

The Tutor's Ward, Vol. 2

Felicia Skene

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CHAPTER I.

SLOWLY along the path where she had walked with Aylmer on the night of Juliet's arrival, Millicent Grey went wandering alone. Cold and dreary was the scene around her, for it was winter now; and nature without sunshine is like the soul without hope.

With a heavy and a lingering tread she walks, her hands clasped on her bosom, where the chilled heart beats faintly,—her head bowed down with an earth-drawn gaze, as theirs is bowed whose thoughts unconsciously are stealing on to the grave, as their refuge best and sweetest.

And now it may be well to see how it fares with her who must thus compassionless abide her destiny, and wait in silence the last shock of the fierce passions raging round her.

It may seem unnatural, but heart-sick and full of boding fears as Millicent now was, she never yet had doubted Stephen Aylmer. Most guileless and most trusting, nothing could have shaken in her the belief that whatever he did was right. When she had given up to him her entire and unlimited affection, she did so believing him as nearly perfect as any may be on this earth,—herself had, with her warm imagination, gilded and painted her idol, and then she fell down and worshipped it.

Whatever he said must be truth. She trusted more willingly his words than his deeds, and whilst outwardly, with but little reserve, he gave free scope to his intense and ungovernable affection for Juliet, when alone with Millicent (now a matter of rare occurrence) his manner was little changed, as in truth the quiet friendship he had ever felt for her remained undiminished. She never caused him any embarrassment by a single murmur, for Millicent Grey was most utterly above all jealousy; if she had once discovered that for Juliet's sake he would fain be free of his present engagement, she would have given him up at once without a whisper of complaint; but to harass him with a woman's envy of another, fairer and dearer than herself, was a petty meanness of which her generous nature was incapable. She could not be blind to his devoted admiration of Juliet,—he had himself so far explained his preference, for her society by stating to Millicent that there had existed a friendship between them formerly in a manner strange and mysterious, even to himself, which both desired should be continued now,—but still she felt that no intercourse in times past, could account for the intense and absorbing interest he evidently took in her beautiful cousin. She felt, with what a helpless sinking of the heart, no words can say, that Juliet must be more to him than any on the earth beside, and yet she believed that it was his earnest desire and prayer that herself should be his wife.

She believed this simply because he told her so; repeatedly and constantly he assured her of this, as in fact it was the only salve to his conscience at this present time, that he should bind himself again and again by his words, to fulfill the promise from which his whole heart was shrinking.

She believed that, in some way, he conceived it to be for his happiness that he should be her husband, even whilst his very soul seemed drawn to Juliet Egerton,—it might be only because he wished to show his gratitude to his uncle by fulfilling the old man's earnest desire,—and when this thought came to the breast of Millicent, it brought with it the very chill of death; or it might be,—and sweet as music was the whisper of this hope to her—it might be that with all his admiration for Juliet's brilliant talents and beauty, he yet felt he should find more of the peace and comfort of domestic life in her society, who, less gifted and less fascinating, would more unreservedly give her life to labour earnestly for his happiness.

It was with this thought that Millicent lived on; hope clung round that young heart and would not quit it. Her own beautiful simplicity and truthfulness misled her in this matter; for, judging by herself, it never occurred to her to doubt that if Aylmer had ceased to look for happiness in their union, he would have come in a plain and straightforward manner to tell her so. Yet though she felt herself constrained to believe simply what he told her, and to act accordingly, let it not be supposed that she did not suffer with a suffering which no words could adequately render, at the daily and hourly evidence of his attachment for another. With all the glorious generosity and self-forgetfulness of a sincere affection, it was herself she ever blamed for his unfaithfulness, and all the anxiety which she feared it cost him; it was her fault, she thought,—why was she not beautiful and talented as Juliet? why was she not more worthy of him? Then he never would have brought disquietude upon himself by yielding to the charm of other society than that of his promised wife.

This deep humility saved her from all bitterness of feeling towards either Aylmer or Juliet. More and more

gentle and patient, day by day she shrunk utterly within herself, and strove only never to interfere with him, never to annoy him, and but to show in every word and action, as in every thought, that she desired his well-being only, and was content to promote it as he thought fit.

So Aylmer, looking on this calm exterior, believed almost that he had mistaken, when formerly he thought she was endowed with that most fatal gift—intensity of feeling, and solaced himself with the hope which, in his inmost heart, he knew to be false, that she was too insensible to perceive the extent of the new affection which filled his heart, or to suffer by it. How appalled he would have been, could he have looked beneath that veil, which the woman's pride never fails to draw over her suffering, be it what it may; and seen in what a chaos of utter misery the poor soul of Millicent Grey was wandering now, tossed to and fro from doubt to fear, from present anguish to future dread. She was as one haunted with fearful spectres, rising from the tomb where all must sink one day, to speak prophetic of its chill and darkness, for disheartening fears came ever gliding in, so terrible and phantom-like, upon her fainting spirit, whispering with boding voices of the utter death of all her hope and joy, as though they had risen from her future anguish to warn her with a foretaste of it. And when at times, despite the hope which could not be torn from her youth and inexperience—despite her firm trust in Aylmer's words, the dread stole darkly on her, that even now she might be walking on to the hour, when she should be bereft of all,—of earth's sole good—her right to be the guardian of his life—that thought came to her with all the horror which a criminal must feel when the sentence of his execution sounds appalling on his ear. For be it remembered that, from earliest youth, Millicent Grey had been seeking to discover that mysterious satisfaction of the soul for which it craves with such insatiable longing—that fulfillment of the inborn desire which John Forde had called the "spirit's rest;" and she had believed that this existed only in the blessedness of sweet human love, given and received; and that she had found it in the prospect of a union with Stephen Aylmer. If this, then, which alone contained the promise of joy or peace, were taken from her, where—where should she turn in the bitter cold, the bewildering darkness?

It is impossible that the human soul should seek its repose at once in things temporal and things eternal; and since on earth alone she had sought to lay down that head and rest, when earth came to shake beneath her, as it rocks in its convulsion, the far-off Home of the only Peace had become to her eyes so blended with the dust whereon she lay, that it was too dim and shadowy for her to grasp its promise.

But as yet she never let her mind dwell for an instant on such a possible consummation. To one thought only did she turn in her sad bewilderment, it was her desire daily, increasing to a passionate longing which well-nigh absorbed her, for Stephen Aylmer's happiness, to make him happy, with or without her, by whatsoever means, it might be his wish or will that she should do it. This was her one indomitable resolution; this was her polar star, which was to guide her through all the raging storms and drifting clouds. Patiently she would wait till he should show her how best this might be done. At present he told her plainly it was to be accomplished by a union with herself, and on this she relied; but if the hour should come when a sacrifice would be necessary, there was, though Millicent Grey knew it not, in the generosity of her character abundant strength to accomplish it.

She was waiting now for Colonel Bentley's carriage; which came almost every day to convey her to Milton Lodge. Neither the old man nor Mrs. Hartley had the smallest idea of all that was going on at Rookcliffe. He was unable to go there on account of his infirmities, and his sister but seldom left him. The only change they perceived was that Millicent was with them more frequently than formerly. Poor child! they knew not how in her great friendlessness she pined for their words of endearment and of kindness, for they both loved her sincerely; Mrs. Hartley, especially, had become much attached to her; and Millicent fully reciprocated her affection. Yet it had never occurred to her, to disclose her bidden suffering to the gentle old lady. A genuine frankness of disposition, like that which was the great charm of her character, is perfectly compatible with an extreme reserve respecting the inner life of the soul; and this Millicent possessed to an extraordinary degree. Besides, it was not from these lips that there would ever pass a word, which could call down a censure upon Stephen Aylmer. When Mrs. Hartley would ask her how it was that she had become so quiet and so changed, for she was often uneasy at the settled sadness which seemed to have dispelled entirely her wonted cheerfulness and vivacity, Millicent would answer, with a faint smile, "I am growing old." Then, Mrs. Hartley, pleased to hear her jest, as she imagined, would look with a smile upon her young sweet face; but Millicent, not the less, had told the truth, she was growing old—living many, long dreary years in a day. Once only, Mrs. Hartley, when visiting at Rookcliffe, had been struck most unpleasantly with Aylmer's manner to Juliet. Her suspicions were vaguely roused, but she soon

forgot them when she found that Millicent appeared to take no notice of the intimacy between her cousin and her intended husband, and that Aylmer himself talked of their marriage taking place at the appointed time.

It was now within a very few weeks of the period originally fixed, and which still remained unaltered. Millicent was remembering how, when she last walked there with Aylmer, he had been forming plans of taking her to Italy and anticipating her delight at all they were to see. Would that bright vision ever be realized now? Should she really yet go there with him, as his wife, and forget all the horror and misery of these few months, even as we forget some frightful midnight dream? Whilst she thought of it and the soft voice of hope came stealing on her soul, she perceived the carriage which had come for her, winding along the avenue below; it reminded her how they had stood and gazed on that which conveyed Juliet to Rookcliffe, and how in that hour her whole being was subdued by a dark presentiment. She shuddered when these recollections came across her, and turned to the house. She went to find Aylmer in the hope of hearing from him that he would join her at Milton Lodge in the afternoon.

Mrs. Egerton met her at the open door of the drawing room, and told her he was there, adding that she intended herself visiting Mrs. Hartley that day, and would reconduct her home. Millicent answered a few words which were heard by Aylmer, and she entered the room alone. We have noted elsewhere that there was a singular similarity of tone in the voices of Juliet and Millicent: it is a common point of resemblance between cousins, and in this instance it was so strong that it was not easy to distinguish between them.

Aylmer thought it was Juliet who spoke; he did not raise his head from a drawing on which he was engaged, but as he heard the step behind him, he murmured in a low tone, "My own Juliet, are you come at last? What a dark world this is without you!"

Millicent stood transfixed, as one turned to stone. The voice, the words, the deep full tenderness breathing in them, all came to her with a terrible revelation. His **Juliet!**—his Juliet! and what was she? Her heart seemed to stop its beating, her hands grew cold as ice, her whole frame shook and shivered.

