deeply impressed with her aunt's remarks as to the extreme regularity of life at Rookcliffe, that she devoted herself to the task of watching the proceedings of the family on this day with much energy and zeal. In fact, Fanny declared it made her perfectly nervous to have those great brown eyes fixed on her at every moment, and to see them wandering from one to another with a glance of such animated scrutiny. Her abrupt remarks were also decidedly startling to those who had led a common−place, monotonous, objectless life for so many years with the utmost complacency.

It was not long before Millicent's attention was forcibly attracted by the entire devotion of Mrs. Egerton and

her daughters to the manufacture of worsted work, during the whole of that period of the day when they were not out of doors. They were somewhat confused by her earnest entreaties that they would tell her for what purpose, they were preparing those uncouth representations of bandits, with eyes of floss silk and all those flowers of unnatural dimensions and impossible hues. She seemed to think that since they plainly devoted the greater part of their existence to this delectable employment, they must surely have some hidden end; in view which would render it quite worth while, that they should have been born, educated, and carefully kept alive, by regular supplies of food, for this purpose only.

When their answers failed to give her any definite information as to the ulterior use of their embroidered brigands, she remained lost in thought, with her eyes fixed on the basket containing the materials for this arduous labour, which caused them, as it were, to work their way through the ocean of life, like so many ships under press of canvass, and inwardly pondered whether the mysterious use of existence which so bewildered her was really to be found in that basket.

The gentlemen had disappeared altogether, but they met again at luncheon, and Millicent by a few well−timed remarks succeeded in eliciting the nature of their employments in the interval. Mr. Egerton had been reading the newspapers, Charles had been seeing his horses fed, and Arthur had been wandering in the woods. At the usual stated hour the carriage came round to take the ladies for their drive; for as Mrs. Egerton informed Millicent, after luncheon, the remainder of the day was always devoted to relaxation. What they were to relax from, her niece could not imagine, nor yet the exact aim and object of the two hours' drive which she took with her aunt and cousins along the turnpike road. It was not certainly to give them exercise, as they did not walk a step; nor yet in order to breathe the fresh air, as the carriage was closed; and if it was an amusement it seemed to her even more *lugubre* than the game of chess which had so astonished her merry little *bonne*.

Millicent looked much astonished when Anne told her, as they passed through the hall, that the dinner hour was seven o'clock.

"Do you dine twice every day," she said, with much simplicity.

"What do you mean?" said Anne; "did you think we dined at luncheon time?"

"Why we certainly had enough to eat to serve us for the whole day," replied Millicent. Anne only answered by shrugging her shoulders contemptuously. It is one of the singular facts of the present state of society, that the qualities which in theory we hold to be most lovely and desirable are precisely those which in practice we treat with the greatest contumely and disdain. If one comes amongst us ignorant of the world's ways, innocent because uncontaminated by the knowledge of many evil things, unlearned in the artificial laws and observances of conventionalism,—with what contempt and sneering ridicule are they met by those whose supposed superiority consists in the fact that they drag after them, through the crowds they love so well, garments soiled with the dust they have gathered on them in a many years' contact with the world!

Millicent sat next Charles Egerton at dinner, and she was at first somewhat silent, not having been long enough in England to know what a very important and prominent place in society has been assumed by young ladies,—and how impossible it would seem, by their own showing, that the affairs of the Church, or the nation, should be conducted without their able interference. She might have been somewhat enlightened in this respect by Sophia, who was in the habit of delivering a course of lectures to Mr. Egerton at meal times, which nothing but his deep pre−occupation on such occasions could have enabled him to have endeared. Charles, however, who had observed his cousin's eyes glancing with their look of bright intelligence from side to side, at last endeavoured to draw from her the nature of her thoughts, which he saw was likely to afford him some amusement.

"Pray tell us, Miss Grey, what peculiarity in our manners and customs is now attracting your attention. You should remember that you have especial advantages for working at least a theoretic reform in our social system, since all is entirely new to you, which is a second nature to us, and consequently you are capable of analyzing many of those anomalies which we should never observe."

"Indeed," said Millicent, laughing, "it would be an immense relief to me if I might talk openly of all I see, if I might be as impertinent as I please, in short; and after all, you know, it is I who ought to be laughed at, for it is only my ignorance which causes me to be so astonished at English customs; consider me as a savage, and then I will tell you all I think."

"Very like a savage," said Charles, glancing at her sweet young face.

"But indeed, Millicent," said Mr. Egerton, benignly, "I hope you will make your comments on all you see. I

like to hear your fresh, unsophisticated remarks."

Poor Mr. Egerton! he little knew all he was to suffer hereafter from the excessive bewilderment caused by these same untutored reflections which he thus encouraged in his niece. Millicent, however, had an instinctive deference for her elders, and she preferred addressing herself to Charles.

"Well, I must tell you that I am particularly astonished at all this machinery, merely for the sake of eating."

"What machinery?" asked Charles.

"Why the whole affair; the whole ela− borate pageant, arranged with so much time and trouble. Look at those men, with immortal souls, for instance, going round the table with so many intricate evolutions, to which they are giving their entire intellect and thoughts."

"Do you mean the servants?" he said.

"Yes, the servants; but they have souls, and intellects, and capacities, you know. Now, it is clear to me that their lives are devoted, as well as all their mental faculties, to the task of helping us to eat according to an elegant system. Just think what previous calculation and forethought they must have given to that symmetrical display of forks and spoons on the sideboard there. Who can tell what important discoveries in science they might not have gained for their fellow−creatures with the same exercise of their mind otherwise directed?"

"It is rather a new view of the case," said Charles.

"Then you know, it is not their time and life only, but ours also, that seems to me, in this country, to be absorbed by the business of keeping in life. In reality, you know, it requires a very short time. In Provence, the peasants, when they are hungry, take a piece of bread and a bunch of cherries, and sit down under a tree to eat them; it does not occupy them much more than five minutes; but here it is really extraordinary how much time we employ in preparing to live. I have been counting—an hour to breakfast, another to luncheon, two or three, at least, for dinner, and coffee after it, another for tea and biscuits and wine and water at night, so that it is about six hours altogether; now, if there are twelve hours in the day, that is just half of it given to eating; seven days in the week, three and a half occupied in feeding our bodies; threescore years and ten for a man's life, and he eats incessantly during thirty−five of them."

"What an extraordinary calculation," said Charles.

"True, nevertheless, you see. I am very untaught, very unlearned, and I am obliged to try to analyze life for myself. Life, that is, as it is understood in my own country, and by persons of my own station. I cannot let my existence slip away without ascertaining the truth of those occupations which absorb it. But in order to do so, one must see things as they really are, strip them of all borrowed clothing, and look at them in their true colours. Now it does seem to me that we are for ever making ready to live and never living. I have spoken only of eating; but when you add to that, the time given to dressing and sleeping, I do not think you will find that there is much left of a life−time after the preliminaries are attended to. It is like continually reading the preface, and never coming to the book itself—always getting into the carriage for a journey, and never driving anywhere."

Mr. Egerton looked bewildered, and Charles laughed; he glanced at his father, and then said:

"But you forget that you would deprive us of one of the greatest pleasures we have, if you denied us our comfortable repasts. Just fancy my father's feelings, dining upon a bunch of cherries under a tree instead of sitting down to five courses and a dessert; you must remember that to enjoy is to live."

"Oh, now you **have** reduced it to the very lowest level," exclaimed Millicent.

"Reduced what?" asked Charles.

"The business of life! What, do you mean to say that this noble creation of man, this wonderful existence given to him, this fine intellect, this vast capacity, this power of thought—that all this is intended for no other purpose than that he, as an isolated being, should experience a personal and solitary enjoyment in the gratification of his appetite,—the very lowest and meanest qualification of his nature?"

"My dear Miss Grey, pray be cautious; you really alarm me. My nerves are scarcely equal to such startling denunciations. I thought my remark very innocent and sensible; I can hardly imagine how you have drawn from it such a wholesale condemnation."

"Simply because, if you would test the real nature of a principle, you must carry it on to the extremest verge to which it could ever reach, you must judge of it in all its bearings, and work it out to the very uttermost. I think we are very apt to hold principles in themselves intrinsically evil, but which, up to a certain point, seem to be innocuous, and because we are too well bred, or too indifferent, to go beyond that limit we never consider what is

their true tendency, and so freely indulge them. You distinctly said that we were to spend half our short lives in eating, because it is a pleasant occupation, and I only put that sentiment into other words."

"Sophia, my dear, how do you feel?" exclaimed Charles, evidently anxious to escape giving an answer; "'Othello's occupation' seems to me to be gone into other hands; the wig and gown with which metaphorically you have invested yourself for the last few years, in order to sit in judgment on us all, has clearly been transferred to the head and shoulders of our merry cousin here. Your essays on moral improvement were nothing to her pithy remarks."

"Millicent's ideas seem to me to be remarkably confused," said Sophia sharply.

"Indeed they are," said Millicent, very humbly; "I become more and more confused with every thing I see and hear."

"But you have sufficiently proved to what miserable things our lives are given," said Arthur, who sat on the other side of her; "will you not now say to what they should be devoted? how should the time we might redeem from the corrupt usages of society be occupied by us all?"

"Ah, that is the very difficulty which weighs upon me like the heaviest burden," said Millicent, her eyes filling with tears from the intensity of her feelings; "I can see the wrong, but I cannot find the right. It is I who should ask that question; for I feel myself, more than any other, ignorant and helpless; I feel the evil so deeply that I know, were I to die now, I should have been useless in the world as any clod of earth into which no mysterious flame of life had ever passed. Only in one sense do I seem at times to have a dim comprehension of what man might perform and might be. I know this world is full of misery, of want, of suffering, of deadly guilt. There must be a reason for it all,—there must be some dire evil at the root of it. The effect is dark and dreadful, the cause must be more dark and dreadful still; but be it what it may, it can be overcome, or at least combated, because good is more powerful than evil. It seems to me, though I know not how it should be done, that it were a noble task for the rich, for those who need not to labour for their daily bread, the intellectual and educated class, to rise up and make themselves a work in the succouring of their fellow men. —It must be such au awful thing to suffer! Surely to labour for the removal of the load of suffering from this earth were a nobler system of life, than that which quenches the spirit, in a continued provision for bodily comfort."

She paused, quite ashamed of her own vehemence, and no one seemed inclined to answer. After an awkward silence of a few minutes, Mrs. Egerton rose to go to the drawing−room, muttering to Anne, as Millicent passed her,—

"That girl's extraordinary education has rendered her totally unfit for reasonable society, or for ordinary life."

"You will have some trouble with her, I can tell you," was Anne's reply; "I should not be surprised if she brought discredit on the family by some unheard of proceedings. She has no idea of the commonest rules of society."

Millicent meanwhile went to sit down musingly, pondering within herself, as usual, how she could best reduce to practice the theory she had just started, that it were a fitting object for life to wrestle with human misery; and still it seemed, as it had ever done, that for her, a weak woman, young and helpless as she was, there was but one means whereby she could have a part in so glorious a battle, and that it would be by concentrating all her energy on some one life,—a life beloved,—and devoting herself to banish from it, by her faithful tenderness, every shade of evil, and every cloud of sorrow. She knew not then that there are other ways and means by which, in all ages, timid women have come forth as dauntless soldiers to battle with mortal suffering, that universal foe; and how by self−devotion they have found a wondrous strength and power, most foreign to their nature, and have gone to court the strife, in noisome haunts where most it rages, fiercely braving the pestilence, and all the fouler diseases of moral ills.

Millicent Grey knew nothing of all this, nor would she have been equal to it; for in truth the sweet dream of human love, to which she had given up her whole power of hope, had fascinated her so completely that her eyes could discern no other light in life.

CHAPTER VII.

SEVERAL days had passed away, and Millicent, who was thoroughly grateful for the real kindness with which she was treated by the Egerton family, was now quite at home amongst them, and as gay as ever. It is true, they did not seem to her to take any very animated or very profound view of existence, but they never interfered either with her ideas or her actions, and left her quite free to choose her own mode of life. She also found no small pleasure in the society of Arthur, notwithstanding the morbid and unnatural state of feeling into which he had fallen, from a total misapprehension of his condition on this earth.

He was as much bewildered as she was by the false lights and strange shadows that surround us in the world, and on which alone his eyes were fixed; but it was at least a mutual satisfaction to them both, to speculate together on all the deep questions which they most vainly sought to penetrate with their unassisted intellect. Truly for poor Arthur, misunderstood and little cared for in his own family, it was as though the whole earth had become full of sunshine and brightness when, day after day, he met the sweet smile of his gentle−hearted cousin, and knew that he should hear her kind words of sympathy.

"I find we have a new neighbour," said Mr. Egerton, walking into the drawing room, where the whole party were assembled one morning. "I have just received a letter from a friend, introducing to me a gentleman who has taken Milton Lodge for the summer."

"Oh, do tell us all about him," exclaimed Fanny, the only one of the family sufficiently natural to give vent to the curiosity which all felt alike.

"Lord —— tells me," replied Mr. Egerton, "that he is an intimate friend of his, a man of excellent family and large fortune. His name is Bentley—Colonel Bentley—he acquired no small reputation in his profession; but, poor fellow, he is quite disabled now. I have a note from him, saying that he is too great an invalid ever to leave home, but that he begs me to call upon him."

"He is a married man, probably?" suggested Mrs. Egerton, carelessly.

"On the contrary, he never had a wife. I believe his nephew is his heir, and he will have a very handsome income."

"Is he an old man?" asked Anne.

"Why, not exactly what I should call old; about my standing, I should say."

"Oh!" Anne made no other answer than this significant monosyllable.

"He is, then, old enough to come into the list of those whose age entitles them to the benefit to be derived from my 'Tracts for the Elderly,'" said Sophia, her calm, measured voice; "I am glad of it."

"My dear Sophia," said Charles, "you don't suppose the man to be without education; I thought your essays were for the ignorant."

"You are right as to my intention in the publication," replied Sophia, "but I can assure you that nowhere have I found such ignorance of the peculiar principles I wish to inculcate, as amongst those whose station in life would have led one to hope better things." She turned her eyes, as she spoke, full upon her father; Mr. Egerton, however, endured the glance without wincing, being hardened into indifference to the schooling most plentifully bestowed upon him by his youngest daughter.

"How I should like to see this old gentleman," exclaimed Millicent; "he would be something new!"

"Well, my dear, I know of no reason why you should not be gratified," said Mr. Egerton. "Colonel Bentley is accompanied by his widowed sister, Mrs. Hartley, on whom Mrs. Egerton must call to−day, and you had better go with us."