Words, she knew not how, came dropping mournfully, quietly from her pale lips, "It is not Juliet, it is I!"

If a clap of thunder had sounded in his ears he could not have started more appalled. He bounded from his seat, he turned, he looked on her as she stood there with her white half-parted lips, her stiffening hands, pressing on the bosom so unnaturally still. The blood rushed to his forehead, and a hatred came over him against himself, a horror of the perfidious, base, degrading part he had been playing towards that unoffending, noble-hearted Millicent. He thought not of Juliet then, but only of re-assuring her,—of convincing her that he could not act dishonourably; that he never meant to desert her for any other, however passionately he might be constrained to love that beautiful being.

He took both her hands in his whilst still she said, with her mournful gaze, "It is not Juliet, it is I!" as though she meant to convey some terrible meaning with those words,—and hurriedly, anxiously he poured forth in broken sentences every assurance he thought would remove the fatal impression his first unguarded words had caused.

It was strange that among the various conflicting feelings which naturally assailed him then, the man's pride most predominated, and his main anxiety was to prove to her that he could never intend to be so dishonourable as to desert her;—first he said, "I thought you were Juliet, **my** pretty artist pupil,"—he laid an emphasis on the word as if to convince her that it was in this sense only he had called her **his**. Strange sophistry of this world's ways! His terror was that Millicent should call his honour in question, and therefore he acted a lie.

Then he passed at once to the subject of their marriage, and the more strongly he felt his very frame shivering, at thought of thus placing an insurmountable barrier between himself and Juliet, the more vehemently did he protest that he would not allow it to be one day or hour beyond the time fixed; that he held Millicent bound to that period,—that he was longing for the moment to arrive—yes, longing. He spoke truly when he said so, for the terror was upon him, that if the delay were much longer, he should not have strength to accomplish the sacrifice. He did long, that it should be out of his power to fall from the high standard of excellence he had set before himself. And Millicent, did she believe him? There was a natural **submissiveness** in her mind to his, which made her believe that all he said was true as highest truth,—all he proposed just and right, as though by holy laws ordained, and this habit of acquiescence in soul, to his declared will at all times, made her now smile a faint smile in answer to his earnest entreaties that she would not herself be the cause of any delay, and she let her hand lie in his as if with the confiding calm of the promised wife; but all his strong words had not shaken one moment the

load that now lay crushing on her heart, and took from her the power of speech or of thought.

Mr. Egerton came in and reproached her loudly with keeping Colonel Bentley's horses waiting so long. Mechanically she turned to go,—it was impossible in her uncle's presence that Aylmer should say more, but he held her hand for a moment, and looked earnestly into her face, till he met the gentle, humble look of her large brown eyes, which were so like those of a deer, earnest and mournful. She saw that he expected an assurance in words, that she would do all he wished respecting their marriage, and the instinct of her loving heart made her ever seek, at any cost to herself, to say exactly what would please him most. Half suffocated with emotion now, her voice became distinct with an effort.

"Stephen, you know that now and always I will do whatever you tell me is for your happiness."

He let her go, saying he should himself come to Milton Lodge that afternoon, and when Juliet Egerton entered the room where he was once more alone, a few minutes later, she found him with his face buried among the cushions of the sofa, and his whole frame convulsed as it seemed with anguish.

He rose up, and reproached her almost fiercely for having deprived him of an hour of that only happiness which was so fast flitting from his grasp; he said:

"Do not ever leave me—do not, while my life endures, take from me that which is its light of day!"

He spoke as if his real life was to terminate when he was parted from her, and only an existence like to that, vacant and rayless, we lead in the darkness of night, remain to him.

Millicent passed Arthur as she went to the carriage—he watched her movements at all times with a pertinacity which one less gentle would have resented. He caught one glimpse of her countenance, white as marble, and wearing unconsciously that look of patient suffering which we sometimes see on the face of a child when in bodily pain; he saw her, and the glad smile of exultation passed over his lips—by every deepening shade of sorrow on her soul, the sunshine of his spirit brightened. How fiend-like does the human nature grow when it is possessed by earthly passion as by an evil spirit, and consents to build its fabric of hope on the grave of another's happiness.

She crouched down in the carriage with that bitterly desolate feeling which makes us shrink within ourselves—she lay in a sort of mental stupor, watching all the trifling objects on the road, and unable to think—she had but one thought distinct—she must do whatever Aylmer wished. But why did he wish it? He certainly loved Juliet—she was bewildered.

"My pretty Millicent, what is the matter with you?" exclaimed Colonel Bentley, as she entered. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I think I have," she answered; for surely she had seen the ghost of her happiness, which was dead.

"Child, what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing; I was jesting. I am only not very well." She spoke very fast, as if in nervous haste. "I see you are engaged with your newspaper—you do not require me now. I will arrange your cushions, and go to Mrs. Hartley till you have finished. Where is she?"

"In the next room; but I would rather you would stay with me; you never disturb me, little niece."

"I will come back to you—but you must let me go now."

She had a longing to lay her aching head on the kind old lady's knees.

"Well, well, go away to her, then; some consultation on woman's gear, I suppose,—ribbons for the wedding dress, eh, Millicent? Never mind, child, don't trouble your head about them; it will make no difference to Stephen what you wear: he will feel just the same, I promise you."

She shuddered; what a different meaning she gave to his words from what he intended! She passed into the other room, where Mrs. Hartley sat placidly at work in her accustomed corner. She too exclaimed when she saw Millicent's face, and asked her if she were ill.

"Yes, I am not well—I am very weary—I wish so much to sit here—at your feet." She took a low seat, and placed it beside her aged companion. She sat down.

"And now may I lean my head against you?" she said. "I long so to rest. If I had a mother, how I should have rested now."

"My child,—my dear child,—what can be the matter with you? You alarm me beyond measure!"

"Oh, nothing,—nothing," said Millicent, faintly. The tone of affection overpowered her. She could not bear it.

"My own dear Millicent, this is no illness, but some heavy mental distress, which is oppressing you, poor

darling! You are the very last that should look sad; will you not tell me, love, what grieves you?"

She started up in a kneeling posture, and frantically buried her face in Mrs. Hartley's lap.

"Do not be kind to me, Mrs. Hartley—do not be kind to me," she said; "I cannot bear it; be cold and loveless to me, as they all are; kindness kills me now. I am so friendless—I am so friendless!" Then the pent-up agony burst forth, and she sobbed with an abandonment it was heart-breaking to see.

Mrs. Hartley was appalled, but these wild words were significant enough, as a vision rose up before her of the scene in which she had watched Aylmer and Juliet together. She understood in a moment what was going on, but she felt convinced it was not yet too late. Only yesterday Aylmer had alluded to their marriage, still the peril was evidently great, and she must be prompt if she would save that guileless, loving child—this artful coquette should not be allowed to break her heart.

Gently she lifted poor Millicent's head.

"Take comfort, dearest, no evil shall come to you. You are frightened and nervous just now, but I will be guarantee for your future happiness. Don't think me unfeeling if I love you for a few minutes; lie down on the sofa and rest till I come back."

Millicent obeyed unmurmuring. Had Mrs. Hartley been really unkind, she was too much subdued and humbled now to feel surprised. She let herself be placed on the sofa, struggling to overcome her emotion, and the old lady went to find her brother. She wished to give him certain instructions before Aylmer came, that afternoon; but she had rather a difficult part to play. She knew that, if she told him the truth, he would go off into a tempest of rage, and would, infallibly, throw his crutches at Juliet the moment she came into the room, accompanied by a few home truths, of an unpalatable nature. The only way to manage Colonel Bentley, at any time, was to treat him exactly like an ill-behaved child, to convince him that he was almost bereft of intellect, and that nothing but the most unquestioning obedience to the guidance of others could save him from committing many frightful acts of insanity.

Mrs. Hartley went and stood exactly before him; she looked him full in the face, he glanced up, dolefully at her.

"Sister, you have come to preach, that is as clear as daylight. What **have** I been doing?" His voice passed into a sort of whine. "I declare to you, I took not a drop of port wine at luncheon, and **not** I who let the cat into the drawing-room."

"No, but there is a great deal of mischief going on, which you ought to prevent."

"Please to explain yourself."

"I don't mean to explain, that would spoil it all. You must just do what I tell you."

"Well, I am sure, there never was a man so tormented. But anything for a quiet life: give me my crutches, and tell me where I am to go."

"Nowhere, you are to sit still just now."

"To be bullied and driven into a corner, and put out of all patience for people I don't care about, for I know it can be nothing I am interested in. There is no mischief here, unless you are worrying on about the cat and the crystal vase,"

"So you don't care about Stephen Aylmer and Millicent Grey?"

"Woman! what are you saying? Give me my crutches, I say; what on earth has happened to them?"

"You shall not have your crutches, I put them away on purpose. Now, brother, sit quiet, and listen to me."

"And what else can I do but sit quiet, when you have taken away my crutches? and am I not dying to hear what you have got to say, if you would only speak?"

"Well, you wish their marriage to take place, do you not?"

"Do I wish my head to be upon my shoulders, though you seem to think I have not got one?"

"Very good, then let me tell you that unless you exert yourself this very day, Millicent Grey will never be your niece."

He made a feeble grasp at his crutches once more, but he was perfectly speechless, from astonishment and horror. Mrs. Hartley was glad of it, as it enabled her to tell him what he was to do, without interruption.

"Now, first of all, you are not to know what reason I have for saying this, or the meaning of what I am going to tell you to do. It is all a great mystery, which would just confuse you, if you were to hear it till you became perfectly useless. You are just to listen, and do quietly what I bid you."

"I will! I will!" he gasped; "anything not to lose my dear little Millicent."

"That is right; now all you have to do is very easy. When Stephen comes here this afternoon, you are to tell him that it is indispensably necessary that he should go to London no later than to-morrow, to see your lawyer about the settlements, and that, in order to save you trouble in the arrangements, he is not to come back till within two or three days of the marriage, when he must bring down the license, and having said all this, you are not to rest till you see him off before this time to-morrow, with a private letter from you to the lawyer, telling him to hurry the arrangements as much as he can. Will you do this?"

Colonel Bentley nodded his head solemnly, in token of complete acquiescence: he seemed still too much bewildered to speak.

"And you will do it all quietly, not seeming to suspect anything wrong, only very decidedly, so that Stephen shall be gone before another day's done."

"Sister, I will; you are very wise, and I will be guided implicitly by you, for this is an awful business. I am in a regular terror. Be sure you tell me all I am to do."

"That is all,—he will be here soon, so take care."

She had gone to the door when he called after her:—

"Sister, I am choking with rage."

"Well, don't choke, only remember well what you have to do."

Mrs. Hartley returned to Millicent who, meantime, like a very woman, was reproaching herself bitterly with unkindness and injustice towards Aylmer, by thus allowing herself to despair of the affection of which he had just given her the strongest proof; when urging their speedy union. What right had she to judge from any thing but his own words, distinctly addressed to herself? Was he not noble and true? incapable of meanness or deceit? and it was but herself whose weakness and folly caused this fear. She had been relieved by her burst of emotion from the crushing oppression which had weighed upon her, and in the reaction of feeling, her generous heart returned to its boundless unassailable faith in the object of its worship. She was terrified that she might have led Mrs. Hartley to think any evil of him, by her apparent desolation, and she struggled to look cheerful as soon as she came in.

"I am so glad you have come," she said. "I am sure you must have come so surprised, you must have thought me very foolish, but I am only nervous and ill. I certainly have no right to call myself **friendless**, when Stephen—" she stopped, and grew pale, she could not go on, when she remembered the tone of his voice, as he said, "My Juliet." Mrs. Hartley stooped down and kissed her fondly.

"Don't distress yourself, dear Millicent, I understand it all. I trust, indeed, when you are his happy wife, you will have no cause to say you are friendless."

These were soothing words to Millicent, and, by the time the Egertons' carriage drove to the door, she was seated beside Colonel Bentley and his sister, conversing with them almost as cheerfully as usual.

Mrs. Egerton was accompanied by Juliet and Aylmer, and the three between whom so awful a struggle was silently going on, involving not happiness alone, but life itself, sat down together with the friendly words, the calm politeness, which the world demands from us, even when our whole existence is at stake.

Aylmer had assumed that wild, unnatural gaiety, which is the surest evidence of a heart most ill at ease, but he avoided looking on the face of Juliet, even as we shrink from letting our eyes rest on the still countenance of the dead, so unutterably mournful in their ghastly rest,—for she was the picture of utter despondency: a beautiful picture still, however, that was never forgotten; and the downcast eyes that seemed weary of the light of day, showed to singular advantage the long dark lashes that shrouded them, whilst the very contrast of her present sorrow with her usual animation and brilliancy, gave an indescribable charm to her deep melancholy. Millicent was so anxious Aylmer should not think he had pained her, that her forced cheerfulness confirmed him in his belief, that she had no great depth of feeling. When he thought of her having heard the words which himself knew to have arisen out of the very depths of a soul devoted to her cousin, and then, when he compared her apparent insensibility with Juliet's evident wretchedness, he almost doubted whether he would have strength enough to accomplish the sacrifice, which honour compelled him to make to her.

It was impossible for Colonel Bentley to speak to his nephew in presence of the Egertons, as an admonitory look of his sister's reminded him; and, therefore, as the visit drew to a close, he told him that he wished him to remain at Milton Lodge for dinner, as there were some matters of business which they must discuss together.

Aylmer looked beyond measure annoyed: he could not endure to lose a single hour of that society which was so inexpressibly dear to him, and from which he was soon to be for ever separated. He remonstrated with his uncle, and said there were various arrangements made for that evening at Rookcliffe which required his presence.

"Well," said Colonel Bentley good-humoredly, for he was pleased at what he believed was a proof of Aylmer's wish to remain with Millicent, "I will try not to be too hard upon you, and you shall go back as soon as possible this evening,—but come with me to the next room for a moment, and I will explain to you why you must stay a few hours to arrange matters with me." He took his crutches, and hobbled through the folding door which always stood open to the other room, followed by Aylmer.

Juliet rose, and sauntered towards a table which stood near the door, but at a sufficient distance to make it seem impossible that she should distinguish any part of the conversation, which Colonel Bentley and his nephew were holding in a recess of the other room; nevertheless, her hearing was acute as that of the serpent which discerns far off the tread of his victim. She distinctly heard the old man say, it was absolutely necessary that Aylmer should proceed to town the very next day, to complete the arrangements for his marriage; and, after a long pause, during which Colonel Bentley became furiously impatient, she heard Aylmer reply in a voice of the utmost agitation that he had no doubt his uncle was right, and that he was quite ready to go. He felt that, intolerably painful as the struggle would be, it was best, perhaps, since the effort must be made, that he should at once break from the charm that held him as with chains of iron, and escape from Juliet's presence, before it became impossible for him to resist even perjury and dishonour for her sake.

Juliet had gained enough. She walked back at once to her mother, and urged her to return home immediately, so as to leave no time for Aylmer to announce his intended journey before they left Milton Lodge. She succeeded: Mrs. Egerton and Millicent rose at once. Aylmer only came for a moment from the next room to say that he must remain, on account of business with his uncle, but that he would be at Rookcliffe in the evening, and so they separated. The red glow of the setting winter sun had prevented any but Millicent observing the ghastly paleness of his face. Her own grew white as snow, when she observed it.

"He is suffering," she thought; "but how?—for what cause? oh! what shall I do for him?" It made her sick at heart to think that one shade of sorrow was on his soul. She felt that she would not have sunk or even drooped, if she could have saved him from it by enduring herself a world's weight of misery. But she knew not what to do: she was bewildered. She could but go back again and again to his own words. In what else was she to trust? She had a melancholy drive homewards. All her sense of friendlessness and desolation returned upon her. She felt, by a sort of instinct, that the hearts of both with whom she sat were bitter against her. She could see in the deepening twilight the glittering of Juliet's eyes, as they settled on her with a side glance of deadly hate, and she trembled to feel so utterly helpless, with such a vague dread upon her, she knew not of what.

Juliet seemed anxious to leave the carriage first: when they reached the door she sprang into the hall. "Letters, of course," she said hurriedly, taking up one or two that lay on the hall table. She had a large correspondence, and never failed to receive some by each post.

"Ah, here is a letter from Mrs. Wilmot, at Richmond," she said, looking at the address of one, which was half hid in her hand, and speaking both to her father and mother, who had joined her as well as Millicent. "I know what it will certainly contain."

"An invitation?" said Mrs. Egerton. "Yes," said Juliet, "she wrote to me last week that she expected some of our friends from Milan to be with her this week, and that she counted on me to come and meet them. I shall be so glad."

"Do you mean that you will go, my child?" asked her mother, "that you will wish to go?"

"I shall undoubtedly," said Juliet, turning and fixing her eyes on Mrs. Egerton. "I particularly wish to go just now."

"You know best," said Mrs. Egerton, satisfied that she could not do better than leave her daughter's fate in her own hands.

"And she shall do as she likes," added Mr. Egerton, who was beginning to feel uncomfortable at the manifold proofs of there being something wrong in his household, and who had just sufficient glimmering of what was going on, to feel that Juliet's absence was the event most likely to restore the peace in which he delighted. Mr. Egerton always thought himself ill-used when any distressing occurrence took place in his family. Few men had known less trouble, but even now he talked of the loss of an infant long ago, as a most unjustifiable trial.

Juliet went to her room, and having closed the door, she deposited the letter from her cousin in Shropshire, which had passed for that of Mrs. Wilmot, at Richmond, in the fire, and proceeded to write a few lines to Mrs. Wilmot herself, saying that, if quite convenient to her, she should like to pay her long-promised visit now, as she doubted whether she should be able to come to Richmond later, and at present she had some charming new music, which they might try over together, and many interesting anecdotes from Milan to tell her. The letter was such as to insure an invitation, and she even named the day, in the following week, when she wished to come. It was finished, and despatched by a special messenger to the post, before she came to dinner. She was glad to see the family all assembled, that they might hear of her journey before Aylmer came to announce his. She said Mrs. Wilmot wished her to go on the following Monday, and that she had written to accept her invitation, so that her departure was quite fixed. Millicent clasped her hands in deep, silent thankfulness; she fancied, in her simplicity, that all the sunshine which had passed from her life when the figure of Juliet Egerton first darkened the threshold of Rookcliffe, would now come beaming through it again, when the fatal influence of her presence was gone. Charles looked very steadily at his sister.

"Do you mean to return before Millicent's wedding?" he asked.

"I do," was her answer, and the gleam of her eyes on the face of her cousin, was frightful in its malice.

Aylmer came in the course of the evening. His first look was to Juliet, as of necessity. Her appearance of profound dejection was unchanged; but the next glance, even with anxiety, was to Millicent. This was caused by a few words of Mrs. Hartley's. She had followed him when he left the library at Milton Lodge, to return to Rookcliffe.

"Stephen," she said, "I would say one word to you!" He always listened to his aunt with deference and attention. "I would simply ask you if you are fully aware what a great peril and responsibility you incurred when you gained to yourself an affection so fearfully strong as that which binds your promised wife to you."

He was much surprised. Mrs. Hartley spoke with a sternness of manner quite foreign to her nature; he felt that she had some deep reason for so doing.

"Does Millicent feel so strongly, aunt? It has seemed to me,—I have fancied,—that she was cold, almost indifferent."

"Lay no such falsehood to your soul, Stephen; you cannot and dare not believe it in actual truth,—or, if you do, trust me, for once, when I tell you, that her life is bound up in her love for you. If the love is torn from her, the life will go with it. Look in her face, and you will see that it is already trembling in the balance. Take heed, the Sixth Commandment may be broken without bloodshed,—murder may be done with no wound visible."