Millicent agreed, although she had hitherto always eschewed the daily funereal drive in the family hearse, when it seemed to her that they ever went with much pomp, to bury their superfluous time. She met Arthur's glance of disappointment, who appeared to think there would be a sunbeam less in the woods if she did not go with him to wander through them, as was their wont nearly every day, and she murmured, as she past him, a few of those gentle, kindly words that come like sweet music into the life of those to whom is given that intensity of tenderness, which is a gift so beautiful and yet so perilous.

A short drive brought Millicent, with her uncle and aunt, to Milton Lodge. Mrs. Hartley was alone in the drawing−room when they went in. She was a very old widow lady, most simple in manner and appearance, but

with a face which to look on was to love. The mild blue eyes, full of that calm look of sorrow which the many tears of widowhood alone can give, and the sweet expression lingering round the placid mouth, all spoke so eloquently of the truthful simplicity and perfect unselfishness of her character. Very childlike was her gentle spirit, for to her no gift of intellect or power of mind was given, but the far richer portion, of humility and willing submission, and a heart that ever beat with warmest sympathy towards her fellow−creatures. The deep, unchanging grief which, with the passing of her husband's spirit, had entered into hers, had been, during the long years of solitude that followed, as a blessed angel sitting by her side, and talking to her ever with words of wisdom and love.

She welcomed her new acquaintance with much cordiality, but Millicent was at a loss to account for the peculiar smile which passed over her face as she took the young girl's hands; her astonishment soon ceased, however,—there was a sound of some one coming along the passage on crutches, and Colonel Bentley entered, followed by a very tall servant. Mr. and Mrs. Egerton met him with all due formality, but their amazement was great when Millicent, bounding from her seat, flew towards him, and expressed the utmost delight at seeing him again.

"I told you we should meet in England," said he; "why you fairly bewitched me, Miss Grey! I think you will admit I have lost no time in establishing myself as near to you as I could." He then detailed to her uncle and aunt the acquaintance they had made on board of the French steamer, and further declared positively, that he had come to settle in this neighbourhood for the sole purpose of being near her. He said he had just left the Continent, where he had vainly been seeking to recover his health, and finding his efforts quite fruitless, he had resolved on making a home to himself in his own country, which he designed to quit no more.

"I had no tie, however, to any particular locality," he continued, "and after having met with this,—excuse me, I must speak plainly,—this charming little witch here, it seemed to me that life would be so greatly improved by the addition of her society, that I determined on making my new abode as near to her as I could."

Colonel Bentley stumbled a good deal over the latter part of this speech, as if he were quite aware that he was not telling **all** his motives, to say the least of it, and Mrs. Hartley smiled gently whilst she looked with evident interest on Millicent. The Egertons were, however, extremely well pleased that their niece should have gained the friendship of an old gentleman so exceedingly **comfortable** , in every sense of the word, as Colonel Bentley, and expressed themselves much gratified thereby. The same thought was on the minds of both, that it is not in novels only, that attractive young ladies receive unexpected bequests from elderly gentlemen of easy and pliant dispositions; such things they reflected have been in every−day life, and might be again, Perhaps Colonel Bentley guessed the idea that was working in their minds, for there was considerable merriment in the recasting glance which he cast at his sister, but he proceeded to follow up what was evidently a settled purpose with him.

"Now, Mrs. Egerton, since I have been very frank in avowing the attraction which has brought me here, I hope you will kindly allow me as much of your niece's society as she will consent to bestow on an infirm old man."

"And an old lady scarce less infirm," added Mrs. Hartley, with a smile. "I am afraid your invitation is not very tempting, brother, to such a spring flower as this."

"Perhaps not, but I am very selfish; I should like to see this bright face every day, if I could."

"And so you shall," exclaimed Millicent warmly; "I know I may come." She looked appealingly to her aunt, who graciously signified her assent. "I will come whenever you will let me, it will make me so happy." She pressed Mrs. Hartley's hand involuntarily as she spoke, for the gentle old lady, with her simple quiet words, had greatly prepossessed her. Colonel Bentley, however, was not yet content; telling Mrs. Egerton he had still a request to make, he begged her to allow Millicent to remain with him now, whilst they proceeded to pay some other visits they had in view, and they could return for her on their way home. To this they also agreed, and Millicent soon found herself, greatly to her delight, alone with her kind old friend, whom she seemed to have known for years. He was in the greatest glee, and looked as if he could have danced round her, crutches and all. Had Millicent been somewhat less guileless, she might have seen very clearly that Colonel Bentley had certainly some purpose in view respecting her, which had induced him thus to seek her out, and now determinately monopolize her society; but she only thought of the pleasure of renewing the friendship which had sprung up so rapidly, and of the great relief it would be to her to escape to Milton Lodge, when the ponderous vacancy of the respectable and harmless existence at Rookcliffe became intolerable.

They had sat talking some little time, when Colonel Bentley rose and summoned Millicent to come with him to

the library, where he said there was a treasure he wished to show her. She followed as he led the way, and opening the door he stood back to let her pass. She paused one moment on the threshold; one moment she stood there, turning round upon that old way−worn man her cloudless eyes, with their candid, confiding gaze, telling so eloquently of a spirit that, child−like, knew nothing as yet, either of the deep joys or the deep sorrows of this life, whose depths had never been stirred to tell what mighty power of feeling and of suffering was there, over whose clear surface the wings of time had passed as over a calm limpid sea, where no blast of destiny, swift and viewless, had roused the lurking storms and called the human passions like foaming waves to life.

Thus stood she,—though she knew it not,—on the threshold of her youth's sweet spring, from which she was about to pass for ever into that first summer of the soul, when the sunshine of earthly love shines upon it, and calls forth every latent power of thought and feeling, even as the warm, glowing beams draw out the fragrance from the flowers. She turned and entered the room, and with that one step she passed into a new era in her existence, where she never more could be, as she had been.

The first object which attracted her attention was a large oil painting, seemingly fresh from the hands of the artist, which stood on an easel near the window; and as her eye fell upon it, immediately on entering the room, it seemed to her so strikingly beautiful, that, without looking to the right or left she hurried forward to examine it. The subject which it represented was somewhat singular, but so ably executed, that Millicent stood transfixed with admiration.

It was evidently the production of a mind of high refinement, and great purity of taste, whilst every line bore the incontestable stamp of genius. The scene represented a wild and frowning landscape, a very desert of savage mountains, where huge rocks rose menacing through mist and clouds, while deep precipices and chasms were lost in a portentous darkness. In the very midst of this abode of gloom and terror, stood one solitary female figure of the most exquisite grace and beauty; her robes of purest white, her fair head, veiled with her waving golden hair, her calm, and clear blue eyes, turning with a gaze evidently of deepest tenderness on some unseen object, afforded a most striking contrast with the dark and terrible nature all around. That stern solitude with its inaccessible heights, and fearful depths, offered to the mind only the most dismal images of utter loneliness and gloom; but when the gaze turned on that radiant figure, on whose half−parted lips the glowing smile told of joy and gladness, as eloquently as the soft eyes spoke of fond affection, all the promise and the hopes of life seemed embodied there, and she looked like the representative and dispenser of the whole rich happiness which earth is believed to offer man.

The picture was painted in the style of some of the old Italian masters, but it possessed none of that devotional character which mostly hallows those divine works of art, many of which were consecrated and inspired by prayer;—far other was the spirit breathing through this splendid painting. Ethereal−looking and lovely as was that figure, standing forth so white and fair amid the gloom—it was no angel, but a mere woman, beautiful with the beauty at which the expectant worms mock,—radiant with the ardour of earthly hopes, and on some earthly object fixing that tender and speaking glance.

Millicent gazed at it long, silent, and motionless, then, drawing a long breath, she exclaimed,−

"How wonderfully beautiful!"

Instantly there was a slight movement behind her, as of one drawing near; she turned, and her gaze fell upon that face whose image was to pass before her spirit when her eyes were closing for ever on the light of day,—and a voice, whose echo was to linger on her heart, when already with a dull faint beating it was fluttering beneath. the hand of death, came sounding on her ear.

"So sincere a tribute as yours is worth a world's praise."

"Why, Stephen, I did not know you were here when I brought my charming little friend to see your picture, but I am glad you have had such an honest proof of the admiration it deserves;" said Colonel Bentley. "And now, Miss Grey, I must introduce the artist to you as my nephew, Stephen Aylmer; he is my sole surviving relative, besides my sister, so I must pray you to be very friendly with him."

Millicent offered her hand to Aylmer with her usual frankness, and again looked up into the noble face that was bent down to her, thinking as she did so that she had never seen a countenance which bore so plainly the impress of a fine mind, and an elevated character, and wondering at the singular charm of the sweet smile that tempered so well his gravity of thought.

Stephen Aylmer had received many rare gifts wherewith to make himself a noble destiny on earth, if so he

willed it. Of these the most powerful was, perhaps, the great fascination which he possessed over the minds of others. His personal appearance, his genius, his kind and generous disposition, all united to give him an irresistible ascendancy with whomsoever he would. He was a man of great talent and of strong feelings. In this age, when knowledge is around us like the blaze of the noonday sun, the light of truth fails not to pass before the eyes of all;—it passes immutable, unchanging; and the influence of its pure beams on the soul of each is either like the power of the sun−rays when, stealing over the kindly grateful soil, they cause its hidden treasures to germinate, and bear much fruit, and many fragrant flowers; or like those same rays sweeping over the cold deceitful waters of the sea that gather not from them a spark of warmth or of life. Now the proud, strong spirit of Stephen Aylmer had met the flood of light divine as the chill waters of the ocean meet the sun. He acknowledged the glory and the surpassing beauty of that moral brightness; he no more doubted whence came those living beams, than men could doubt that the sunshine streams from heaven. Yet it penetrated not deeper into his life and heart, than the earthly light beneath the cold dark billows. He held the faith as an hereditary possession like his name, or the unstained honour of his family, but he yielded obedience to none, save his own will; he ruled himself solely by the dictates of his own understanding. He abhorred vice, not because the voice of truth had proclaimed it abhorrent, but because he himself conceived it low and degrading, unworthy the possible elevation of the human nature. Nevertheless the soul of man demands a worship; it cannot exist without adoring, and if it bow not to the Supreme Perfection, it will prostrate itself before some outward expression of that Unseen Power. Now, that which to Stephen Aylmer supplied the place of a legitimate adoration was the worship of the Beautiful;—he gave up his life to seek and cherish it, wherever it might be found,—in the scenes of nature, in the human face, and in the higher works of art. He adored also the moral beauty of goodness; he sought it in others, he cultivated it in himself, but he rested in his own proud independence of mind alone for the attainment of all virtue and excellence. He would not be degraded, he would not be corrupted by evil, and therefore he **would** be generous, honourable, unstained by any vice; not because he was so commanded, but because he so willed. He had lived nearly thirty years when he first looked on Millicent Grey, and as yet his unsound theory had apparently upheld him in all rectitude and goodness;—no unworthy action had ever sullied his fair fame. He was honoured and beloved for his rectitude, and for his amiable and noble disposition, whilst the admiration excited by his talents and genius seemed only to render him more kind and gentle to all.

He believed himself very secure on the high ground he had chosen, but he knew not what ungovernable passions lay hid in the depth of his soul, which no human will, not even his who called himself master of his own spirit, could restrain. It was strange that these had never been called forth in any shape; but his life had been very bright and tranquil. He had devoted his time almost entirely to the cultivation of the fine arts; he had lived much in Italy, enjoying the free poetical existence of the artist, which is too wandering and gay to admit the exercise of any very strong feelings. Aylmer had never felt a deep or powerful affection, not because he had not the capacity for it, but because he had it too intensely,—his ideal had never yet been found. Many a fair face had haunted his dreams from time to time, but no attachment had ever taken root in his heart. He knew not what it was either to hate or to love, therefore had he easily maintained that calm dignity of excellence. But too surely, yet a little while, and some rushing wind would come to blow to flame the smouldering fire of his soul's deep passions, and then would he find that the fair structure he had built up, the noble character and blameless life, were set on a foundation of shifting sand.

Aylmer was altogether dependent on Colonel Bentley, being the only child of his sister, who had married a ruined man, and died in the same year as her husband, whilst he was quite a child. They left nothing but debts to a large amount, which Colonel Bentley paid, and adopted his nephew, designing to make him his heir. This was, however, entirely a matter of choice; he could dispose of his fortune as he would, and Stephen had no legal claim upon him. This state of utter dependence would doubtless have been very galling to the young man but for the excessive affection shown him by his uncle; their wishes were never in opposition, for Colonel Bentley so habitually indulged him in everything, that Aylmer was always ready on his part to make occasional sacrifices to his uncle's desires.

In the present instance, Stephen had returned from the Continent to reside at Milton Lodge, in accordance with Colonel Bentley's request, although he had only partially revealed to him his reasons for requiring it. He had told him, what was the case, that he was exceedingly anxious he should marry, but he had not communicated the more important fact, that he had already fixed on the person he should wish him to choose.

Colonel Bentley had never ceased to regret his own deficiency in this respect; as a young man, being fond of a free and merry life, he had rather avoided any family incumbrances, but when, later, he found himself a helpless cripple, condemned almost entirely to solitude, and delivered over to the care of hired attendants, it was then that he longed for some gentle wife to be his faithful companion, ministering to all his wants and comforts. The one great mistake which he told Millicent he had made in youth, was simply his having failed to marry when it was in his power. And certainly his lamentations were not without reason, as Stephen was much absent, and Mrs. Hartley could only leave her children, who were dispersed in the world, at rare intervals, in order to be with him.

It was not unnatural, under these circumstances, that he should feel very anxious, since he could no longer remedy his own mistake, to prevent his nephew falling into the same, both because he really believed it essential to Aylmer's happiness that he should marry, and also because, as he fully intended that his favourite nephew should always reside with him, he would secure in his new niece, a useful companion, whose duty it would be to perform for him all those little offices, which belong especially to a woman's province.

Stephen Aylmer possessed much of the old chivalrous feeling respecting women, and his bearing towards them was full of grace and gentleness, although no one could be more essentially manly in his habits and address. Millicent felt the charm of his manner during the conversation which en− sued between them, and he seemed pleased and amused at the lively and novel view she took of most subjects.

They had advanced considerably in their acquaintance when Mr. and Mrs. Egerton arrived to reclaim their niece. They did not alight, and as Millicent rose to go to the carriage, she paused once again before the picture, and gazed intently on it: then she looked up with a bright smile to Aylmer, and quoted the words of the poet:

"Oh, that a desert were my dwelling−place,
With one fair spirit for my minister."His smile answered hers.

"You are quite right,—you have caught the idea. I have endeavoured to embody on that canvass my ideal of beauty,—of such beauty as, beaming from one human face, could make the savage desert, indeed, a dwelling place of light and joy."

"I doubt, however, if anything so beautiful does exist in human shape."

"I almost begin to fear it,—at least, I fear that my ideal exists not,—for I do not consider this in any degree a successful expression of my own vision."

"What must your ideal be, if this is not beautiful enough?" exclaimed Millicent.

"Ideals indeed!" shouted Colonel Bentley, shaking his crutch impatiently. "I have no patience with your visionary pieces of perfection; they are all very well in theory, but I can tell you they would be most useless, uncomfortable companions. Just fancy asking that ethereal−looking; individual in the white gown, whom you have painted there, to come and shake up one's cushion, or bring one a footstool? Take my word for it, Stephen, if your seraphic vision were to come flying in just now, for she certainly could not walk, along with some active, merry, sweet tempered little being, of nature' s own making, you would soon bow your ideal out, and tell the footman to show her the window, that she might make a poetical exit, while you sat down to your dinner with a good honest bit of flesh and blood. No, no,—I have no fancy for your ideals. I dare say you have got one, too, Miss Grey,—a very fierce and interesting brigand, with black hair and a mystery over his birth; but, my dear little love, let me assure you, you would not be at all comfortable, making tea for a brigand, especially if he took it with his mask on."

"I don't think I should, indeed," said Millicent, laughing heartily; "I am not famous for courage; but, in the meantime, I have an uncle and aunt waiting for me, who are very real and substantial, and not at all visionary; so I fear I must go."

"Well, promise to come back every day."

"I will, indeed, if I can," said Millicent; and she went to the carriage, accompanied by Aylmer. Mr. and Mrs. Egerton were extremely gracious to him, and hoped to see him often; and so terminated the visit to which Millicent Grey looked back when on her death bed, as the crisis of her destiny.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. AYLMER called at Rookcliffe next day, and having paid a visit of considerable length, he was about to take leave, when the horses were brought round for the Egertons and their cousin, who were going to ride; and Mrs. Egerton proposed, as he had come on horseback, that he should join the party. To this he willingly agreed, and they were soon on their way to the common, through which Millicent had passed on the night of her arrival. They were all there excepting, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Egerton, and Sophia, who had passed out of the hall−door, in the most elaborate manner, with a basket of Tracts, just as the others were preparing to mount; and having anxiously waited to be asked where she was going, which she at last happily accomplished, she replied that the curate of the village had greatly unsettled the mind of one of **her** flock, and that she was now going to warn him that he must on no account attend to that gentleman's advice, but to her own instructions only.

Millicent Grey had never been face to face with the poor—that dark, that awful, that mysterious portion of this world's vast system had never passed before her eyes, that one black page in earth's history, which changes not from age to age, bearing ever the same record in the single word **MISERY**, had not as yet been unrolled to her gaze. She was like many others, who live and die in this country, with its millions of paupers, without ever having looked on poverty.

They would think you mocked them if you told them so. They would say that surely they had often seen the wretched beggars in the street, and that yearly they gave a large portion of their income to charitable institutions. It may be so; they know not what is poverty. Have they ever gone to pass days and nights in attendance on the sick and dying, amongst those crowds of miserable wretches who herd together in damp, black cellars, to watch there all the various shapes and stages of the agony of want?

Have they seen them seeking to forget in sleep the raging pangs of hunger,—dreaming of food, and waking to curse life, and weep for death?

Have they heard that cry, simple, familiar, daily ascending—but into which is gathered the extreme of mortal anguish—"My children are perishing for want of food, and I have none to give?"

Have they seen parents blessing the pestilence which sweeps away the babes they have carried on their bosom? or bending over them when dying in the lingering horror of starvation, and feeling all the strong love returning, so that they would yet retain them even to their life of misery, well knowing one morsel—one little morsel—might redeem them from the jaws of death—and yet that morsel is unattainable, and they expire?

Have they seen the man with the strong life struggling in him, lying before the stores of food, where all that could tempt the appetite is separated from him by the frail, clear glass?—have they thought on his superhuman virtue, who stretches not out his hand to take the means of life, when his nature was revolting against the death of exhaustion? It were a crime, no doubt, for which men who fare sumptuously every day would sit in judgment on him and condemn him, with stern rebuke, to punishment. A crime, truly; but in whom? In those, surely, who withhold, as much as in the maddened wretch who steals.

They have not known poverty, they have not seen it, till they have so felt it that they turn in horror from their own luxurious boards and look in fear on the comfort of their homes—asking themselves by what right they enjoy one item of superfluity whilst at the door of their very souls a million fellow creatures stand knocking, saying, "Give us food, give us food, we perish!"

Millicent knew nothing of all this, yet she had learned theoretically that there was want and sorrow in this world, and she often wondered what it was that she felt so repugnant in Sophia Egerton's charity.

She had a vision of Charity such as we have spoken of already, one whose feet she would have kissed, could she have met her stealing in secret through the dark haunts of wretchedness, so gentle, so humble, so loving—none knowing whither she goes, or whence she comes—braving the contagious sickness of all the noisome atmosphere, cold and heat, fatigue and long unrest, if only her presence can give comfort; enduring the rude, unholy words of evil men, the sights and sounds of blasphemy and vice, nor heeding that the delicately nurtured might shun her after, lest she suffer by the contact. Some such vision as this had Millicent; yet she was always angry at herself for not sufficiently appreciating Sophia's exertions.

The truth was, that Millicent Grey, quick sighted as she certainly was in detecting many of the popular fallacies and familiar little sins which, like so many respected family friends, are everywhere received and

cherished in society, had not yet distinguished between the meek, voiceless, all−enduring charity which, heaven be praised, has a wide though hidden dominion in our lands, and a certain species of convivial benevolence, quite peculiar to England, and most universal there.

There is a whole system of sociable, open−mouthed alms−giving, which is most intensely pleasant to human nature, and especially to that nature as developed in the inhabitants of Great Britain.

Religion being essential to respectability among us, we are obliged to dress up our pleasures in a monk's cowl and gown, before we can go out walking with them in the eyes of the world.

Now nothing looks the religious so well as that busy, excited, talkative charity, that drives to cottage doors in a carriage filled with sympathizing friends, and holds meetings to discuss soup kitchens and blanket clubs, ever comparing notes with others equally zealous, as to the amount of good that has been done,—promoting in every possible way the **public** performance of that duty, which is to be accomplished by the left hand unknown to the right, and talking as openly of their charitable prowess as if they were recounting their misdoings in self−imposed penance.

Millicent had not quite understood this as yet, so she looked thoughtfully after Sophia and her basket, till the voice of Aylmer at her side recalled her from her reflections.

Aylmer's conversation was striking and full of talent: he waged war against all common places, and when he was conversing with any one who could understand him, he invariably chose subjects of some depth and importance, on which he could exercise the powers of his fine mind. This was great enjoyment to Millicent, who could never be content with the surface of things. She was perpetually diving to the bottom of wells in search of truth, and she was quite happy when she found any one willing to dive along with her, instead of passing by on the beaten path, as most of her present friends did, who were content, as she said, to cast a glance of pity on her so perplexed in her well, whilst they themselves followed the road, right or wrong, which others chalked out for them, and wondered what made her take so much trouble.

Aylmer was pleased with her frank simple manner, and amused by her lively remarks. The conversation was so interesting that it was not until they had ridden several miles that Millicent remembered she had not addressed a word to Arthur, who was riding silently by her side.

There was a great change in Arthur Egerton, since the sweet face of his cousin had come beaming in upon his dark life like a star: the immense ambition which so long had sounded in his heart like thunder, still was echoing there, for it was the voice of the divine gift within him, that cried out to be employed on the high mission for which alone the poetic spark of heavenly fire was ever sent to dwell in mortal clay; but it had changed its nature. We have said that this young poet had never understood his calling, because he had not comprehended man's immortal destiny, wherein lies the solution of all this life's bewilderment, and he was still in the mist of his sorrowful ignorance; but it often happens to those who have never filled the void of their own spirit with the great name of truth, that when, for the first time, a strong affection of earth comes swelling up into their soul, they conceive that their whole being shall be content therewith, and that around this alone, may revolve all their thoughts, and longings, and desires. The conviction of this error comes best and soonest in the full accomplishment of their desires, for satiety is the deepest test of the true value of enjoyment.

Whilst the treasure is unattainable, however, it seems mostly to suffice for the heart of man,—and it was so now with Arthur. He had never yet stilled the raging fire of his ambitious yearnings, by giving the fruit of his great gifts to the world, for he did not sufficiently love mankind either to devote his genius to benefit them, or to gain their applause for himself; but now at this time it seemed to him that he would readily employ all his rare talent to conquer one gentle heart.

He had the consciousness of his own genius, as all must have who possess it,—and at times the wild hope came across him that the young soul of Millicent, which ever seemed to him limpid and clear as a stream at its source, would so meet his own with its treasures of poetry, that she would overlook his unsightly appearance. Millicent would have been overwhelmed with astonishment had she discovered the nature of his feelings. In France she had been taught to look on first−cousins as brothers, and she had no intention of doing otherwise in England. Even had this idea been removed, however, poor Arthur, with his repulsive looks and his morbid gloomy disposition, would never have inspired her with any other feeling than that of compassion.

Arthur now recalled her to a recollection of his presence, by telling her that he was convinced her horse had cast a shoe, and that she had better stop and have it ascertained. This was done, and his supposition was found to

be correct. She was obliged to dismount while the groom galloped off to a blacksmith's which was fortunately near, and the rest of the party assembled round her. Aylmer suggested that they should all take a walk until the horse was ready, but Anne and Fanny exclaimed against this idea, bidding him look in what part of the country they were before he proposed it.

In truth, Millicent and Aylmer had been talking too earnestly to observe the scene through which they were passing,—they were now in the very midst of the colliery district, surrounded on all sides by the miserable hovels in which the miners dwelt. It was certainly a most uninviting spot,—those cheerless, half−ruined huts, rising but a little way above the black naked ground, had every appearance of the most squalid wretchedness; whilst the few ragged women and starved−looking children who were crawling about, wore the stamp of abject poverty in every feature.

Aylmer was not surprised that the Miss Egertons did not choose to walk: he wished as they did that they had stopped anywhere else. He had a horror of suffering either in him− self or in others,—he liked sunny landscapes and smiling faces, and he shrank from the very thought of sorrow for himself, although as yet he had known little of it. He was by no means an unfeeling man: on the contrary, there was much depth and warmth in his character, but he felt, as many persons do with regard to the awful mass of poverty which overwhelms this vast country, that it was an evil quite beyond his reach, and therefore, since he could not remedy it, he would avoid all occasions of making himself unhappy by contemplating it. So thought and so acted the man under the influence of the world's schooling,—not so felt Millicent Grey, who was as yet guided solely by natural impulse. She gazed round on the gloomy scene, with great astonishment for, as we have said, she had never looked poverty in the face. "What a dismal place this is!" she said; "surely it cannot be, that human beings live in those wretched abodes?"

"I fear they do," said Aylmer. "It is sad to think what misery is around us, but we cannot help it."

"We cannot help it!" She hardly understood what he meant: some impulse seemed to move her, and she walked towards the nearest hut,—Aylmer followed her. As they approached, they could distinguish a low moaning sound proceeding from within.

"Some one is in distress here," exclaimed Millicent, and hastily pushing aside the door which was swinging half off its hinges, she entered the cottage. She found herself in a dark miserable room devoid of all furniture, and containing only some heaps of straw, serving apparently as beds to the wretched inmates. Close to the hearth, where not a spark of fire lingered among the black cinders, a woman sat crouching, her face buried in her hands, and her continual moaning seeming to indicate that she was in pain. Two half−naked children lay sleeping at her feet. Millicent shivered as she cast a rapid glance on the cheerless aspect of the place,—then going up to the woman, she laid her hand softly on her shoulder, and asked if anything was the matter with her. The poor creature looked up and gazed for a moment in her face, with a sort of vacant astonishment, but soon resuming her former position, she began to rock herself to and fro with many heavy sighs.

"Are you ill?" said Millicent, in a gentle voice.

"Ill enough," replied the woman, with the sort of dogged sullenness which almost invariably takes possession of the pauper, who has long ceased to hope or expect relief.

"But then you surely have a doctor to attend you?—can he do you no good?" said Millicent, who never supposed it possible that any one could have to suffer, either morally or physically, without the means of relief.

Again the woman lifted her head, and looked at her; she evidently thought that the "lady" mocked her. Millicent repeated her question; a bitter smile passed over the woman's face,—"Oh, ay,—we've a doctor, sure enough,—he puts us out of pain, any how: there's my child, in the corner, see what he has done for her." She pointed to what Millicent had fancied was only a bundle of rags: she now saw it was a tattered counterpane, covering a little child. She went and lifted it up, but started back appalled and almost frightened; the white rigid face which met her gaze, wore that expression of sternness and of indomitable calm, which is so strangely sublime when stamped on an infant brow. The majesty of death shone forth on the innocent countenance of the pauper's little child, and filled her soul with awe. She let the covering fall over it with silent respect, and crept back to the poor mother.

"This is very sad; I feel so much for you; poor little child! How did you lose it?"

"Do you mean, what was it killed my baby?" said the woman, not yet softened by Millicent's gentle sympathy. "You may know that soon enough: it was starvation."

Millicent actually screamed, "Starvation! Oh, you do not mean it. Oh how dreadful! Surely it is not possible,

and to think of that loaded table yesterday! Oh, we did not know it,—we did not know it, indeed!" she exclaimed, ready almost to fall on her knees, to ask forgiveness of this woman, for the luxury in which she lived.

"Ay, like enough," said the woman, bitterly; "what should such as you know of us poor creatures!" And then passed through the mind of the starving pauper, a vision of that awful history, on which the very souls of the poor do feed, finding therein a terrible consolation and a savage hope. It was the parable of Lazarus and the beggar.

"Oh, but if we had known it, we never would have let this happen," said Millicent, trembling with agitation; "and at least you shall suffer no more now,—take this, take all this," and she emptied her purse into the woman's lap; "and I will bring you more, much more, to−morrow,—everything you want.

For the first time the woman seemed to feel that her visitor's compassion was genuine. She bowed her head, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, my little baby, my poor, weeny baby! If I had had this, she need not have died; it is too late for her—too late!"

"But not for the others," said Millicent, eagerly. "Oh, take comfort; I will never let you want again. Indeed, indeed, we could not have lived in all our comforts had we known your suffering. But how was it? Surely some terrible misfortune caused it. What can have made you so very poor?"

"It is nothing strange, anyhow," said the woman; "many and many's the one I have seen worse off nor I have been. My husband's a miner; from year's end to year's end he never comes out of them black mines; it's work, work, in the dark, all day, and little pay; but it's all one to me what he gets, I never sees a penny of it. He's taken to drinking, that he may drive out care, and the parish won't allow us nothing so long as he is in work—so here we may sit and starve."