She left him so deeply impressed by her words that he resolved, happen what might, to give Millicent the fullest possible assurance of affection before he left her, and to ensure her looking forward with a happy security to their union. He must lie if he told her he loved her now, but he had become so bewildered in the dense mists of many conflicting passions, that the outward semblance of truth was all he even strove to attain.

Before he had time to announce his own departure, Juliet had told him in presence of the assembled family, that she was to go to Richmond the following week. Aylmer started with uncontrollable emotion.

"How strange!" he said. "I am likewise obliged to go to London to-morrow."

He then resolutely stated, though with an inconceivable effort, that it was in order to prepare the marriage-settlements, and that he should return only in time for his wedding.

"Well, you seem both flying off at once, Juliet and you," said Fanny, who excelled in inopportune remarks.

"But you will not be able to escort my sister," said Charles, with considerable haughtiness,— "she is not to go till Monday, and you leave us to-morrow."

"No," murmured Juliet, who had come with her noiseless gliding step close to Aylmer,— "here we **part**."

She spoke in a low deep tone that struck on his ear like the tolling of a funeral bell: he felt as if the darkness of night had come over his life, but still the solemn ominous words of Mrs. Hartley recurred to him. It seemed as if in this conflict his senses would abandon him. He could only cling to the recollection of the resolution he had taken. He was to go so early next morning that he said his leave-taking must be this evening, and he asked Millicent to come and speak to him for a few minutes in the inner drawing-room. There he assured her of his entire affection with a tenderness and a solemnity which it would indeed have been hard to doubt. The very urgency of the case made him act his part to perfection, for his brain was actually reeling, and he was half frantic with the mad desire to fling her from him, and tell her she never, **NEVER** should come between him and his own,

his only love. Nevertheless, he left her happy, calm, assured as she had not been these many long days,—smiling quietly to him whilst she repeated the words he dictated to her, containing a renewal of her promise, that on the appointed day she would become his wife.

It seemed to her that her long patience was rewarded, and peace was come at last; and though for a short time she would gaze upon that face no more, how blessed would be their meeting.

So she laid down her gentle head in very great thankfulness that night.

When Aylmer returned to the drawing room he found that Juliet had disappeared. Vainly did he look for her with utter despair in his heart. She was seen no more, and the next morning he was to go, without even a farewell.

CHAPTER II.

IT must be a light heart, indeed, that can wake from the calm oblivion of sleep, to begin a new day, without shrinking wearily from resuming the burden of existence, so gladly laid down when the night brings its healing rest. Its peace and radiant dreams are like a foretaste of the repose eternal, and there seems scarce energy to return again to the life-struggle; but with Stephen Aylmer this feeling had deepened almost to a horror of the light of day, when the morning broke which was to take him from Rookcliffe, and terminate for ever that period of intense happiness, which seemed to him now the only hour of real sunshine his life had ever known. The struggles of his soul in that dark night had been terrible: now it seemed to him impossible to relinquish Juliet, the beautiful, the poetical Juliet, with her impassioned spirit and her brilliant intellect, the very type and embodiment of all he had ever wished in his wildest dreams to find, as the companion of his journey through the world,—the first, the only one who had ever awakened the strong, mighty affections of his heart,—who had broken up his life-long indifference and vacancy of soul, to send the deep tides of passionate feeling swelling and raging over it. Yes, to give her up, his living ideal, his reality of love and joy, seemed a sacrifice beyond his strength; and yet he felt it must be,—as we feel that we shall die,—that night shall follow day. It was still more impossible that Stephen Aylmer should be a per-jured and dishonoured man,—a murderer, as his aunt had said,—the un pitying assassin of the gentle and true-hearted being he had called and chosen from out of all the world, to come and nestle by his side for ever, safe from life's great peril in his sheltering love. This could not be. This alone was dear in the chaos of his mind,—he must keep the solemn oath he once had taken, with her hand in his, that she should be his wedded wife.

He went out into the cold grey morning: the carriage stood already at the door, to convey him to the distant station,—it was fully time, there must be no delay,—yet Juliet,—Juliet,—was he never to see her again? It seemed most utterly impossible to go without looking on her face once more,—surely she did not mean to deprive him of his lawful right, a last farewell. Alas! perhaps, like himself, she felt she could not endure it.

Still he wandered into every room where he thought she might be, but found that he only shivered at the desolation which her absence caused, in scenes where they had been together in joy unutterable,—and past! He returned to the hall-door,—his servant said they should certainly be too late, unless they started at once,—but, Juliet, Juliet,—to go without seeing her,—he believed he should never see her again,—he did not think she would return before his marriage,—he thought rather she was going to escape a trial too bitter for her strength,—so that when he left those walls which now contained her, all would be at end between them,—it would be as though they never had met. He felt rooted to the threshold of that house,—a mad device passed through his brain, to send away the carriage and remain. He knew it would be utter folly,—that it would cause the discovery of all his faithlessness,—that Millicent would learn the truth,—but still,—still,—as soon could he let the grave close over the form most beloved on earth, without one last look on the cherished features, as he could have consented to abandon Juliet without telling her, once for all, that, in sacrificing her to honour and justice, he sacrificed all that life held dear. Suddenly he recollected that she was going to Richmond,—then he would see her there. It was decided,—he would have not done so,—thus much of strength he would have had, that he would not have ventured into her presence again, had she given him the opportunity, by taking his leave of her for life itself at Rookcliffe; but it was beyond what human nature was capable of, as he conceived, that he should have gone on through existence without receiving, like a dying man, the last words of consolation from the friend, who had been the star of the life of joy, now passing from him.

His resolution once taken, he delayed no longer; he flung himself into a corner of the carriage, and they drove off at full speed.

They were about a mile from Rookcliffe, when suddenly a sight met his eye, which caused his heart to bound madly: it was a groom in the Egerton livery, pacing slowly along on horseback, evidently in attendance on some one in advance.

Aylmer almost threw himself from the carriage, that he might distinguish whom he was following. He was right,—the instinct of his true affection had not deceived him. That light, elegant figure, that waving mass of golden hair falling on the dark garment, was not to be mistaken. She seemed to let her horse wander at will with lingering steps,—she scarce held the bridle,—it hung relaxed from the fair hands clasped on her knee,—her head

drooped on her breast,—her whole attitude was expressive of a profound dejection, which was touching and **graceful** to the last degree. In another instant Aylmer had flung himself from the carriage, and told them to drive on to a certain point, where he would overtake them; they passed on, and he was at her side, his arm upon her horse's neck, alone with her for the last time. They walked slowly on; she had not moved, still the head bent down, and the flowing hair veiling her countenance completely from his sight. No one had ever seen Juliet Egerton weep, nor did he now, yet he believed that golden veil hid a face convulsed with anguish. She was the first to speak, but how choked the voice, how incoherent the words that usually rung out so clear and musical.

"You may have thought it strange and bold, that I should choose to meet you thus alone, but I had to tell—it is the last time—never more." She seemed unable to proceed.

"Juliet!" he gasped out. Her sorrow maddened him,—she struggled for composure, and spoke more calmly:—

"I have come here to fulfill my promise, that one day I would tell you all,—all of the sympathy that bound me to you, long before your eyes had looked upon my face. I could not,—I dared not,—until your fate was in all things too utterly decided to be influenced by words of mine; but now I may make a revelation, as men do on their death-beds, for this is the dying day of our friendship, Stephen Aylmer." He could not answer her, but his hand grasped the bridle-rein convulsively.

"Shall I speak then?" she said in her soft thrilling tone; "shall I try to forget the present, the bitter unendurable present, and go back over the ages I have lived since then, to the bright time of hope when I believed you were a heaven-sent friend?"

"Yes, speak,—speak,—were it but that I may hear your voice, so long as its sweet harmony is permitted music to me; speak, that I may know all I might have possessed, all I might have been!"

Juliet lifted up her head, and looked on the landscape round her; she seemed to throw off all consciousness of present events and cast herself back into the past without reserve; she spoke as one over whom glad recollections were passing, like the fair visions of a dream.

"Bright Italy!" she said, "bright, sunny, gladsome Italy! as different from the dreary winter scene around as the happy days through which we have been passing from those which are to come, Stephen! When I first went there, I passed through its scenes of beauty and gay amusement as light and free of heart as any on this earth. Aylmer, I was what you were many years of your life, I had never seen one in this world whom my soul could call—friend. Many there were who professed to love me,—many to whom, in truth, I was too dear,—for I must speak the truth now: this is no time for false humility, I must tell you all that really was. I must explain the nature of my existence then, that you may understand the change you wrought in it."

"You tell me but what I heard of you everywhere," said Aylmer: "I know you were the worshipped of many hearts."

"And I was to all indifferent and unloving. I smiled and scoffed most carelessly at all. I ever felt that till I encountered one whose spirit could meet with my spirit in a communion of thought, of feeling, and of sympathy, I must be alone,—and so I was most lonely, with a very world at my feet. One day, I went to an exhibition of pictures, most of them were by old masters, some few by modern artists. I paused before a splendid painting, which I believed, from its vigour, its rich colouring, its deep meaning and sublimity, to be the work of one who lived in ancient and more noble times: there was a soul breathing through that picture to which my own flew straight, as waters long pent up gush forth to mingle with their kindred billows on the sea. I felt that he who gave a shape, a form to the noble idea there embodied, could have understood and sympathized with the tide of passionate feeling which was for ever surging up in my own breast,—and when I remembered, as I believed, that he must long since have mouldered in the dust, my heart died within me, and I said, 'Let me go to dust then likewise, for he in whom my soul could have found rest has passed from earth before I stepped upon it, and a twin spirit like to mine, as his was, shall surely not be found again.' Aylmer, you will think me mad to have spoken thus of one whom I knew only through the dim faint medium of that glorious painting; but I tell you truth—for I have ever held that doctrine, ancient, I believe, as is the earth itself, and universal among many nations, that for every soul which comes into this world, another is found to be its companion and twin sister as it were, and except they meet while dwelling here, the same weary vacancy possesses both for ever. I say this old faith I believe, and I felt that the spirit which had conceived that picture was moulded in the same fire as mine, and that none could ever have been to it, what I would be!"