"It is a most extraordinary case," said Millicent, "I never heard anything so sad. How strange that your condition was not known."

The woman looked surprised; she well knew there was nothing uncommon in her case.

"Well, my lady, indeed it's not me only; there's scarce a family in the place that's not as bad off nearly. I will speak up for them, poor creatures, for they have done what they could for me: many a time they've given me a bit of bread when not another soul's come a−nigh me."

"Every family in the place as wretched!"

Millicent felt her brain almost reeling; she could not conceive the possibility of so many human beings in want of the necessaries of life within a few miles of those who were plunged in its luxuries; it was the horror of the contrast that overcame her. For the first time the great problem of want and superfluity was before her; to think of Rookcliffe and Milton Lodge, and half−a−dozen similar houses not five miles distant, with their abundance, their comforts, their elegancies—and then these damp, naked walls, that child dead of hunger, that mother, sullen, hardened, mistrustful, losing the very woman's heart within her, because of her unpitied anguish, Millicent stood with flushed cheek and trembling hands thinking on these things: the voice of Aylmer roused her—he had remained at the door watching her, and it interested him to see how those social evils, which have grown old and hackneyed amongst us, struck that fresh, penetrating mind, so clear−sighted and so full of depth, even whilst ignorant of the commonest truths of daily life. He now told her, for the second time, that her horse was ready, and her cousins impatient to return home. She started, and, telling the woman she would send to her next day, abruptly left the hut. Here she paused, and, looking with a dismayed and anxious glance to the oilier cottages, she exclaimed:—

"We cannot go home yet; I must go into those houses, and tell them we will help them. She told me they were all equally wretched—starving!"

"Nonsense, Millicent!" exclaimed Anne, "you can't be going into those hovels just now. If the people are in want, papa will send to relieve them—but I've no doubt they are imposing on you."

"At all events, you really must not go," said Charles; "you are by no means the proper person for such a task. You don't understand these things, my dear little cousin, or they would not astonish you so much; there must be beggars everywhere, and we cannot help them all."

Aylmer was pained by her look of distress as her cousins spoke, and he said to her, in a low voice:

"It is really better you should not go now, but I will come here to−morrow and do all and everything you could wish."

Millicent thanked him warmly, and at once mounted without another word. She rode on in front with Aylmer,

for Arthur seemed anxious this time not to join them, and for a few minutes both were silent; at length, she turned to him with a look of deep agitation.

"Tell me," she said, "in one word, is it a common spectacle which I have this day seen?—is it one isolated case; or has England many such?"

"Many thousands," replied Aylmer. "It is best, in my opinion, not to know the fearful extent of the misery we cannot relieve; but if you insist on the plain truth, I must tell it. What you have seen is indeed a sight too sadly universal, and, in fact, what we witnessed to−day is nothing compared with the awful amount of want and wretchedness which prevail in London and the great manufacturing towns."

She could not speak to answer him: we are too familiar with the great truth his words had conveyed, to conceive how appalling such a statement was, to one who had never dreamt of such things before.

Heavily did the first knowledge of the great dark tragedy for ever enacted by the poor, come over that young spirit. The sense of her own utter helplessness became insupportable: she bowed her face on her hands and wept aloud. Aylmer felt a pang of remorse at sight of those pure teams falling for the sorrows of others. How far gone was the time when he could so have mourned with unselfish pity? Truly, had there ever been such a time for him? So early had the natural sympathies, the first quick impulses been deadened by habit and education, chilled by custom and experience; he felt that he was looking on the fresh dews that well forth only, in the spring and morning of the heart, and the sight inspired him with an involuntary reverence.

Millicent was ashamed of her emotion, and she soon conquered it.

"It is the terrible, the unnatural contrast between our own condition, and that of these hapless beings, which overpowers me so much; if all suffered alike,—if such were the destiny of man, then all might submit and endure with faith and patience; but that some should have, not abundance only, but a hundred fold more than they can use, not personal luxuries alone, but the most costly ornaments to the rich homes in which they dwell, to the very floors on which they tread,—and others, meanwhile, perish, actually perish in cold and hunger; it is this that seems to me so appalling,—how can we dare to live as we do?"

"But, my dear Miss Grey," said Aylmer, soothingly, for he saw she was strongly excited, "you must reflect that you are now for the first time looking on that great national and social evil, which occupies the whole thoughts and attention of legislators and political economists. You have been laying bare the most deep wound which the best and wisest of men so long have sought in vain to heal. All see the evil, all deplore it,—but who shall suggest a remedy? It seems to be an imperative law of nature that these widely−contrasted positions should exist?"

"Doubtless," exclaimed Millicent, "I know that equality is as impossible as it is undesirable. I have discovered that, in reading history. I remember to have noted in the records of nations how, when rank was abolished, the aristocracy of talent or of power straightway took its place. No! ignorant as I feel myself, I have read enough to have imbibed the most deep−rooted horror for all leveling and republican principles. The distinction of rank and station is clearly a divine as well as a necessary principle, and even for the sake of the lower classes one would not have it otherwise. We should do a great evil, I am sure, if we sought to change the condition of the merry French peasant, or the contented English labourer. I went with Sophia to one of their cottages yesterday, and I was so charmed with the scene,—but I did not think there were any much poorer than these. I never dreamt of people actually starving; and it is the violent extreme of the contrast between rich and poor which strikes me so painfully; the palace−houses, and the wealth expended, on a thousand costly frivolities which have not even an intrinsic value, (being altogether useless; the devices of fashion for the employment of superfluous riches,) and then the utter destitution with its daily, hourly agony. Many grades in our social system there must and ought to be, but surely it is a fearful thing that there should be within a few yards of each other men revelling even to satiety in the full sunshine blaze of prosperity, and others lost in the darkest depths of misery, barren even of hope?"

"No doubt it is a fearful thing, and you cannot suppose you are the first to have discovered it. Believe me, the noblest intellects in our own land have been devoted to the task of seeking a remedy for it,—but they have found none as yet any more than you could; it is an evil, passing man's power to compass."

"But that is surely no reason why we should be indifferent to it," said Millicent very gently; "I think it is taking a dreary and enervating view of the case to say that because we cannot remedy it, we will not think of it at all. I see your remark conveyed to me a strong reproof for my presumption in attempting to discuss such a deep subject, and certainly it was deserved, and would be more so, if I really pretended to give an opinion on matters with which women have nothing to do, and which ought to occupy the wise heads of statesmen only,—and indeed

I do not even know what is meant by political economy. But, Mr. Aylmer, my eyes have looked on the face of a fellow creature who died of starvation, and I think had even the veriest child stood and gazed on such a sight, it would have asked if there was no remedy, and would have thought upon the matter."

"Unquestionably," said Aylmer, "they are thoughts which force themselves on every mind, and I can perfectly understand, after the hermit−life you have led, that these great evils strike you in a new and appalling light, which we who are too much accustomed to them, could not conceive. But still I can but repeat what I said before,—the deadly wound is there, but who shall find the soothing balm wherewith to heal it?"

"I am very fond of Utopia," said Millicent, suddenly turning her bright face to him, "I like wandering there in visions which, though I well how they can never he realized, still do one's heart good to fancy they warm one into hope. Now my Utopia for the poor, would be, that each man to whom is given as his station, the advantages of material and intellectual wealth, should instead of living for himself, live for those, his sorrowing brethren, and devote his life's energy to ameliorate their condition,—if all did this, might not their universal efforts compass, so far as the world's predestined fate permits, a universal evil?"

"Utopia, indeed," said Aylmer smiling, but he had not time to add more, for Charles rode up at that moment.

"Millicent," he said, "I can stand this no longer; ever since we had the misfortune to let you go into that cottage you have had an expression on your face, which has chilled me, as if we were in the month of December. Pray restore us to that very Italian summer which you brought with you into the dull old house at Rookcliffe. You introduced yourself among us as a most merry and amusing companion, and really you will have gained all our hearts on false pretences if you assume any other character now."

Millicent saw that Charles was talking much more earnestly than was his wont, and as her spirits were far too light and elastic to remain long depressed, she readily accepted his challenge, and made the old woods ring with her clear merry laugh, as they rode homewards.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was quite impossible for Millicent Grey to remain long in a desponding humour, yet she could not forget the scene she had witnessed, and when the family assembled before dinner, she began describing it to her uncle as he stood with his capacious person benevolently protecting the fire from any intrusive approaches.

"Well, my dear," he answered, "this is no doubt very sad, but you would find the same poverty in many parts of the kingdom; these things really cannot be helped. I was quite aware that there was much wretchedness in the mining district, where you unfortunately went to−day; but it is far beyond the power of any single individual or party of individuals to relieve it; you may rest assured, Millicent, that I would willingly do what I could for them."

Millicent had a spice of mischief in her disposition, and since her residence in England, she had often found no small amusement in reducing the respectable theories which pervade our atmosphere, to the test of practice.

"I am sure you would, dear uncle, you would do all you could for these starving people, even though it involved a little self−sacrifice, would you not?"

"I trust, Millicent, when you have lived sometime longer in this house, you will not require to ask such a question: you will then learn that those who feel the most, say the least."—"And do the least, also," muttered Charles, *sotto voce*.

"I beg that you will not suppose that you are the only person who deplores the condition of these paupers," continued Egerton, with no small testiness; "the Egertons, from time immemorial, have laboured for the good of their tenantry." ("And the improvement of their lands," continued Charles, with his running accompaniment,) "And that in a manner which would prove to you that they do not shrink from self−sacrifice."

"Oh, I am sure of it," said Millicent, "and in this instance also, as well as in others."

"Certainly, if there were anything to done, but we have often talked it over our parochial meetings, and it is a case beyond our efforts."

"Well, you are so indulgent, you know, uncle, in letting me tell out all my wild fancies, now do forgive my boldness, but even for this affair—I have an idea—"

She hesitated, and laughed at what she inwardly qualified as her own cool presumption.

"Let us have it, my dear," said Mr. Egerton, condescendingly patting her shoulder. "Curious results have often arisen," he continued, addressing his wife, "from the innocent remarks of children and young persons; their very ignorance causes them to take such novel views of the subject as often produce very valuable suggestions."

"I wonder whose remarks are innocent now," murmured Charles, as he looked at the contrast between his father's bland and stolid countenance, where beamed not a ray of any fire more ethereal than that at which he was slowly roasting, and Millicent's intelligent face, her clear eyes sparkling with all the rigour of a young, fresh intellect.

"Then I have leave to say anything I please, however presumptuous?" asked she.

Mr. Egerton waved his hand encouragingly.

"Pray tell me, then, supposing that two thousand pounds could be yearly distributed for the support of the miners' families, or for increasing the pay of the men themselves, to such an amount as should prevent the possibility of want for their children, would it not go far to relieve the distress even of that whole district?"

"Of course it would, any child might know that; but where is such a sum to come from?"

Millicent cast a sly glance at the old gentleman's pockets, which suddenly enlightened Charles as to the nature of her ideas on the subject; she took care, however, that her words should not seem quite so crude as were her thoughts.

"Why you know, uncle, you told me when you were describing many of the English customs to me, that an establishment like yours could not be kept up under three thousand a−year, and that the rest of your income went to the improvement of your estate."

"Very true." Mr. Egerton began to look uneasy.

"Then, if all persons situated like yourself were to feel that they would like to make any sacrifice to save the starving people, you might all determine to give up, at least, a whole two thousand a−year to them; and it could be easily done by changing the style of living entirely, and reducing the family expenses to somewhere about eight hundred a−year. It would be quite riches, you know, in comparison to what half the population have."

"Easily done!—riches!" Mr. Egerton was so astonished that he could only ejaculate a few fragmentary, portions of his great indignation.

"Yes," we should all have to give up our comforts, of course—carriages, horses, all that; but then what could be compared to the luxury of knowing that never again should any one die of starvation so near; and we might be immensely happy and comfortable on the income you still would have left. We should live in a very different way, and being so large a family, perhaps we should not have much more than the necessaries of life; but these necessaries would be shared by hundreds of families, who have them not at all just now."

"Shared. indeed!" said Mr. Egerton.

"It might not be possible to live at Rookcliffe on that pittance," continued Millicent, warming with her subject, "but as it is not an old family place; and only lately bought by yourself, you could complete the good work by selling it, and so gaining another enormous sum for the poor."

"Now, thanks to my good fortune, the place is entailed," muttered Charles.

"Millicent, you are talking the most consummate nonsense," suddenly shouted her uncle, having recovered his voice and his breath, which had been fairly taken away by her unexpected proposal. "You don't know what you are saying, and I wish to goodness you would keep quiet,—I never heard such arrant folly in my life." Millicent was frightened into silence fast enough by this tremendous burst of indignation, and she retreated behind her cousins, who were all laughing heartily.

"I've one comfort," said Mr. Egerton, beginning to cool down, and addressing his wife, who was the picture of rigid disapprobation, "that mad girl's own fortune is safe in my hands till she is of age, and I hope by that time we may find some sensible man to take care of it for her." Mrs. Egerton shook her head ominously, and they all felt relieved when dinner was announced.

Mr. Aylmer dined with them next day, and Millicent found that he had amply fulfilled his promise with respect to the poor people she had seen. He had awakened Colonel Bentley's compassion for them, who, like many other good people, was most liberal whenever his attention was drawn to the subject, but who never thought it could be at all necessary for him to rise out of his usual apathetic indifference unless an actual appeal were made to him. His nephew had, however, spent the day among the miners, and he brought Millicent such a report of the relief they were to receive, as filled her with gratitude towards him.

The party at Rookcliffe was further enlivened on this day by the curate of the parish and his pretty wife. He was a very comfortable curate indeed. His good fortune had procured for him in his present subordinate position that prosperous ease, which is the usual perquisite of rectors only. Being very good looking and of pleasant manners, he had won for his companion not only a handsome and elegant woman, but an heiress to boot, through which means he was now enabled to live in a splendid house, whose luxurious apartments it must have been rather difficult to quit, on the cold nights when the sick people sent for him. He was a very cheerful young man; just the sort of person to swell the number of those clerical Bluebeards, who are perpetually rising, as phoenix bridegrooms, from the ashes of the widower state, and of whom England possesses so many, happy in the affections of their third or fourth wife. He had two great leading principles, which chiefly governed his existence; the first was a strong abhorrence and avoidance of non−essentials, of which he had a very large list, and an equally great dislike to what he termed "morbidness," under which head he qualified all acute feeling, sensitiveness, and fervour, whether in matters theological or domestic. There were also two or three young ladies of that species, who love to look at other young ladies through their eye−glasses, and whose object is to exalt themselves, by an exclusiveness, which shuts out from the charity of their sympathy, all but the very few who have attained the fashionable nonchalance that professes to require none of it.

Millicent found herself seated between Charles Egerton and the curate, with Aylmer sufficiently near to join in the conversation. Charles had been talking with him, of his extreme impatience for the arrival of the hunting season, which was in his estimation the only period of the year worth living for.

"That is a noble sight you have yet to see, Miss Grey," said the curate; "of course you have never witnessed an English fox−hunt,—I quite envy you the first impression, you will be so delighted."

"Don't calculate on Miss Grey being delighted with anything that delights other people, my dear Reverendissimo," said Charles. "With all due respect, Millicent, I may be allowed to mention, that your tastes and ideas are slightly peculiar. I have no doubt, if you would favour us now with your views on fox−hunting, you would prove to us that we had been labouring under some great mistake respecting it."

"You really make me feel," said Millicent, laughing, "as if I had some mental **peculiarity**, which deserves a less gentle name; but what can I do? I come to England, and I look straight at everything, and I see what it is, and then, if you ask me, I must tell you. One can't help distinguishing between black and white; if it is black I must say so."

"Exactly; but that is just the thing. All our innocent customs seem to you so very black," replied Charles. "Pray tell us now, however, what you think of hunting. Where is our error? Perhaps it is not a fox we run after at all."

"Very true," said Millicent, composedly, "it is not the fox, it is his tail, and that is just what surprises me,—to think of ever so many intellectual men; all very learned, having had classical educations and the highest grade of instruction, giving themselves so much trouble and expense, and putting themselves into a violent heat, all for the sake of getting the simple tail of a fox."

"But we don't call it a tail," exclaimed Charles, "it is the brush."

"You can call it what you like, but it is the tail all the same, you know, neither the fox himself nor anybody else can doubt that; and I must say, few things astonish me more than the extraordinary love you all seem to have for it. You keep up horses and hounds at an enormous expense; you have a whole establishment for the purpose, and actually a sort of uniform, as if you were going to conquer an army instead of gaining only a wretched little tail. You long for the hunting season all the year round, and then, when the happy time does come, you all assemble together, ever so many full−grown men, in the pride of your intellect and strength, and you ride off at the risk of your lives, all struggling who is to gain the precious piece of goods, and every one hating the man who gets it, when he rides back in triumph with his tail."

"Millicent, you are really too absurd," said Charles. "it is not the brush, or the tail as you will persist in calling it, that is our object in hunting,—we only take it as a proof that we came in at the death. It is the excitement and amusement of the chase that we like."

"The amusement of seeing a fox die,—of watching it straining and panting, with its poor heart bursting, as they say it does sometimes, in the effort,—flying in the torture of pursuit, with the open−mouthed dogs at its heels, making the most incredible exertions to escape, and then sinking exhausted and quivering, to feel the teeth of the hound in its throat. No, I would rather think it was the love of the tail, than believe that men of feeling and mind should make their pleasure in the death−agonies of poor helpless animal?

"But, Millicent, you do use such extraordinary terms. It is not the actual pleasure of seeing the fox die, though they do a great deal of mischief, and must be destroyed, but it is the fine bracing exercise, and the opportunity of trying one's courage, that is really of use to the health and the mind as well."

"If the foxes must be destroyed, let the farmers destroy them, or the butchers who perform the same office for the oxen and sheep. You never think of kindly relieving **them** of their task, although I don't in the least see why you should not just as well assemble to kill the mutton and beef. As to exercise, you can gallop on horseback quite as fast without having a fox in an agony running before you; and for the display, or the testing of valour, considering that this world, is very full of such things, as the oppression of the helpless, and the wronging of the innocent, I think some nobler means might be found for the trial of your courage."

"Miss Grey, it seems extraordinary to hear you talking, against what has always been considered quite an honour to England and peculiar to the country, such a fine manly sport," said the curate.

"I cannot think it manly to take a pleasure in the torture of a poor dumb victim, and that any one should find sport in it is beyond my conception. No, Charles, I am certain if you analyze the especial charm of fox−hunting, you will find it is the intrinsic value of the tail, unless, as I said before, you choose to admit that it is the delight of seeing the unhappy brute killed before your eyes,—in which case if humanity has fallen thus far, the sooner they give up fostering so cruel a taste the better, to my mind."

"Only you must remember, Miss Grey," said Aylmer, "that the same argument applies to all field−sports; shooting, and fishing, and everything of the kind."

"Well, I can only say of these as of fox hunting, I do think it degrading to man that he should find his pleasure and amusement, in the pain of any created thing. Since they must be put to death that they may serve as food, let it be done by hired people, as of necessity; but do not let their expiring struggles form the systematic delight of a set of amateur butchers. If only each one of them would make their chosen pursuit in the relief of pain, and the giving of happiness to others, instead of this contrary principle, what a strange bright world this soon might be made."

"Well, Miss Millicent, I declare I have you there!" exclaimed Charles. "You do give a great pleasure to others

in hunting; for the hounds like it extremely: they take a real pleasure in it."

"Then, do you mean me to suppose that Englishmen are so very tender−hearted, and so considerate of the feelings of the lower animals, that they actually take all this trouble, and devote themselves, at the risk of their lives, for the sole purpose of pleasing their dogs? How extraordinarily kind! but if their motives are so very disinterested, it strikes me that there is a slight error in their judgment, for of course you would not wish to give a preference, in your sympathy to any one species of the brute creation in particular: so that whilst you are carefully providing for canine gratification, you overlook altogether, the necessity of consulting the feelings of the fox himself."

"There is no use in arguing with you, most pertinacious cousin," said Charles, "but really it is incredible that you should composedly give forth a sweeping condemnation of all field sports, the old well−established amusements of England."

"You must lay all the blame on my defective education," said Millicent, laughing. "I am quite aware that I have never learned my catechism."

"Come, that is in my province, Miss Grey," said the curate; "I will undertake you as a pupil."

"Oh, no, I do not mean what you would be bound to teach me," said Millicent. "I mean that theoretic catechism, unacknowledged but universally learned, which teaches the popular and received meaning of those things that are not destined to be called by their right names. It seems to me that, in this country, every one is duly instructed in a set of useful principles—little systems for the rule of social life, which are all ticketed and labeled with the finest possible sounding names, and these, when once impressed upon the young mind, can never again be separated from the fallacy they protect. I dare say the children have picture−books full of practical illustrations, and their nurses show them two men shooting at each other, and say, 'Now, my dear, this is honour;' (for you call a duel the vindication of your honour, don't you?) and a gentleman watching the worrying of a fox, Charles, and say, 'This is a healthy amusement for mind and body,' with a variety of other scenes, representing prudence, and proper pride, and self−respect, and charity which begins and finishes at home. Now, you see, never having learned these technical terms, all things present themselves to me in their natural true form, without any disguise whatever, and of course I talk of them as I see them; but now, I have been quite impertinent enough for one day, so I shall not speak another word; but I mean to listen to that grave discussion, which my uncle is holding with the old lady, in the purple face and turban."

Aylmer brought Millicent a most pressing request from Mrs. Hartley and her brother, that she would spend the following day with them, to which she willingly agreed; and from that time forward, it became a sort of tacit arrangement that she should be with them every day when it was possible for her to walk to Milton Lodge.

CHAPTER X.

THREE months had passed away: autumn had come with its sighing winds, so like the voice of the decaying year lamenting its departed brightness; and, outwardly, there seemed little more of change, in the inhabitants of Rookcliffe, than in the old walls themselves. And, yet, if we had power to see it, strange wild dramas are enacted day by day in the silent souls of those around us; they walk beside us unchanged in aspect, and we dream not of the dark shadows that may be stealing over the heart we still believe so light and joyous; we fancy that to be reserve which is the instinct of deep feeling; and that bitter pride, which folds over deep gnawing wounds the quiet hands that tremble not, to be the calm of a contented mind, and yet there may be working in that tranquil breast, the seeds of mortal anguish which have driven many to insanity or death. Outwardly, no change at Rookcliffe, but for two of those who dwelt beneath its roof, it was as though the earth on which their youthful steps had trodden, with all its lights and shadows, its joys and sorrows, had passed away for ever, and there was a new world with a new state of existence. Yet, not in the same region were these spirits wandering now. When the winds of destiny are unbound from their hid cavern, and set forth on their appointed mission, the same blast which sweeps away the hopes from the soul of one, like withered leaves from a tree, bears the seeds of sweet flowers to the heart of another, where they germinate and flourish to fill the whole being with fragrance. It was so with Millicent and Arthur. The one was in a land of light and gladness now, where the sun of hope had risen, and shone unsetting, so that there was no night there; and the whole air was filled with melody, whose music was from one voice alone, and all things were made lovely, with the presence of that perfect beauty, which is ever in the face of one beloved.

And the other was far away, in a chill and frozen region, where the sun of hope had sunk, as beneath the deep waters of despair, so that there was no day there, and no melody, because the voice that made sweet music gave all its gentle tones unto another, and no beauty, because the face beloved, was radiant only with the joy, that came from other love than his.

It may be, that if some observed, how the tread of Arthur Egerton, was slower and heavier than of old, and his eyes dim, as though, not sleep alone, but dreams, had fled from him, they thought the chill weather, and the gloom of decaying nature subdued the poet's fiery soul; but they never dreamt that these were tokens of the cold dead winter of the heart, where all the sweet blossoms of his spring of hope, lay mouldering away, blasted by the freezing winds of disappointment; and little did they think, when calmly he moved amongst them, that he had passed through that convulsion of the mind, which is like to the shock of death itself, for it is the rending away of the very life hope, from the being that seems to fall a dull inert mass of clay without it.

But if they noted the change that had passed on Millicent Grey, they could, in some sense, understand it; for they knew that she was the promised wife of Stephen Aylmer. Great was the change, in truth, that had come upon her,—none greater in the phases of a purely earthly existence,—it was as though a new being had been given to her, for it was life, animated by a new principle.

She had done that thing, the most perilous, the most awful which any can do in this mere mortal life. She had delivered up her whole heart and soul to the love of one human idol. We have seen how her young, ardent spirit had flown forth into life, to seek that object for its worship, which, exiled from its own true home by ignorance and misconception, it sought in earth alone; and how she was led to the belief, that the intense indefinite longing, the aching void of her soul could, only find a rest in one deep human affection,—in the entire devotion of her life to the happiness of another. Before ever she had learnt to feel, she already held in theory, what was the natural impulse of her woman's heart.

And now, with her, that surrender of every faculty of the being, to one absorbing thought, was entire; for she had no ties of blood, no childhood's affection to draw her heart's deep tenderness in other channels, nor had she ever yet effected an entrance into that bright and holy life, within whose pure atmosphere no god of dust and clay can find a throne.

Once in a life−time, only, is such an affection felt, as that which bound Millicent Grey to Stephen Aylmer. All was bright and prosperous around her now; a few short months, as she believed, would see her linked to him by holiest ties; yet not because of present hope and joy, was this deep, earnest friendship so intense. If in the future, storms and clouds should come upon the sunshine of her happiness,—if even he who was her idol, should by

unworthy deeds, or chilled affection, fall from the high pedestal where she had placed him in her great esteem, it could not change or lessen her attachment for him. It seemed to have taken root in the very principle of life itself, and with the life alone could now expire.

And she was changed. The fierce independence of mind, the quick energetic scrutiny of life, were over. Much more thoughtful, more still and silent; every look and tone told how her spirit was subdued to his. She thought as he thought, loved what he loved, and could have even learned to hate what he hated. Her eyes no longer wandered restlessly, seeking a hope in life, but ever rested on him, in whom all joys were bound up; her feet no longer strayed, searching a path that should give the promise of an aim on earth, but meekly journeyed where he trod, content to make it her life's mission, to clear away the stones and thorns before steps.

And Stephen Aylmer?—was she all in all to him, as he to her? No one ever made a plot so palpably manifest, or flattered himself that he concealed it so ably, as did Colonel Bentley, when, having set his heart on effecting a marriage between Aylmer and his favourite Millicent, he commenced, by a series of the most glaring manoeuvres, the task of accomplishing his purpose. Colonel Bentley was a singular old man; if once an idea took possession of him, however unexpectedly or wildly, it was utterly impossible for himself or others to eradicate it. Already when he quitted Millicent, at the Tower Stairs, on their arrival, had he made up his mind that she was the very person he desired to be the wife of his favourite nephew, as well as a satisfactory niece to himself, and he never from that moment lost sight of his object. For this reason he came to Milton Lodge—for this reason he monopolized Millicent's society, and while his wish and his purpose strengthened every day, he failed not to give Stephen the strongest possible intimations that if his will were thwarted on this point, he might go so far as to transfer his property from so refractory an individual to the young girl herself.

But Aylmer had no desire to disappoint his uncle's wishes, if by any means he could accommodate himself to them, and this, after a short acquaintance with Millicent, he found himself willing to do. He had not the slightest attachment for her—he never yet had felt a strong affection for any one, and she had failed to effect any change in this respect. He had, in fact, come to the conclusion that he never was to find his ideal, or feel deeply for any living being. But it was impossible to know Millicent Grey, so frank, so generous, so warm−hearted, without loving her in some degree; and he did like her, quite well enough to make her his life's companion, with a hearty good will. He did not attempt to conceal from himself, that she was not in the least, what he had always resolved, his wife should be. His ideal had ever been one of surpassing beauty; for, as we have said elsewhere, he worshipped the Beautiful with all the fervency and devotion which men offer to the self−elected gods to whom they cause their souls to bow, in order to satisfy the craving of their nature for adoration; and the sweet face of Millicent Grey had none of that perfection or symmetry which would win the artist's heart, although it was very pleasing from its charming expression, especially of late, when softened by the reflection of the deep, generous tenderness that filled her heart.

In short, it had not been given to her to call to life the strong affections that lay hid in the heart of that proud man; waiting only, till the crisis of his destiny, to rise up like billows from the ocean of deceitful calm, and swell out in their ungovernable might, till they well nigh made shipwreck of his soul, Aylmer was little aware of the intense power of attachment, which lurked in his own nature, or, if he were, he never expected to meet any one who would call it forth; and meanwhile he was well content to secure to himself, so faithful and devoted a companion, as he saw that Millicent would be to him. It was a pleasant thing to think that this pure, boundless love would breathe such warmth into his whole life—that he would be ministered unto day by day with such earnest watchful care.

He could not but love her too, in some degree, now that the near approach of the time fixed for their marriage had put an end to reserve between them, and that he saw how generously and devotedly her whole heart was given to him. His warm sympathy for the poor, and active exertions on their behalf, had been the first things which had caused her to distinguish him, from all around her, and her vivid imagination had soon invested him with an ideal character of almost perfect moral beauty, to which his many really good qualities gave a strong semblance of reality; and now, she had not an idea how poor was the return he made her for the vast wealth, of the whole deathless affection she had bestowed upon him; or if at times she was constrained to feel how she was but a very small part in his existence—whilst his own image had shut out the world for her, she conceived it but the natural result of the great superiority, which she was convinced he possessed over herself.