"I also believe the same; and I too hold that faith," said Aylmer.

Juliet continued: "The Marchesa L——, with whom I was then living, was at my side, and as I gazed upon the picture, I stretched out my arm to it, and I said—'Would that I could step back over the ages that have passed away since the hand that traced those lines has mouldered into ashes! Then would I take it in my own and sit down at his feet, and give to him my heart and soul. Then the Marchesa laughed out and said (I remember every syllable), 'You need not go so far, *Giulietta bella*, for if you will walk with me now across the Piazza, you may take that artist's hand and sit down at his feet, and give to him your heart and soul. He is a living and a breathing man.' When I heard that, Aylmer, I thought no more of myself, but only of the glory of the living artist; and I said, 'He should be crowned.' Instantly all those around me echoed back my words, 'He should be crowned—he should be crowned as poets and painters ever were, and borne triumphant to the Capitol.' No sooner was the thought thus brought to life, than the deed was done."

"What! it was to you, then, I owed that day of triumph," exclaimed Aylmer. Her bright smile flashed upon him in answer.

"You remember," she continued, "how a party of the noblest cavaliers, accompanied by ladies masked, came to your studio and carried you forth to receive the public homage due to your great talent; and how one more than all others, closely veiled, presented to you the laurel wreath which the old Italian custom awards as the mark of highest honour; and how it was by her lips and in her words that you were thanked for having made so gorgeous an offering to the *belli arti*."

"And it was your voice I then heard?" exclaimed Aylmer; "it was your words that sounded to me, then, the sweetest I had ever listened to! I understand it all."

"Not all, as yet—would it were all, in truth. Do you remember, after that, how the Marchesa L—— came to your studio day after day to have her portrait taken, and how there was ever with her one closely veiled, who spoke with you in your own English tongue, to her unknowns. so that we held sweet converse, most intimate and close together, which none impeded, month by month?"

"Juliet!" exclaimed Aylmer, starting, as though stung by a serpent; "you do not mean that you were that mysterious friend whose face I never saw—but who so linked my soul to hers, that had I not believed her, as I was told she was, the wife of another man, I never would have left Rome, I verily believe, without her?"

"And who told you she was another man's wife? Ugo Bartoli, who, for my sake, now inhabits a madhouse on the banks of the Arno; for he loved me, and, like all the others, loved in vain. I learned he had told you this, when you suddenly left Rome, without even a farewell. But I took no measures to undeceive you then, for I knew that we should meet again in England—I knew we should meet, because I willed it."

"And we did meet—but how?" exclaimed Aylmer. Suddenly he turned round, with a look almost of fierceness upon her, "Juliet! why did you do this thing—why did you dare thus to sport with the destiny of both of us? Look what havoc you have made of it! Why did you conceal yourself from me? why did you come thus closely veiled, and never tell your name? Think—think, had you done otherwise—had I known you as I do now, of all that might have been! Oh! it is madness to dwell upon it."

"Forgive—forgive me!" said Juliet, imploringly, with that tone which the French so admirably renders, "*Des larmes dans la voix*;" "it was for a sweet dream's sake I did it, and I do see all the error now; but, then, it was my darling vision. Listen—I heard of you, that you adored the Beautiful, in whatsoever shape it appeared before you; and I knew my face was fair, I knew that nature had so willed to clothe my soul in a garment pleasing to the eye, that if you saw me it would be my outward appearance which would draw you to me—but, Aylmer, it was your mind and spirit, as recorded in your paintings, which had bowed my whole being to your influence, and that which I felt for you, as one noble in intellect, great in mental power and energy, filled me with a passionate longing that you should, if ever you loved me (I may use the word now, Aylmer, it can be but an empty sound between us), that you should love my mind, my soul, my inner self, and not the visible form only. For this cause I never let you look upon my countenance, but day by day I sent my soul forth, as it were, to commune with you; and, Aylmer,—Stephen Aylmer, I sought not for your friendship even thus in vain—surely, we were friends!"

"Friends!" echoed Aylmer. "Alas how much more—now, at least!"

"And then you left me; but, as I said, I knew that we should meet; and when I heard from those at home that you had made your abode so close to Rookcliffe, to my father's house, Aylmer, I was weak and wild enough to think that so our destiny had been arranged. I thought that I should come, who had made my way into your soul, with but the whispering of my voice, to claim an entrance there in all the power of that fair aspect which I

believed was mercifully given me for your sake, and I came—I came—" There began to be the greatest wildness in Juliet's look and gesture now.

"I did come, and I saw you once again: I saw you my **cousin's husband!**" Her voice changed almost to a shriek.

"Oh, what have I to do speaking thus to you! What am I doing here,—what am I saying! Let me go—let me go!"

She struck her horse violently as she spoke, and the startled animal attempted to bound forward, but Aylmer threw himself upon the bridle and arrested his progress.

"Juliet, hear me,—hear me!" he exclaimed.

Her only answer was—"Let me go,—let me go!"

There was the utmost wildness in her eyes, and something almost of frenzy in her tone and manner. With her weak hand she struggled to make him quit his hold on her bridle—rein. Again she struck the fiery horse, and the animal, furious at the restraint which prevented him from springing forth, reared and plunged so violently that at the risk of Juliet's life and his own, could Aylmer have alone restrained his grasp. He exclaimed only in a tone almost of defiance—

"Juliet, we shall meet at Richmond!"

His hold relaxed; with one tremendous bound the horse darted off at the most fearful speed. He saw but for an instant the flash of her golden hair borne back by the wind; he heard but the rustle of her garments, as though one driven by the tempest went past, and in an instant horse and rider had vanished from his sight, like a beautiful dream which in waking hours we cannot recall.

But they met again at Richmond.

CHAPTER III.

THE period which elapsed between Aylmer's departure, and that appointed for his marriage, was well-nigh the happiest of Millicent's life. She was so calm and fearless now, living on one bright hope. Aylmer's words had allayed every doubt, chased away every shadow; in her beautiful trust she received from them the full assurance they were meant to convey, and the storm of terror and anxiety through which she had passed served but to deepen, if aught could deepen, the intensity of her affection for him. All that her soul desired was centered in the assurance of his. For she still believed that the spirit's rest on earth is in the love of one beloved, and nothing doubting that this joy was hers, the measure of her contentment was complete.

It was for this very reason that Mrs. Hartley now trembled for her. Even whilst her prospect of happiness seemed most assured, this wise friend felt convinced that some heaven-sent blow would come to hurl her from her false unhallowed rest. She judged not so from any outward circumstance, but because she had deeply studied that Mystery of Love, the chastening of man, which is appointed to draw him out of the snare which his own deceived heart sets for him in this world. She had learnt that when human souls are so allured by the green and smiling earth as to lie down there amongst its flowers, instead of seeking to struggle up the steep and narrow path that leads to our own home, then straightway is misery sent to drag them through fire and water—the fire of tribulation and the deep waters of sorrow—on to the Paradise above.

She saw that Millicent was resting now so utterly in this world's good,—its highest good truly, but still an earthly treasure only, that she felt sure by some violent wrestling would the cords be broken, which charmed her spirit back from the pure sphere for which it was created.

Millicent was much at Milton Lodge. She dearly loved Mrs. Hartley, and it was music to her ear when Colonel Bentley called her his niece, or talked of all she was to do for him when he had a right to her services. Yet, notwithstanding their constant intercourse, Mrs. Hartley never made the slightest attempt to lead her from her delusive rest in this world, to the Sure Repose. She felt certain that a deeper and more bitter teaching was awaiting her.

To Arthur Egerton also, this period was one of wild delight;—he was with Millicent constantly, and his heart was full of hope: whatever she might believe or think, he knew by the tempest of his own soul, that the power which was now at work in the breast of Stephen Aylmer would, assuredly, sooner or later; fling her out from thence, as the rock repels the bounding wave that strikes against it.

A man must have known the influence of stirring passions before he can rightly picture their effect in others.

There are certain matter-of-fact persons; such as Mr. Egerton, who, being incapable of feeling strongly themselves, are very apt to reason, with individuals struggling and suffering as Aylmer was now, much as though they stood looking on at a man roasting in a fire, and assured him that he was by no means too hot. But Arthur was able to form a perfectly just estimate of Aylmer's position; and he judged rightly that in the whirlwind of feeling in which his soul was now so fiercely contending, Millicent Grey would be engulfed and lost.

Arthur had discerned with equal acuteness the real state of Juliet's feelings with regard to Aylmer. But he trusted that vanity and self-interest would make her eager to win him as though she loved him; for she did **not** love her cousin's future husband,—she felt for him, perhaps, as much affection as her most selfish nature was capable of, but it was not enough to weigh one second in the balance, if her own ease and comfort were staked against it. Her whole conduct, from the first bright smile which she bestowed on Aylmer in imitation of his pictured ideal, till that moment when in an apparent frenzy of mingled shame and despair, she had bounded from his side, had been one splendid piece of acting. The motive and secret of her heartless design was simply this:—in Italy her vanity had been piqued by hearing of Aylmer as one whom no fascination had yet won from a lofty independence, which submitted not to any supremacy of affection. Moved by the inordinate vanity and love of admiration which was her ruling passion, she determined that she would accomplish this conquest which seemed so unattainable, and not only subdue him to herself, but she declared, in a moment of triumph, to the Marchesa L—— that she would gain him by the powers of her mind alone!