She felt that he had given her the highest proof of esteem, in choosing her from all the world, to be his first and

best friend until death, and she asked no more, since this gave her a right to minister even to his faintest wish.

Moreover, her attachment had that entire disinterestedness, which is inherent to the very nature of all deep and intense affection. She no longer thought of herself at all, save as the privileged guardian of his existence on earth; nor had she now any wish, or hope, or object, except his happiness. This was the star of her life, which was to guide her every thought, and word, and deed,—it was the desire of her heart, the one absorbing thought of her soul; his happiness, not her own; nor yet his only, as united to hers, but his, by any means in which it could be procured for him, either by the offering of her whole life's devotion with him, or the sacrifice of her whole life's joy without him.

They stood together now, side by side, on a rising ground, within the park, at Rookcliffe, where they had been walking. They were returning home, and paused here, to look at the fair, peaceful scene that was spread out before them, in the faint light of the autumn evening. He looked with his free, proud glance, on the landscape,—but she, on him, with a timid, wistful gaze in her earnest eyes, as though the poor, trembling soul within her were whispering, "I have done a fearful thing, I have given you my whole existence, my whole capacity for happiness,—I have given you my life. Oh, what will you make of it? Will you deal tenderly with it, and be merciful to it,—will you fill it with light and joy, as you may do so easily, by a little loving kindness, or will you be rude and careless with it, and cast it from you, to perish in some desert waste?"

It might have been the melancholy season of the year, the sight of nature in her mourning garments, as though it were her time of widowhood for the summer,—the whisperings of decay and death that went forth in the rustle of the falling leaves, and the rough wantoning of the wind with the naked branches,—but certain it is, the heart of Millicent was full of a strange terror, and a sad foreboding. She crept close to the side of Aylmer,—he looked round kindly at her.

"How silent you are, dear Millicent,—almost sad, I think."

The sound of his voice made her smile.

"No, not sad, I could not be so now, I am too deeply, really happy. But to−day, I do not know how it is,—I fear you will think me fanciful,—only I feel such a terror."

"A terror of what?" he asked, anxiously.

"Of life, I think," she answered; "it seems to me such a fearfully precarious thing,—its entire happiness or utter misery hangs on so slender a thread. Often,—the living or dying of one single hope, can make it a beautiful and blessed gift, or a crushing, intolerable burden. Its destinies are so irretrievable, if once the soul has been wrecked on its treacherous waves, where it wanders, seeking joy, then the perishing of its peace is beyond all recall, and it is borne on by the tide through tempests and gloom, dead to all earthly bliss, as the corpse drifting down to its grave in the deep. I feel just now as if it required such courage to live, it is such a perilous venture: to−day we are happy,—to−morrow, but one step more in our mortal journey, may have plunged us into a hopelessness of sorrow, from which we never rise again. The life once doomed, can never return to the days of its hope and freedom. Though its ruin may have been worked in our youth, and that of our own very hands, yet the one chance is gone, and the game lost for us,—we cannot go back to mould it anew. Cheerless and dark as we made it, it drags with us on to old age and to death."

"Dear Millicent, these are dark words, indeed! I hardly know you, speaking thus. All you say is perfectly true, no doubt, but it should only make us rejoice the more that **our** venture in the great game of life has been so fortunate. Our prospects are bright enough, are they not? You have nothing to fear for yourself: so far as one may judge the future, there is only calm enjoyment before you."

"I do not think it can be for myself I fear, though, in truth, I hardly know what it is that terrifies me to−night,—but cannot be any thought of myself; for, Stephen, you do not know, I never can tell you, how all my hopes, and wishes, and feelings, have become absorbed in one intense, unutterable longing for your happiness. It is my one dream, my one thought,—I can seek, I can strive for nothing else. I almost fear it must be wrong, to be so given up to this one thought, I cannot even pray for anything besides."

He was touched by these words, the tone of her voice told how they came from her very heart. He spoke to her with a grateful tenderness, and soon soothed the passing agitation into which she had allowed herself to be betrayed; then, anxious to divert her thoughts from the dark misgivings which seemed unaccountably to have taken possession of her, he continued, with greater cheerfulness,—

"Now I shall not let you think any more of these dismal forebodings. Tell me rather what is that black shadow

passing along the avenue down there? It looks, at this distance, like a great spider creeping on towards the house."

"It is the carriage, I have no doubt, coming home with my cousin Juliet. You know she is to arrive to−day from Italy, and this is just the hour when she was expected."

"True,—I remember! I am rather anxious to see this same cousin of yours; I heard of her often at Milan, but never chanced to meet her. You have never seen her yourself, have you?"

"Oh, no; she has been absent ever since I was at Rookcliffe—but they speak of her constantly. I have heard her described many times."

"And always as a wonderfully beautiful person, have you not? At least, that was the reputation she had in Italy, and my artist friends were by no means easy to please on that subject."

"I suppose there were never two opinions as to Juliet's beauty; even Charles was enthusiastic about her. She must be a strange person, from his account; he described her to me, as having a very subtle, powerful mind, hid beneath a great outward appearance of frankness."

"Well, excuse me if I seem rather un− gallant, but I confess I have no faith in any woman possessing, that sort of depth of character, which has the Machiavelian talent of concealing great power under apparent simplicity. They have intensity of feeling, but rarely are capable of profound calculations. One can read them right easily, and pleasant reading it is, too, Millicent dear, at least in some cases."

"I hope you mean that as a compliment, for I shall certainly appropriate it," said Millicent, laughing. "But I trust you are right about Juliet, for I feel rather afraid of her, after all I have heard."

"On the contrary, you must try to make a friend of her. It annoys me to see you meeting with so little sympathy among those Egertons—Anne freezing you, Sophia lecturing, and Fanny worrying. I hope Juliet will be more companionable."

"I doubt it; but we must go and see her now, for I have a vision of my uncle undergoing, all those tremendous moral consequences, which are the invariable result of his having to wait for his dinner. First, he falls entirely from the dignity of human nature, and loses command of his temper, for a matter of five minutes' delay, in a material enjoyment; then he lowers his intellectual being, altogether below the level of the earthly, and shows himself a slave to bodily wants; next, he perverts and wastes one of the noblest gifts given to man, the power of administering to the pleasure of others, by tormenting every one round him, and horribly reproaching the delinquent who causes the delay; then, as to his duties as a husband and a father, he of course fails,—but I will not go on, for I see you are laughing, Stephen."

"As I always do at your extraordinary system of analysis. However, let us hurry home, by all means, and prevent the deterioration of Mr. Egerton's moral nature."

They met Fanny in the hall at Rookcliffe, where Aylmer was at present staying.

"Juliet is arrived!" she exclaimed; "she has been asking for you, Millicent, but now you must wait till she comes down to dinner, for she has gone to dress."

Millicent went to her room, and the indescribable gloom which had for the time been dispelled by Aylmer's gay conversation, returned upon her with redoubled force. When she rose to go to the drawing room she paused a moment ere she passed the large mirror which reflected her figure; her cheek was pale, and her countenance devoid, for the time, of the bright, lively expression which formed its great charm. She still wore mourning for her father, and the peculiar truthfulness of her character made her at all times dress with a severe simplicity, which, just as she intended, did not enhance her beauty. She could not endure to use any art or forethought in order to make herself seem other than she was; and now, as she looked at her own unpretending appearance, she sighed, while she murmured—

"Aylmer would surely have wished for a fairer bride!"

She did not know how much, at that very moment, was lovely in her face as its expression shadowed forth the feelings of her generous heart, nor even how pleasing in the sight of all were those large brown eyes and the soft hair, almost of the same colour, shading the pale, quiet brow. Yet, certainly, there was a strange contrast between herself and the radiant figure that met her gaze as she entered the drawing−room. She started back almost terrified at the sight which presented itself—either she was dreaming, or there was before her the exact counterpart, the living embodiment of the pictured figure in which Aylmer had represented his ideal—the countenance was not the same, but the dress, the attitude, the flowing hair, the head turned round with the same studied grace, all combined to render the resemblance most striking. In the midst of that half−darkened room she stood, the dark oak furniture

and heavy crimson curtains forming an admirable background, clothed in a dress of the purest white, falling in soft folds around her—no ornament except her own magnificent hair, which was allowed to wave in golden masses, so as almost to veil the fair face, with a defiance of all ordinary customs which seemed quite admissible in one so beautiful. And the countenance, (alone unlike the bright vision of the artist's dreams,) how marvelously lovely it was! a beauty not to be described, it dwelt so much in the softness and sweetness of her expression, and the dazzling brilliancy of her large beaming eyes. Then the perfect grace of her slightest movement, were it but the gentle falling of the delicate hand and arm, or the singular lightness of the step, with which she glided forward, seeming to carry light and beauty wherever she went—the whole effect was so perfect, that it never conveyed the idea of what was, in fact, the truth, that her every attitude, and look, and action, were the result of the most studied calculation.

A terrible snare to Juliet Egerton had been her great loveliness. She had delivered herself up to the evil influence, it has the power to exercise without a struggle. The one sole object of her life, was to gain all the fair gifts of this world which beauty had the power to procure for her,—universal admiration—the praise of men—the love of many hearts. Self was with her all in all. So soon as an idea, a wish, a feeling rose in her mind, it must straightway be gratified at any cost; the consequences to others were never to be thought of, and her great natural talent, her subtle, intriguing mind ably assisted her in carrying out whatever she designed to accomplish.

Her present return to Rookcliffe was, she well knew, most opportune for the execution of a design, which had for some time been powerfully agitating her mind, and which, in a singular manner, affected the interests of those now present with her.

It was only for a few brief instants that Millicent Grey looked upon her in silence, but in that space she had time to observe that the meaning look, in the splendid eyes of Juliet Egerton, which so remarkably imitated the expression in the fair face of Aylmer's ideal, was turned upon her own future husband, whilst his gaze was riveted upon her cousin's countenance in evident admiration.

Quickly, however, the picture full of life and interest which they presented thus grouped, dissolved away at the sound of Mr. Egerton's voice.

"Come, Millicent, and make acquaintance with your new cousin.—Juliet, this is our dear Millicent."

"*Pro tempore*, Miss Grey,—*bientôt*, Mrs. Aylmer," said Charles.

Juliet instantly passed from her striking attitude to another no less graceful, with arms outstretched to embrace her new relation. She glided towards her;—in the softest and sweetest of tones expressed her delight at meeting her, and when the first few sentences had passed between them, wound her arm round her neck, and drew her gently back to the spot where Aylmer stood. Millicent could not account for it, but she felt that she infinitely preferred the Siberian shake of Anne's elegant fingers, or the stern grasp of Sophia's hand, to the warm embrace of Juliet. She answered gently and kindly to her enthusiastic expressions of pleasure, and then slipping from the soft twining arms, took refuge at Aylmer's side. He scarcely heeded her, so intent was his gaze on Juliet, who now stood bending over a table, apparently engaged in examining some object that lay upon it.

"Is it not extraordinary how she resembles the picture of your ideal?" said Millicent to Aylmer, "and yet you never saw her?"

"The likeness has struck you also, then," exclaimed Aylmer, quickly; "it is indeed most remarkable. What a strange coincidence!"

"Perhaps no coincidence," said the soft musical voice. They could hardly tell who spoke, for Juliet had not turned her head, yet the tones were hers, and her hearing must have been singularly acute to have caught the words of their whispered remark. Aylmer looked bewildered, and Millicent felt a strange terror, as though she had suddenly been brought in contact with one of those dangerous magicians of whom we read in the German tales, who are so wonderfully beautiful, and so full of subtle wickedness.

Aylmer had no time to ask an explanation, for they now went to dinner. Juliet sat opposite to him, and engaged his whole attention, as in truth that of all others. She monopolized the conversation, and spoke well and brilliantly. She talked only of Italy and the fine arts,—of music, but chiefly of painting, and that with a wild enthusiasm which lit up her charming face with redoubled beauty, and kindled the very souls of her hearers.

"You talk so like an artist, Juliet," said Charles, "that I begin to be suspicious of the contents of some large boxes I saw among your packages. Pray, do they contain your own performances as a *pittrice* ?"

"Yes, my own despair that is embodied on canvas," she answered, with her gay ringing laugh, "for it is nothing

less than despair, to find how impossible it is to give a material existence, to the fair visions of one's dreams. **You** can never feel this," she continued, suddenly turning and fixing her large eyes full on Aylmer's countenance.

The great peculiarity of her beauty was the singular contrast of those eyes, so dark as to be almost black, with her golden−coloured hair. She well knew their power when, as now, she fixed them with their intense gaze on the face of Aylmer.

"Indeed you are mistaken. I know the feeling of which you speak right well. The pictures of my dreams, are not more like the reality, than the glowing landscapes we sometimes fancy we see, among the sunset's radiant clouds, are like the earthly scenes of rock and stone. I suppose no painter ever was or could be satisfied with the outward expression of those beautiful shapes, that pass before his spirit, any more than the poet is content with the words into which he seeks to infuse the fire of his heart, or the composer, with the notes in which he would breathe out his soul's harmony."

"Doubtless, but were it not so, there would be no arriving at perfection," said Juliet.

"It is the struggling of the soul to beam through the thick veil of this mortal body," said Millicent: she spoke so low that Arthur only heard her.

"You must tell me how you knew that I was an artist?" said Aylmer to Juliet. She made no answer, but the large eyes still gazed on him with a look too strange and intense, to seem bold,—he preferred that look to an answer,—it was plain that some mystery existed in her mind respecting him, which awoke his interest and curiosity, to the uttermost.

"At least you will let me see your own pictures. I feel sure they are striking."

"To−morrow," she said, and resumed a more general conversation.

She seemed bent on making a conquest of Millicent, and addressed her continually, but chiefly on subjects with which it was impossible she should be acquainted, so that the contrast between Juliet's animated remarks and her cousin's quiet answers, was the more striking. To say the truth, Millicent had never been so dull or so incapable of conversing at all. Her wonted vivacity seemed unaccountably gone,—she was humbled and subdued, she knew not why. Aylmer more than once looked at her with an expression of disappointment, for her light−hearted cheerfulness had been a great attraction to him.

In the evening he sought especially, to find an opportunity of asking Juliet an explanation, of her mysterious resemblance to his picture, but this she seemed determined he should not have. Once only she was alone when he came near her, and then starting up, she went to the piano with a smile which invited him to follow. She sat for a few moments, passing her hands dreamily over the keys, as though gradually losing con− sciousness of where she was: then suddenly she burst out into a very flood of song, as singular as it was beautiful. Her voice was not very strong but strangely sweet, and she knew how to throw into it a passionate earnestness, which agitated every heart that heard her. Aylmer was perfectly entranced,—he entreated her to go on song after song, and she seemed unwearied, and carried away from all around her, as any bird that carols in the high clear air.

Millicent sat, meanwhile, in a large armchair near the fire; she crouched down in it as though she would have hid herself, and sought a shelter. Arthur was placed behind her; his head rested against the chair on which she reclined; neither spoke, and so passed the evening. They were to separate at last for the night. Mr. Egerton systematically marshalled his troop, and presented each individual with their candlestick, as though he were arming them, for some important combat;—it was Juliet's turn, and she came gliding in her white robes from the darkened part of the room where the piano stood. Her eyes turned with a beaming glance on Aylmer,—her lips but half opened, to murmur a soft *buona notte, dormi bene*! and the bright figure disappeared on the dark threshold. He stood rooted to the spot, so lost in thought that he did not perceive his young bride at his side, waiting to wish him good night.

It was strange that Millicent had not felt the faintest pang of jealousy towards Juliet. Her perfect guilelessness, and the trusting simplicity of her character, seemed to save her from the most miserable peculiarity of the woman's nature. She judged Aylmer by herself,—true and unchangng as human heart, may be, was hers, in its deep love for him, and so she believed of him. He was her promised husband: surely nothing could ever make him other than her own. It was natural that his artist's eye should be charmed with Juliet's beauty, his musical ear ravished with her exquisite singing, but his heart's affection she thought was not the less given to her by voluntary choice, by solemn word and promise.

She stood lifting up those trusting tender eyes to his thoughtful face, but not till she extended her hand, and

whispered her earnest "Good night," did he notice her presence. Then, as he looked down and met that sweet smile, that loving gaze, one less guileless than she was might have trembled to see how the blood rushed to his forehead, under the remorseful sting of recollection,—he clasped her hand in his, and his "Good night, dearest Millicent," was so warm and energetic, that it brought tears into those gentle eyes. She went to rest, with a lightened heart.

There was another who went to his room that night, with the crushing weight that long had lain upon his soul, stirring within him as though it were about to be lifted off. There was one who threw open his window, who leant far out, faint and breathless, to bathe his head in the cold night air. Arthur Egerton was gasping,—panting with hope. Hope the forgotten,—the exiled had returned, and was careering a conquerer through his soul, casting down the strongholds which despair had built up, undermining that mountain of anguish, carrying light to those chambers of gloom where the human idol stood on its pedestal and was worshipped,—(albeit, there was no heart for him in its bosom.)

There are some characters full of an inherent power and energy, which is of depth inconceivable,—who are filled with a terrible capacity for good or evil, which is never called into life until some ungovernable affection, fearful in its strength, becomes to the man a very principle of existence, and the latent force comes forth to work the will of this new master. It was so with Arthur Egerton; his fiery poetic soul, his intensely feeling heart, his strong sound intellect, had all been of late turned into one channel, all had been given to spend, and to be spent, in the love of Millicent Grey; and now, powers of which he had known nothing, and which might well have appalled himself, had he known them as they were, powers to resolve and to execute, to work evil, if in evil there were hope,—to make a path on the hearts of his fellow−creatures, if none other might be found, were rising up within him, armed and ready, to aid and abet him, in the one object for which he lived, the attainment of her love, as she loved Stephen Aylmer. There had been a time, brief as those radiant moments, when the sun bathes the world in light ere it sinks to utter darkness, when had believed she loved him. None had ever looked on him with the tender pity she had shown, and this deceived him, so that to him who never had known the unutterable sweetness of human affection (for he was repulsive to the very mother who bore him,) brighter, dearer, more inconceivably precious than mortal words can tell, was the thought that he, the wanderer and outcast, had found in her true heart a home.

This dream had been dispelled, how utterly! Not many weeks after Stephen Aylmer passed the threshold of the old Hall at Rookcliffe, in Millicent's first look of affection on another, Arthur understood that she had never felt for him aught save barren pity, and straightway in that hour the fair, sweet hope he cradled in his breast, died in the agony with which a slaughtered man expires. So long as it lay within him a corpse, making a charnel house of his soul, he had but one thought,—the thought that has been dreary yet sweet comfort to most of us, at least once in a lifetime, that the hour must come when he would go to lay down his head on the breast of his mother earth, and rest from this tyranny of wretchedness. But hope had revived; faint as the faintest streaks of dawn, that give the far−off promise of a future day, were the indications of a possible change which might cast back Millicent upon his unbounded love, a poor lost outcast, desolate herself, as he was desolate;—but they were enough to rouse in hope, the clinging tenacity of life. It had started, breathing, gasping, from its tomb and with it Arthur lived again. He lived again a new life, as it were, which, with all its capacity, its energy, its power, was to be devoted to this one sole object,—that he might feel again as he had felt when he believed she loved him.

He was almost terrified at the indomitable strength he felt within him to overthrow all obstacles, to work by any means for this his heart's desire.

Arthur Egerton had neither hope nor love out of this world, which could induce him to feel that there is but one thing to be ardently desired on earth, even the preservation of the soul's rectitude and purity, but rather having delivered up his spirit to the adoration of one earthly good, it seemed to him a noble thing to offer in sacrifice to it, if need were, even the very dignity of his moral being, his very honour and integrity. He had an instinctive consciousness of this great truth, that no personal gratification can be obtained without departing from that fixed standard of right, in which one of the first principles, is the immolation of self for the good of others.

But nothing is more easy than to render crime poetical, Arthur's gift of genius, hitherto wasted, was now perverted, and cast a most false glow over his deep selfish love. It made his heart throb with a powerful delight, to feel that not only he would compass earth for her, and trample on whosoever stood between them, but that he would not withhold from her he deemed worthy of his uttermost affection, even to the gift of his soul's

righteousness and honour. He must be patient, but patient with an invincible purpose standing like an armed warrior at his side. That which he called destiny seemed working for him;—he would step aside, and watch as a tiger for his prey, and when the events he expected had done their part, then would he rush in to effect all that might remain unaccomplished of his life's desire. So now betake thee to thy troubled sleep, most wretched man!—for the thoughts of this night shalt thou repent thee yet, in sack−cloth and in ashes, sprinkled on thy fallen head by the cold hands of the dead.

CHAPTER XI.

THE morning light brought Juliet Egerton fairer than ever before the eyes of Aylmer. She came bounding through the glass door of the breakfast−room, her hands full of flowers, radiant and bright as a type of the morning itself. She stopped, and held them up in triumph just where the sunshine was streaming into the room, so that the golden rays flashed on her waving hair, and lit up her brilliant eyes. Her clear voice sounded a gay good morning to all; but to Aylmer there came a few words of softest Italian, heard by himself alone.

It was not wonderful if this dazzling figure shut out from his eyes that other so gentle and nunlike, that sat patiently admiring her beautiful cousin. And yet captivated as Aylmer certainly was by Juliet's remarkable loveliness, it was not her outward fascination which had already so powerfully drawn him towards her,—it was the evident interest springing from some mysterious source which existed in her mind for him. He could not account for it. He was certain he had never seen her before, yet he felt that they were not strangers, he felt that he was known to her in no common way. It was impossible but that this conviction should deeply occupy him,—it caused him to scrutinize her every look and gesture, and each one of these movements, as he watched her, seemed more graceful than the last, swiftly drawing out his soul in worship to the Beautiful there present in her. As the day wore on, there was a smile of indescribable triumph on the face of Arthur whose eyes followed Millicent Grey wheresoever she went.

Aylmer had petitioned that he might see Juliet's paintings; but she refused to show them till a room had been appropriated to her use as "studio," where she might arrange them in suitable lights, and where, hereafter, she might paint undisturbed.

This was not done till late in the afternoon; and the whole morning he sat entranced with her voice as she sang or spoke to him in her liquid Italian. Still, he was never alone with her: she was constantly at Millicent's side. Juliet would look from Aylmer to her at times with an air of melancholy interest, and seemed anxious to draw her into conversation; but poor Millicent never appeared to so much disadvantage. And had Aylmer been less blinded he would have seen how artfully Juliet's remarks were calculated to produce this effect.

Millicent had left the room, and Juliet, who stood thoughtfully looking after her, turned to Sophia.

"It is strange, I do not think you have described Millicent in your letters at all as she is. Charles and the rest of you used to speak of her charming vivacity and cheerfulness. She seems to me possessed of none at all. She is so very—I hardly know what to call it—I should say sad, if that were not impossible, with so bright a fate as hers."

"Out of humour will express it, I have no doubt," said Anne, who, by some conjuring trick of a mental nature, invariably transferred her own faults to the possession of others.

"Millicent is spoilt," said Sophia, in her usual sententious manner.

"What has spoilt her?" asked Juliet. Sophia looked with phlegmatic prudence to the corner of the room, where Aylmer sat reading, and paused in her answer.

"He does not hear—he is too distant from us," said Fanny, eagerly. Her lively curiosity condescended to the most insignificant material for an aliment; and she was bent on hearing Sophia's definition of the change in their cousin.

"It is the prospect of her marriage which has spoilt her; she has never been the same creature since. I suppose she is much elated by it, though how any one can be elated by the entire loss of their independence, and the subjection of their will to one of their fellow creatures, on a mere equality with themselves, passes my comprehension; but, certainly, I had trusted Millicent was beginning to profit by my instructions, and now she has eyes and ears for none but Mr. Aylmer. I presume she imagines herself perfect since he chose her."

"She has not much to be proud of, I can tell her," said Anne, with her habitual sneer. "If ever a man was driven into a marriage, he was. Colonel Bentley never rested till he made up the match; and I only wonder Stepheu Aylmer was so easily led."

"Dear Anne, do be careful, he will hear you," said Juliet, with her soft voice, by no means so low pitched as usual, and a gleam of triumph in her eyes, as she saw that she had effectcd her object, and that his sudden movement showed he had heard these remarks.

The painting−room was arranged at last, and the whole family assembled to see Juliet's pictures. They were large oil paintings, chiefly copies from the old masters. Aylmer was struck with surprise at the sight of them;

although she had not in the remotest degree attained to his own excellence in the art; they were yet so full of original genius that he was delighted. He spoke his approbation strongly.

"It is plain you are but a beginner," he said, at last, "but with energy and perseverance you may attain to a high degree of perfection."

"I can do nothing unaided," said Juliet. "In Italy I never could work unless my dear old master were at my side to call out '*corragio* ' every moment, and to fill me by his enthusiastic words with what he called ' l'anima Italiana.' I wish you were Italian and a painting master,". she added, turning her bright peculiar glance, with its sudden impulse, on Aylmer.

"I will be both to you," said Aylmer, earnestly.

"Do you mean what you say? I may take you at your word? Oh, how gladly! But, for you, is it not a rash offer? Think of the long hours when the master must guide the pupil's powerless hand. Is it davvero?"

"*Davvero*! I do mean what I said most seriously. I will be your master. You could have none here, and I cannot see such a talent left uncultivated."

"Then the office is upon you beyond recall. Oh, how thankful I am that I shall yet be a painter!" Juliet looked up as if she had no thought but enthusiastic delight at the prospect of being assisted in her pursuit of her favourite art.

"Indeed, Mr. Aylmer, I shall be very glad if you will kindly give my daughter a few lessons in your leisure moments," said Mr. Egerton, who had an inconceivable aversion to the class of individuals whom he was wont to term generally "Monsieurs," and who infested his house at the period of the Miss Egertons' education. Like most Englishmen, who have never left their own country, he was under the strong conviction that they were all rascals, and felt profoundly uneasy about the silver spoons, whenever they were asked to luncheon.

"How many leisure moments has Aylmer had of late, Millicent?" said Charles, as he stretched himself in the luxurious arm−chair, provided for Juliet's future accommodation. "Of course the time when he is occupied with you must be said to be devoted to business. An engaged man goes to his duty as regularly as a clerk to his desk, for so many hours a day. I have no doubt you make the work as pleasant as any could,—sweet little Millicent,—but commend me to my freedom."

This was certainly not a pleasant speech for Aylmer, and, after the manner of most men, he visited his annoyance on the unoffending. He glanced, half angrily, at Millicent, and turned from her with a movement of impatience. There is a French expression, which alone can render Millicent's feeling at that moment "*ce mouvement lui serra le coeur*." She felt dreary and chilled with a longing to take refuge somewhere hid from all eyes; and, at once, as if answering to her secret thought, a hand drew her gently down on a seat, in an unnoticed corner. She looked up with a glance of humble gratitude, (for we are mostly humble in sorrow,) to him whose kindness was so opportune, and met the gaze of Arthur full of tenderest pity. Already, then, their offices were changed: he was the consoler, and she the afflicted, and the thick loud beating of his heart, as he thought upon it, might almost have been heard through the room.

"Well, now we shall leave Juliet in undisturbed possession of her studio," said Mrs. Egerton, as she rose and kissed her handsome daughter with proud satisfaction. She was truest to the woman's nature in her overweening indulgence of this favourite child. They all left the room; Aylmer held the door open for the ladies to pass, for Charles and Arthur had gone out together. Millicent looked back, thinking he was following her, but he stood gazing on Juliet, as she bent over her easel. Millicent heard the door close: he had remained with her cousin.

"I suppose Mr. Aylmer is going to give his first lesson, it will be a real pleasure to so enthusiastic an artist as he is," remarked Mrs. Egerton. "My Juliet has such extraordinary talent."

"Millicent," said Arthur, in a supplicating voice, which trembled in spite of himself, "will you come and walk with me a little while in the garden: it is so long, so very long, since we have been together there."

"Dear Arthur, pray excuse me to−day, my head aches, and, besides,"—Millicent's tender conscience took the alarm at any equivocation,—"I think I promised,—I believe Mr. Aylmer expects me to walk with him." She could not have left the house where he was.

"Not yet," murmured Arthur, as he turned away, "but soon, very soon, that heart cannot live without affection. Cast out, and deserted, where should she fly but to my love, so devoted and unutterable."

Meanwhile, within the studio, a new scene of the drama was being enacted. Aylmer had shut the door, and quickly approached Juliet.

"You cannot escape me, now. You must explain the mystery which bewilders, while it charms me. I feel in my inmost soul that we are not strangers one to another,—yet we met but yesterday!"

"Strangers, no, truly!" she looked round sweetly, confidingly to him, as we look on the familiar features of a favourite brother.

"But, then, where, when, how did we meet!" he exclaimed, still more moved. "I **know** I never looked upon your face before; do you think I could have forgotten it?"

"Yet I know yours well," she said, with her sweet smile, "and the tones of my voice, you have heard them many times."