She had heard of the power which mere beauty could exercise over him, and with the perverseness and personal ambition of a true woman, she was resolved that without this advantage she would charm him, and break down the strongholds of his indifference. In the course of her intercourse with him, which she has herself

described, she could not but feel a certain admiration for his talents, and a degree of interest in himself which supplied the place of the genuine affection her utter egotism rendered her incapable of feeling. Further, when she discovered that Aylmer was heir to a large fortune, and devotedly fond of Italian life, it struck her that he was the very man to suit her as a husband. She was particularly anxious to be married, in order to attain that perfect indifference to all trammels which she was quite determined, whoever the individual might be, he should allow her,—and she was also bent upon being established in Italy, where the admiration she excited was quite equal to her wishes, and the whole style of life precisely to her taste.

She at once therefore decided that she would marry him; and when, on arriving at Rookcliffe, she found that he was the promised husband of her cousin,—this only gave to her design, and the subtle mode in which it was to be worked out, the additional zest which the pleasure of triumphing over a rival is known to produce in such minds as hers.

In truth, there was nothing Juliet so much delighted in as a difficult enterprise of this kind, where she had to exercise her intriguing powers, and that capacity for acting a part which would have made her an admirable diplomatist, had she been a man. As has been seen, she had never for a moment relaxed in her task, and now her design was fast ripening to the ultimate triumph.

And this was the being for whom Stephen Aylmer was wildly longing to sacrifice the deep mine of true and noble love which Millicent Grey had offered him! It is often so seen in the world.

Millicent's wedding day was also to be that of her coming of age, and it was within a fortnight of the period when Juliet returned to Rookcliffe. Aylmer himself was to follow in two days, and Arthur felt that the hour was now come when he must rouse every faculty, and exert every energy to further that consummation, which the secret working of (the so called) destiny had so long been preparing. If the course of events did not produce, as he firmly believed it would, the separation of Millicent and Aylmer, he was sternly resolved to accomplish it by other means. What plan he was to adopt could only be decided according to the circumstances; but this at least was certain, that the struggle must soon be over,—now was the crisis,—the crisis of many lives.

Juliet returned from Richmond, looking sad and depressed, for it was quite necessary that Aylmer should hear it remarked that she seemed unhappy when she herself arrived. She never mentioned him, however, and Millicent, in her great guilelessness, did not for a moment suspect that they had met. Arthur knew it, however, by the instinct which enabled him to see, in all Aylmer's actions, the reflection of his own feelings.

On the day when Stephen was expected, Juliet received, as usual, various letters, handed to her by her father across the breakfast table. Arthur's keen eyes detected one in Aylmer's handwriting,—he admired the coolness with which his sister slipped it unread into her pocket; and when, later, he saw her again, after she had spent an hour alone, he scrutinized her expression eagerly, that he might gather from it some clue to the contents of the letter.

He saw that those gleaming eyes were full of triumph, and yet there was a restlessness and anxiety in her whole appearance, which seemed to indicate a painful suspense;—there was, too, a deepening bitterness in the look of deadly hate which she was for ever casting askance on Millicent, which considerably alarmed him. Still, he felt within himself a strength to hew down all obstacles, should even fate oppose instead of assisting him, and he knew that Juliet resembled him in this and many other qualities: he felt certain she was equally determined with himself, and that the grasp of these slender white fingers on her victim was firm as the iron grasp of a tiger.

Aylmer was to arrive rather late in the evening, so that the whole party were assembled in the drawing-room to receive him.

The Egerton family were certainly rather remarkable than otherwise for their obtuseness, but they must have been dense indeed, if each and all had not felt that there would be fierce work in the destinies of those gathered round the hearth that day, and that the hour now fast approaching, was one which would cast its shadow through many lives.

When the sound of the carriage-wheels announced that he, so deeply loved, so madly hated, was at hand, not the coldest heart among them could avoid a throb of agitation. Arthur's hand closed upon the arm of the chair on which he sat, with a grasp of terrible power, whilst with a violent effort he strove to appear calm. Juliet clasped her hands on the cushion of the sofa, where she had thrown herself, and laid down her head upon them, so that her countenance was completely concealed, and Millicent,—Millicent neither spoke nor moved, but suddenly, she knew not how or why, her whole soul seemed paralyzed with the most agonizing terror,—she could not tell what

caused it. Five minutes before, she had been serene and hopeful as any on this earth may be, and now it was as though despair had come and stood bodily before her, and said, "Thou shalt be mine!" Juliet's look and manner before she thus hid her face,—the expression on every countenance to which her startled eyes turned for comfort, all seemed to her as though they knew of something dreadful about to come upon her, of which she alone was ignorant. Meanwhile a slow heavy step was heard without; the servant had opened the door,—he stood holding it to admit Stephen Aylmer, but he kept meanwhile looking back with surprise into the passage, for the guest lingered long on the threshold: at length he could do so no more,—he passed into the room,—the door closed, and he stood amongst them silent and motionless. They all felt as though one from the dead had appeared before them, so appalling, so strange was his aspect; ghastly pale,—rigid,—speechless he remained, as if utterly unconscious of where he was, or what he was doing,—no greeting passed his lips,—one thought and feeling only appeared to absorb him. His eyes had fastened upon the drooping figure that lay there on the sofa, the waving hair trailing to the ground, and the convulsive movements telling how the heart within was heaving up the aching breast.

Mr. and Mrs. Egerton came forward, and welcomed him; he gave his hand mechanically,—his lips moved, but he spoke not, nor had he power seemingly to avert one moment the strained agonizing look. Some one placed a chair for him,—he sat down,—his hands fell powerless by his side, and all the life within him seemed gathered into that gaze, fixed as though the object on which he looked had turned him to stone. It was a most painful scene, well nigh insupportable even to the parties least concerned.

It roused the father of the family himself to action,—he made an effort to speak.—"Come, Millicent, you are very slow to welcome our friend on his arrival; do you not see he is tired, come and speak to him."

She rose trembling, and advanced with hesitating steps,—her movement did at last cause him to withdraw that fascinated look from Juliet,—the expression in his eyes changed as light changes into darkness, from the passionate adoration with which they had settled on the graceful reclining figure, to one of absolute ungovernable hate, and thus they glared on her,—on her, his promised wife. When she moved towards him, he shrank within himself, as men shrink with a miserable repugnance from the viper creeping to their feet, and the horrible look stopped her short. Gasping,—appalled,—breathless, it fixed her to that place,—it held her there bound and chained, as it were, to inconceivable torture, like a victim to the rack, then slowly the eyes turned away from her, the sunbeam of love passed into them again, and they became riveted once more with their intense and mournful tenderness upon the form so unutterably beloved.

When their spell was taken from Millicent, she was seized with strong shivering from head to foot. Charles saw that she would have fallen, and, starting up, he placed her in his own seat; then the painful, fearful silence fell upon them all again, and there was a few minutes' pause, During that brief interval interminable ages of misery rolled over the soul of the unhappy Millicent. It was enough—enough,—that horrible look had spoken to her with the most fearful eloquence; it had recorded all—all, from the very beginning—it had told her every detail of the deep love that had risen in the heart of Aylmer for Juliet—it had described to her how this love had grown and strengthened even to madness, so that it had transformed the very soul of the man, and constrained him to hate, even with a deadly hate, the being albeit innocent, who stood between him and the object of his worship. No book written within and without in fairest characters could have told her all this better than his look; and so in the stillness that reigned among those persons, all smitten with silence by the presence of terrible passions, there went forth the sound of one faint gasp—one low sob from the very heart—the knell of a life's happiness. Then Millicent rose, and stumbling forward like one walking in utter darkness, fled from that room. Along the passages, out beyond the hall—door, she rushed, flying madly from the misery that was dogging her heels, clinging to her hand, mounting up to take its firm seat in her heart.

Out into the dark night, she knew not where,—she fell at the foot of an old oak tree; down,—down on her knees, crouching, her face in her hands,—moaning as the wind moans at night, deep sobs at intervals rising from the breaking heart,—the whole frame shaking as the storm drove through her soul like a reed in the tempest.

"Was it come to this! was it come to this!" she cried out at times; "Why was she brought into a world where there seemed no place for her,—surely it were better for them had she never been born;" then down fell the desolate head to the earth, and rested on the cold damp ground. But a hand was laid on her shoulder,—a strong arm lifted her up,—a voice sounded, trembling with violent emotion, on her ear.

"Millicent, I have long foreseen this hour,—I knew it would come,—it has been preparing these many months,—it is the crisis of your destiny; but you must be strong, you must arise and act; it will not avail you to lie

mourning here."

She looked up to him through her long disheveled hair with the most beseeching childlike gaze.

"Arthur, I am so bewildered,—I am so lost,—I can scarcely tell what has happened;—no one spoke to me, and yet my very soul seemed shattered suddenly. No one cursed me, but I came here weeping as though they had,—tell me what it all means; am I dreaming?"

"No, there is no dream, but stern, cruel reality. I will tell you all, Millicent, I will befriend you in this hour, and he alone can be a friend who tells you truth to-night;—take courage then and hear it." His voice now swelled out with exultation. "It is that Stephen Aylmer loves my sister Juliet as never man, save one, has loved before."

She shrieked out piteously at these words, and writhed as though he had driven a knife into her breast.

"Yet more,—it is—that he now hates you for her sake."

Again the scream, the anguish as of a new made wound.

"Millicent, you will not endure this—you will rise and act; you will not let him trample on you?"

"No, never, never!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet with flashing eyes; "but is it certain—where is the proof of this?—he never told it me—he did love me once."

All her long tenderness for him came gushing round her heart, so that she could not endure to admit the truth. She was like a drowning man, clinging to some last frail shred of the breaking rope, who well knows the whelming waters are about most surely to sweep him away for ever.

"Do you wish a proof?" said Arthur; "you shall have it. I will bring you a proof that would shake the maddest unbelief—a proof in Stephen Aylmer's own handwriting: do you require this?—then you shall see it." He thought of the letter Juliet had that day received.

"Yes, yes!" said Millicent, wildly; "bring me this, and when I have seen it, then for ever will I rid him of my presence: never more shall he look on me with hate. He shall be happy, though my life's misery should make him so. Go, bring it me—here will I wait."

She knelt down again, and laid her head on the root of the tree.

"Not here, Millicent, the night is so dark and cold: it will chill you."

"Here! I will not—I cannot stir, till I have seen it. Arthur, do not trifle with me; remember, there is a life at stake. What darkness is like to the darkness of my soul? What chill like to that which lies at my heart? Go."

He saw she was resolute, and went; he did not for a moment doubt that Juliet would readily entrust him with the letter, when she knew for what purpose it was intended, nor was he less certain that it would be of a nature to accomplish most fully the desired effect upon Millicent, even were it but a despairing farewell. The revelation of Aylmer's hopeless love for Juliet would be enough to raise at once the woman's pride within her in all its indomitable strength.

He found that both Juliet and Aylmer had left the drawing-room; but when he asked for his sister, Anne told him she was in her room alone. He went thither, and knocked at the door; Juliet called to him to come in, and he entered, closing the door behind him. He had never seen her look more lovely, than as she sat there, dressed in flowing white garments, leaning her fair head against the high-backed chair of crimson velvet; her brilliant eyes were full of thought; her small white hands wandering restlessly among the long hair that was twining round them. Arthur paused for a moment to look on, and to rejoice, with a fierce exultation, in her glorious beauty. Therein was his hope: this it was that had worked for him so well. Then he advanced to her, and stood before her, fixing his freezing gaze on her face. Juliet and Arthur had never directly communicated together on the one subject of all-absorbing interest to them both; yet from the very commencement they had felt that they mutually understood one another, and that the wishes of both were to be accomplished by the same end. There is a sort of freemasonry between persons who are both alike delivered up to the influence of evil passions; and Arthur was not more perfectly aware of Juliet's motives and designs upon Aylmer, than she was of the nature and extent of his love for their cousin.

They had throughout felt sure of one another's assistance in any emergency, because both were conscious of their entire community of interests; and they knew likewise that there was much similarity of character between them in the determined resolution which they had to carry on their own designs, in spite of overwhelming obstacles.

Thus when Arthur came to claim his sister's aid at a moment so critical to both of them, he spoke, and she listened more as if it were the continuation of a direct and open intercourse, than the first breaking in upon the

meaning silence they had hitherto maintained.

It was not a time for delay. Arthur spoke hurriedly; and he saw, by Juliet's kindling eye, that her thoughts flew faster than his words.

"Juliet, the moment for action is come; all is at stake this night: if we are prompt and vigorous, the game is ours. Millicent requires but to be convinced, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that Aylmer so loves you, as well nigh to hate her for your sake, and she abandons him for ever. Yet more, she will, I am convinced, promote your marriage by every means in her power."

A smile of triumph flashed over the beautiful face.

"But she must have a proof—a certain proof that so it is."

"Poor fool!" said Juliet, with bitter contempt; "did she not see enough this night? Is she not convinced, when his own conduct showed him almost bereft of reason for very anguish?"

"Her heart is convinced, but she had ever given a faith strong as that of a trusting child to his own assurance, and her cry of imploring despair is ringing yet in my ears when she repeated that he had said no word to her, and for this reason she must have some proof that indeed his love was for ever gone from her. Juliet, such a proof you have! You received a letter from him to-day. Is it of a nature to convince her, beyond the questioning of hope's last lingering effort, that he has deserted her in soul most truly and most utterly?"

Juliet's only answer was to laugh out exultingly.

"Trust me with it, then, for this one night, and the deed is done. He is yours."

She looked at him steadily for a few minutes; then rose, took the letter from her desk, and placed it in his hands.

"I trust you with it," she said, "because it is for your own life you are working." These words contained the ruling principle of Juliet Egerton's existence; she believed in nothing but that great god, self, which is so worshipped in this world of ours. It was the deity of her own soul, governing her every action, and her faith was, that he reigned in like manner, singly and alone, in the spirits of all flesh. This belief guided her whole conduct to her fellow creatures.

But Arthur had his treasure, and it mattered little to him for what reason she gave it. He fled down the stairs—he passed out into the dark night again. Far off beneath the old tree he could see the faint glimmering of the white garments of her who lay there waiting his coming as men wait their executioner. He held in his hand the death-warrant of her whole life's happiness; and had he no remorse, self-elected murderer as he was, had he no thought but for his own selfish love? his own soul's satisfaction? had he no horror of the crime he was about to commit? by the will of heaven, the one solitary and adored hope had been killed within her heart, then for her needful chastening, doubtless, was it done; but who appointed him to be its slayer? Oh! at the last hour many that have walked through the world with smiling faces and stainless hands, shall come out convicted as murderers of deepest dye!—each one—each one who has ever destroyed the happiness of another!—and are the sea sands more innumerable?

Had the dark earthly passion that twined, even as a clinging serpent, round his soul, so enveloped that immortal being in its deadly coils, that he could be no longer sensible of those holier influences that fail not, in every time of strong temptation, to come as a merciful waning in some one shape or other?

Hark! even now that voice from heaven speaks, which, though varied its tone, disguised its sweetness often, yet never is silent in those tremendous hours, when angel and demon struggle for the deathless human spirit.

Arthur stood one moment only on the threshold of his home, that he might still the strong beating of his heart, ere he fled onwards to use on the writhing soul of her loved the instrument of torture he would have purchased with his life's blood; and in that moment, borne towards him by the obedient wind, floating—floating to his charmed ear, there came the ringing music of the sweet church chimes, that, night by night thus told the expectant world that Christmas-tide drew near.

Sweet and clear, chiming gladly, softly, through the thrilling air, they came like faint and far-off echoes of the harmony celestial that was heard in that Glorious Night of Wonder, when angel voices, loud exulting, filled the high arch of heaven with melody, unheard before or since.

Those sounds—those sounds sweeping from heaven on his heart, they bore him back long years to his infant days of deep belief, when in the child's pure mind the Light Divine reigned bright and glorious, shedding a lustre over earth and heaven, and making glad the tomb which he was taught to know was Eden's gate.

All, all was darkness now—earthly ambition, evil passions, love idolatrous, like foul mists, had arisen to spread in blackness through his spirit, and chase away the beams from the eternal sun; but still the memory of his early faith and innocence,—that, with the whispering music came,—reflected, as it were, a shadowy gleam upon his present crime, till he was staggered at the sight of it.

He passed his shaking hand across his forehead,—one moment he must pause, before he went to consummate that fellow-creature's destiny, to seal it with the seal of deep despair.

He stayed the feet that swiftly would have flown towards her, and turned another way; he plunged down into the thick plantation, where the wind was only sporting wildly with the dead leaves and the withered flowers, and the angel and the demon went by his side, as he ran on frantically through the deep mazes of the wood; and it was as though both spoke to him with urgent warning and entreaty, the angel, in accents sweeter than ever to our ears the voice we love the best on earth, beseeching him to abandon his cruel and murderous project, and rather, with a noble self-sacrifice, such as wakes rejoicing in the realms which were his own bright home, endearour even yet to rescue her from the gulf of misery into which she was falling—falling fast. If by the will of heaven who was appointed to suffer all the mortal anguish he was preparing for her now, then assuredly no power could save; but let not the deed be his—let not her chastening be his crime: let him rather, tearing from his own breast the cherished hope, go back to Stephen Aylmer, and tell him what she was, for whom he deserted thus his chosen bride, and what the depth of agony that curdled in the true heart he was breaking. It might not be too late—Arthur might save her yet, or, if not, at least it were a righteous effort. This was the angel's pleading; but the demon's subtle whispering kept breathing venom through his heart, telling him to beware of such a course, for haply he might succeed, and then would she escape him, when even in his grasp. Then would he see her happy by his rival's side—then would he see her go forth into life the joyous wife, casting back not a look on him, desolate on earth, with but the one most gnawing deep regret for this night's mad forbearance. Yes, if even when cast out from Aylmer's heart, she yet should never turn to him, so were it better to see her pining solitary in the world, than know her happy in her husband's love, forgetting him for ever.

Distracted by these contending thoughts, he stood—hearing on the one side the ringing chimes so sweet and solemn, and on the other the shrieking of the mournful blast, whose withering melancholy fills us with such a horror of suffering. Irresolute he stood; the courage failed him to accept the sublime and noble office offered to him now, and to pass from the stormy world of human passions and human hopes and fears, into the serene and breathless region, pure and still, and cold as a land deep buried beneath unstained snow, where the martyred in soul may dwell on earth. He had not strength for this: too wily were the demon's dark suggestions, and yet his very soul was stirred within him by the sweet pleading of the voice celestial. Not long, however, will the holy powers thus struggle with the spirit that resists them. A certain space is allotted to the messengers divine, and if the pure impulse be not followed up in hours like these, when good and evil demand a choice between them, as the time of grace expires the angel-wings are spread, and upward soar again, whilst back the feeble loitering soul must fall into the fiendish grasp.

It was so with Arthur Egerton to-night. Too long he lingered, doubting, shrinking alike from the cross and from the crime, so the moment of mercy came in vain.

Suddenly the sweet chimes died upon the still soft air; they had spoken their mission to the world, and were hushed again, and with them, like a vision, passed the memory of childhood's holy faith, and the purity of childhood's radiant hope in paradise. Only the man's deep love was raging through his heart—the man's fierce jealousy and earth-bound wishes; no sound came to him now, save the howling blast that ever seems like the great voice of the world lamenting for its universal woe, and borne with it he fancied he could hear the cry of Millicent, beseeching him to hasten to her.

Oh! wherefore was he lingering here, letting slip the hour when it was given him to accomplish that for which he had been so madly longing these many months? He had no thought for heaven, nor hope within it, and earth had but one good, and that was in his hands to-night, if like a madman he flung it not away.

Back, back through the tangled wood he flew, no longer undecided, resolute in will, and the demon hurried with him; but the angel spread his snow-white wings, and soaring up through the soft dark air, took his course heavenward. Again would he visit, perhaps, the wayward soul; but fainter—fainter ever would his voice be, while bolder and more daring should the demon-whisper sound.