"It struck me so," exclaimed Aylmer: "the first words I heard you utter, were like a strain of well−remembered music, that long ago had passed melodious on my ear. But your voice, as we have all remarked, resembles so strangely that of your cousin Millicent, that I fancied it was her tones I recognized in yours."

Juliet shook her head almost sadly, "It is not so, and it were best I should resemble her in nothing."

"Do not let us talk of her, just now," said Aylmer, impatiently, "but, tell me what claim I have upon your acquaintance, I believe I might say your friendship and oh! may that claim be a strong one."

"I knew you were here," said Juliet, dreamily, as though she were rather wan− dering back through the regions of the past in her own memory, than directly answering his question, "I knew that you had come to live near this place four months ago, and I thought it was strange that Rookcliffe was my home,—I thought I should come and show you how my soul understood the artist−soul within you, by bringing into actual life the vision of your glorious picture,—then I thought that I should tell you all."

"All! how much may be in that word!" thought Aylmer, with a thrill of delight.

"And you will tell me all now, then?" he exclaimed to Juliet; "the time is come, as you thought!"

"Not as I thought,"—her countenance assumed an expression of rigid decision, which gave it a statue−like beauty,—" I will not, I cannot tell now."

"How!" exclaimed Aylmer; "you surely cannot mean it. This is unkind and cruel. What should prevent you? You said you had resolved to tell."

"Yes! but I knew not then that things would be as they are."

Ambiguous as was this speech, he understood at once that she alluded to his marriage. How the poor heart of Millicent Grey would have died within her had she seen the expression of his face,—that of Juliet swelled with triumph.

Aylmer was silent for a few moments, then he looked up with a sort of calm sadness.

"Am I to understand, then, that you will never tell me the meaning of this hidden sympathy, which draws my soul to you, as though you were some friend of childhood, some companion cherished long? Am I to live near you constantly as the mere stranger, which, in the common course of events, I should be to you, with the feeling half maddening me the while that in very truth we have been and are, although I know not by what mystery, friends in no common way? Will you **never** tell me, *amica incognita*, what is the strange, sweet link between us?"

"Never," she answered, in a low, melancholy tone, as though she had caught the reflection of his sadness,—"never, **now**! at least not until—yes, perhaps the day may come when it will avail you nothing, for good or ill, to know the truth, and then, if you wish it, I will tell you,—however, bitter were the revelation to myself. But now,"—she seemed to make a violent effort, and assumed that air of forced gaiety which is more touching than the wildest burst of sorrow,—"there is an interval when we may be as friends together, and none shall have any true right to come between as, when we may enjoy that communion of feeling which those who have the artist soul alone can know. Yes, that communion which I have dreamt of having with you this many a long day; there is an interval which may be bright with that friendship I had thought was to be ours, **unchanging**. Let us, then, forget what past and present, were and are, and I at least will forget the future; let us catch the sunbeam while it passes, and make merry with it. It will be time to weep when the night cometh,—you know they say the dews fall at evening."

She bounded from him as she spoke, and went to the door, whilst he stood motionless with agitation and bewilderment. There she paused, and said, in a gentle, beseeching tone,—

"Promise it shall be as I have said. We **are** friends as few have been: believe it on my word, and let us for this little time, unmoved by that which is, or is to come, enjoy without constraint the intercourse which a sympathy of thought, and tastes, and feelings will make as precious as it is rare. Ask no questions, seek no change; be it

understood that we have met in soul long since, and held much converse, sweet and true, together, and now there remains but to snatch these golden moments which are passing, and will pass too soon. Promise me!"

"I will do all you choose, it is but too bright a prospect. Make of me what you will." He had hardly spoken when she passed from the room,—her power was established.

From that day Juliet Egerton and Stephen Aylmer lived for one another. It was as she had said; the scheme of ideal friendship she had proposed to him was carried out to its full extent,—he gave up all thought of the future, and abandoned himself to the charm of present intercourse. They had much in common in their love of the fine arts, and their knowledge of Italian life and habits. It became a settled custom that they always spoke Italian together, and this shut them up, as it were, into a little world of their own.

Their mornings were spent in the painting room, not generally alone. Mrs. Egerton was too tenacious of the world's forms to allow of that, but quite sufficiently isolated by the nature of their employment,—Juliet painting and Aylmer instructing,—to hold such communion together, as was little dreamt of by those around them. Day after day Juliet continued, unmolested, to exercise her powers of fascination on her cousin's future husband, with every variety of art. She never did anything like other people, but her undoubted eccentricity seemed quite justified by her remarkable beauty, which already rendered her so unlike all others. No one ever thought of finding fault with the peculiarity of her manners and habits: she was in all things considered quite unique, and that bright face won forgiveness by a look, for the daring independence with which she followed her own wayward will.

They generally all went to ride together in the afternoon. Juliet was a bold rider, and often, whilst they were all proceeding quietly together, she would seem struck with some object in the distance, some rock or tree, or opening in the landscape, that gave the promise of a fine view, and without uttering a word, would cause her horse suddenly to bound away from her companions and career at full speed across the country, never pausing till she was lost to their sight altogether. Some one must follow her, of course, in these wild flights, but Charles, who never allowed his ease or dignity to be compromised by such hurried movements, invariably requested Aylmer to take upon himself the care of his capricious sister, whilst he remained in charge of the rest of the party; and Aylmer joyfully accepting the mission, would gallop after her, to find her generally motionless on some rising ground, whence she could command the prospect, the horse, curbed by her small vigorous hand, standing still as a statue, and herself in an attitude equally fixed, having uncovered her head, that the breeze might blow in its freshness on her fair face, and sweep from her cheek the long, waving hair.

She never, perhaps, seemed so beautiful as in that position. The picture was perfect, and entrancing to a man like Aylmer, the artist; and then as the sound of his horse's steps struck on her ear, the slow turning of that graceful head, the glad smile breaking over the face, the soft entreaty to be forgiven the wayward fancy, were full of an irresistible charm to him that bowed the strong heart of the proud man to be the abject slave of that woman's will.

Then they would ride on together, talk− ing with that sweet intimate communion, that converse of soul with soul, which when they are united in pure friendship, or in holy affection, has a joy that must be a foretaste of that blessed intercourse of the brighter world, when no veil of the flesh shall come between the happy spirits whose life of love shall be then as now, to love one another.

But the intercourse of Aylmer with Juliet Egerton was not the less delightful to themselves—that it partook not of this higher nature; and they would most often rejoin their party only at the gate of Rookcliffe.

Again in the evening, half hidden in the recess where the piano stood, the promised husband of Millicent Grey sat listening to the enchanting voice that was speaking, as he felt it did speak, to his very soul in those wild Italian words; nor was he ever for one moment arrested in his fascinated admiration by the fact, that every word and look and action of Juliet Egerton's was the result of the most subtle calculation; for this was her special art, that she seemed ever guided solely by ungovernable impulse. Woe be to her who uses the powers of fascination given her by heaven for the purposes of earth!

By solemn appointment, and for a solemn mission, is their responsibility laid on her,—even that with her beauty and her winning manner she may make stern goodness lovely in the eyes of men, and cause severe uncompromising holiness, to seem a sweet alluring thing; that with that voice of thrilling harmony she may sing holy strains to fill the ears too often choked up with a world's fulsome flatteries, and by that soft charm in her aspect and her words, which draws after her the hearts of many, teach men to listen and submit themselves the

more readily, to the sharp exacting lessons of unchanging truth, because one with an angel's look and tone hath spoken them.

But again we say, woe be to her who ignoring or rejecting this her mission, degrades her loveliness to slave for earthly hopes, and perverts her gifts of manifold allurement, to win for her only an earthly love.

All this while Stephen Aylmer had not an idea of the complete revolution which had taken place in his entire being. He knew not that in the secret history of his inner life, that change had occurred which colours the whole existence, destroying all independence or freedom of will, and which he had believed himself incapable of experiencing.

The power terrible in its extent, of an indomitable affection had risen up and taken possession of this man, as the wild beast seizes on its prey with some tremendous grasp, and now even as the victim lies palpitating and crushed in the tiger's fierce embrace, so did his soul lie fluttering beneath the might of this unconquerable love, subdued and powerless for evermore!

But he knew it not—he knew that he was living in a rapturous dream from which too surely he must wake one day, and therefore strove ever to put from him, all thought of that waking and its consequences, till the dark hour should arrive, and only sought the more madly to enjoy the present because it was so fleeting.

He knew that the presence of Juliet Egerton was life to him, and most bitterly, passionately, did he regret that before ever he saw her face, one had come to stand between them to shut her out from his life so utterly. But he knew not that when the hour of restitution came, and he must go forth from that existence of fascination and excitement to take another by the hand, and swear to love her only and her truly, until death, then would this new power rise up within him like an armed giant from his ambush, and trample down his soul with crushing steps, till truth and honour and compassion were cast out from it and the conqueror passion reigned there alone.

He knew not this would be; for though often, as we have said, even with agony he regretted, that he was bound by other ties, before that radiant face came beaming on his life, he was yet a man of honour, and he never dreamt of abandoning his promised bride. He fully intended when the time originally fixed for their union should arrive, to fulfill his engagements, and become her husband; but meanwhile, since this brief interval was all that was given him of the intense happiness he never was to know again, he resolved, even as Juliet had said, to give himself up to the full enjoyment of the redeemless present, and let no thought of the future darken its exceeding brightness.

It never occurred to him how fearfully he was already wronging Millicent by such a scheme; such desertion to the spirit of his engagement, and mocking faithfulness to the letter of it. He heard no complaint from her lips; gentle and patient, he had learned to persuade himself that she was not susceptible, nor keenly alive to the many tokens of neglect, which would have called forth such wild jealousy in Juliet, had their positions been reversed.

He almost persuaded himself that Millicent was incapable of any very strong and vivid feeling, when he compared the quiet proofs of unutterable affection, which rose from the still deep waters of her soul, with the glowing words of passionate attachment which, under the name of friendship, came bursting from the lips of Juliet.

And, besides, whenever the thought came across him irresistibly, that truly this entire devotion to another than his promised wife was unjustifiable,—he laid this flattering unction to his soul that Juliet, likewise, had a distinct claim upon him, at least for these few months, in the mysterious sympathy resulting from some strange former intercourse, which she had proved to him must exist between them. Her half−uttered hints in the very commencement of their acquaintance had shown him plainly, that, but for this unhappy engagement with her cousin, she had come to Rookcliffe prepared to find him wholly hers, and to be his own in heart and life.

Of course the Egerton family were not blind to the drama which was being played before their eyes, but no one interfered by word or deed, or even by a meaning look. There were various reasons for this. Charles having attained, by some intricate process, to a most real and enviable insensibility himself, never thought that possibly there might be the germs of an agony, even unto death, in this working tragedy, for some, if not all, of the actors therein. Sweet little Millicent would soon find a better husband, he thought, if Aylmer played her false; and meanwhile it was a wonderful enlivenment to the old halls at Rookcliffe to have this exciting romance going on within them: he would not disturb it on any account.

Further, there was a certain feeling existing in the minds of these three old young ladies, his sisters, so perpetually in bewildered amazement that the world had not yet seen fit to draw them from their immutable

position in changeless solitude, which caused them secretly to feel, that they had somehow been personally aggrieved by their cousin's speedy engagement, and although they admitted it not to themselves, they did, in fact, look on her probable desertion by Aylmer as a retribution justly due to them. They, too, would not have disturbed the course of events for any inducement whatever.

In the heart of Mrs. Egerton the absorbing love of the child least worthy of it, had left room for no other feeling.

She saw that Juliet had won the heart of Aylmer, and that she herself in return seemed devotedly attached to him; therefore the mother ardently desired their union, and was careful to promote their intercourse. Aylmer was, moreover, precisely the husband she wished for Juliet; rich, talented, and fond of continental life. As for Millicent, Mrs. Egerton had never quite forgiven her for having come, with her bright, sunny face, and her clear, vigorous mind, to contrast so unpleasantly with her own world−worn, artificial daughters, and, "indeed," this fashion−taught woman was wont to think, "Millicent had always shown herself very independent of her care and advice,—so now, if she lost Aylmer's affec− tion as speedily as she had won it, it was her own affair and she must even make the best of it. As for her, she must look after her own child's interest."

Mr. Egerton would have been obtuse, indeed, had he not perceived that there were storms brooding in the atmosphere round him,—storms where she, whose guardian he was called, was fast making shipwreck for ever; but, really, while the cook persisted in sending up such abominable *entremets*, he could not think of anything but having him taught better, or procuring another. He did believe that was the best plan, to send him off, and have another from Paris; but then his *pâtés de foie gras* were capital; no one could excel him, there was the difficulty. As to love−making, they must settle it among themselves: he had had enough of it in his own time, but he was done with it long ago. Indeed, he wished he had never begun. There was his brother, the General, what a comfortable old bachelor he was! nothing to trouble him, no one to think of but himself, and what a cook **he** had!

So ruminated the head of the house, and so speculated the various members of his family, whilst slowly and surely stealing along, the great agony of Millicent Grey came forward to meet her on the pathway of life.

But, oh! Arthur Egerton! what a glorious opportunity was here afforded you, of proving how noble and how bright a thing the human soul may be, when strength is given it to suffer for the weal of others! Why did you not come forward in this her hour of betrayal and friendlessness, armed with the energy and zeal of your deep love, to interpose between her and the fierce blow that was descending on her, by receiving it on your own heart? Yes! by the holocaust of your life's affection, you might have saved her now: you might have won back for her the happiness that is flitting fast away: you might have given up the dear hope that exists for you, in the agony of her desertion, and with the strong words of truth and rectitude, awakened that man from his ignominious dream, to see how peerless is that true heart he is breaking, how unworthy her, for whose sake he is so miserably fallen. You might have saved her; Arthur Egerton, you might have thrown down the stronghold of your own solitary hope, into which you suppose life and its joy are gathered, and from the melancholy ruins built up again the tottering fabric of her happiness, now shaking to its very centre. And who so blest, (not with earth's blessing,) as yourself, when having thus restored her to her well−beloved home, in another heart than yours, she went forth to live, and to enjoy, and to forget you in your bitter solitude!—yes, who so blest, for in your soul of earthly light bereft, would shine the glory, ripe with promise, of that deed wherein you immolated self on the altar of the Faith which speaks of holier love, and higher hope, and more enduring joy!

But, to an earthly affection you have delivered up your spirit, and the darkness of earth has closed in round it,—mists, arising from the dust out of which your mortal frame was taken; so, cowering back in the shadow, you sit watching with a keen cruel eye, till flung out by remorseless hands into the desert of hope and of affection, you hope to find that helpless child, compelled to seek a refuge by your side!

END OF VOL. I.