Millicent lay where he left her; it might be she had really called him, for her suspense was intolerable. She

started up as he came near; she flung back the dripping hair, soaked with the night-dew, from her pale sad countenance—she fixed on him eyes that were strangely bright and clear; that strength and energy were within her now which ever come to us at the crisis of our fate, however feeble we may feel in its anticipation.

"Have you brought it?" she said: her voice was strained and unnatural, but perfectly calm.

"I have it—it is here, in this letter."

"Give it me."

"You cannot read it thus in the darkness."

"There is a light—let us go to it;" she pointed to the lamp which hung in the porch at Rookcliffe. He walked towards it, and she followed; he heard her light footsteps, her quick half-suffocated breathing—yes, she followed him—his heart swelled with a fierce exultation. Already was the charm at work—he was drawing her after him by the power of her despair.

They came and stood within the old stone porch; the light fell strongly around them. Without a word, Millicent took the letter from Arthur's hands, and, standing upright, proceeded to read it through. He had meant to have said so much to her before she read it—to have prepared her to find in his breast the love she had lost a hundred-fold more earnest and devoted; but he dared not speak to her. So rigid in her determined calm, she seemed to him no longer the same being now—the playful, humble, loving Millicent; rather was she like some dauntless warrior, standing forth in the front ranks of the battle to meet the cannon's wrath. She read it all—each word of deep unutterable tenderness from her promised husband to her cousin Juliet,—she read that whilst he still must cling to honour and his plighted word,—his longing—nay, his prayer would be, to die upon the very altar—steps, when once his promise was fulfilled to the bride no longer loved.

So she finished it, and flung it from her. Arthur saw that all the woman was in those eyes again, as she raised them with passionate imploring agony to heaven,—in those white quivering lips,—in those shaking hands pressed mournfully on the desolate breast, which no one ever more should shield from the chilling blasts of destiny. His own affection for her rose almost to madness at the sight,—now was his time, now would he comfort her with the intensity of his most undivided love.

"Millicent, Millicent!"—he bent himself before her in an agony of supplication,—"other love than his awaits you, deeper, deeper than the soul of man hath yet conceived till now."

His words were too wild, too incoherent for a record here, but he told her all, all he had felt and suffered for her sake,—he poured out his whole feeling heart before her, and then he waited her answer, as one sinking with the roar of many waters in his ears, awaits the voice responding to his cry for help.

She seemed to have heard him speak; at least when he ceased, she lowered the wild gaze from heaven, and looked upon him. With a startled fearful glance she looked, then letting both her cold hands fall upon his drooping head, she said, "I thank you,—I thank you,"—(each time with increasing vehemence)—"I thank you that you have saved me from being unto him a curse!"

With that she turned and fled. He saw her bound through the open door into the hall,—he heard her echoing steps along the passages in frantic haste, and she was gone. And was this all?—was it thus she had received the offering of his whole soul,—the full avowal of his unchanging, unreserved, unbounded love?—with but that wild and fearful blessing, that he had saved her from inflicting pain on that other, not more unworthy than beloved! For a moment his heart sickened within him,—then he saw and understood, that truly her soul was so absorbed by the one thought, the one despair, that no offer idea could have access there.

It mattered not, his time was coming. For ever broken were the links that bound her,—a shattered lonely tree, by lightning struck, she seemed. None would come near to tend and lift her up, save him alone. Surely his grasp was upon her! Who but death should make him quit his hold?

CHAPTER IV.

SHE was alone now. She bolted and barred her door,—she opened wide the window to admit the cold wind upon that fevered brain. There was luxury in this,—she was alone; no witness there,—visible to human eyes at least,—one hour's indulgence, or her heart would burst. She laid herself down upon the floor,—she buried her face in those convulsed hands.

She shook and shivered as the storm of grief raged over her.

Many a grave has been dug with tears such as those she shed that night! sobbing—sobbing, heart-broken, she lay prostrate. Often when the full sense of her misery came upon her the sob rose to a shriek; then died away into that low dreary moaning which has no words, but is the deep voice of the soul most eloquent in its unutterable suffering. So passed the first moments of this—her new existence—the life without hope.

Millicent! said we not well when at the vessel's side you stood and looked exultingly on the boundless sea that swift was bearing you to the threshold of the world you so pined to know—said we not well that could you have foreseen this hour, you would have prayed the whelming waves to take you in their terrible embrace, and hide you in their chilly depths less cruel and cold than human breast?

At length for very exhaustion the tempest within her was assuaged: it was a relief to exchange the first gnawing anguish for the settled stillness of despair. Now when the free indulgence of her grief had done its work, she would think what measures must be taken in this her life's emergency; so she rose up staggering, giddy with sorrow. Never more should her step go light and free on earth: she was aged with the centuries of wretchedness gone over her.

She plunged her head and hands in cooling water: she must have all her intellect and strength of reason now. Back must roll the tide of tortured feeling from her soul, whilst she stood forth with clear collected thoughts to resolve and act as beseemed the being he once had loved and chosen. A lifetime would be long enough to weep hereafter.

So she was very calm as she took her seat and resolutely looked her destiny in the face; it had a hideous aspect, but she quailed not now, for she was not alone in this matter,—**his** fate was like her own, involved. Most women have a martyr's heart within them, often no great convulsion in their life calls it forth, as now it was aroused in Millicent; and then it does but expend itself on a thousand little daily sacrifices and secret endurances for the friends they love, most often by them unnoticed even. But when, like hers, their soul has been appointed to the storm and whirlwind, then is it ready, with all its noble courage and its dauntless suffering.

She looked, then, into her destiny in its new form, and this was what she saw:—For herself, it was plain that all was darkness now,—above, around. She never yet had had eyes for the light of heaven, and that of earth was gone. The sunbeams of hope and love had fled, and the night had come. His love had made the world where she had dwelt, bright and glorious as some enchanted sphere, but suddenly the earth on which she stood had passed away, as it were, from beneath her feet,—a strong convulsion had rent the ground asunder, the firm ground where she had hoped to walk so happy by his side. It had parted in a yawning chasm, and she had fallen into the terrible abyss, thrown down into darkness and despair.

He had driven her out from his sheltering arms, lonely to shiver in a wilderness, now bleak and cold. It needed not many words to describe her fate, now she was desolate,—desolate.

But in this shattered life did any good remain? In this most thick darkness was there a ray at least of light reflected? Yes, existence had yet one good within its limit, and through the deep gloom one beam yet strayed,—far off from her, and powerless to warm her poor, chilled heart, as the fair star that shines, unconscious of our being, in the distant heavens; but still, because the last remaining treasure earth could have, she must devote herself unto it, as we are devoted to our life—hope, be it what it may. It was his happiness,—this sole capacity for enjoyment life still offered her,—to know him happy, any how, by any means, even in another's love.

That was the one, pale flower that only had not withered, when this night made such fierce havoc, in the blooming Eden of her past existence: all the sweet blossoms that were wont to spring around her feet had perished when her sun of hope went down; and this alone remained to be the object of her care, and deep solicitude,—the last light to live for in the darkness of that desert; so that her existence was now gathered up into this one thing,—the wish, and, as a necessary result, the active effort, for his happiness.

It was evident that much depended upon herself now—no other, in fact, could promote his union with Juliet Egerton. Therefore bending the strong powers of her soul to this one object, in that hour of calm and dear reflection she saw distinctly, as in a plan rolled out before her, how it was to be done, and his great prosperity, her complete adversity, accomplished.

She must do all—she must release him from his engagement, she must gain from him the promise that Juliet should be his wife; lest shame or remorse should deter him, she must obtain Colonel Bentley's difficult consent; and, further, she must, out of her own fortune, provide Juliet with such a portion, as should enable them to marry without waiting for Aylmer's inheritance, for she knew that Mr. Egerton had lived too magnificently in early life, to be able now to provide for his numerous family.

But further—and this was the fiercest effort in all that task of unutterable bitterness—she must perform the whole in such a manner as that he should believe it cost her nothing. Her life would become one long remorse, if, in this its crisis, she so weakly acted, as to let one shadow from her own despair, obscure the faintest ray of his long-interrupted sunshine. This were, in truth, to be most faithless to her mission rather, if possible, she must so accomplish it, as that he should believe she loved him no more.

So be it; she was ready. She had given, and entirely devoted, her life to his happiness; and if he chose that, not by the love and tenderness of this life, but by its utter sacrifice and misery, the work should be performed—she was content to serve him according to his own desire.

One thing only she deeply felt was needful for herself—the whole must be accomplished quickly—the strength that was within her would not long abide. She was resolute—she had nerved herself to the torture—she had set before her, his good, as the one thing to be effected, and with serene, untroubled aspect she **must** effect it, by the calm surrender of her soul to an anguish that hath no name in words. But the power to do this thing could be found surely for a brief space only! Quickly, quickly, she would do it all, never stopping to breathe—to gasp—working, working on, till he stood firm and secure, in full possession of his heart's desire; then, when it was done, she would go forth from this place of torture to some far distant spot, where she might lay down her head, and close her eyes, because life would be over—all, save the painful sensation of existence.

Millicent did not appear at breakfast next morning, but shortly after she sent a message requesting that Aylmer would meet her alone in the library.

The mind of this unhappy man was now in a state of utter chaos; his affection for Juliet, on which she had worked during their absence with a fearful power, was now perfectly ungovernable, and yet he clung to honour, so long his ruling principle, with a frantic tenacity. To desert Millicent, or to let her come as a barrier between himself and Juliet, seemed alike impossible—everywhere insupportable misery appeared to be before him. The scene of his arrival at Rookcliffe showed that his reason was well nigh sinking in the struggle.

He knew by the quick instinct of feeling that this message from Millicent Grey boded a crisis; for with his dark night-thoughts, since last he saw her, had come the consciousness that he had looked on her with hate, and that she had read that hatred in his eyes.

He sat in the library shaking in every limb, when the door opened, and closed again upon her, from whom he had won a life, with the promise of a love until death.

She came forward slowly, with that mournful dignity which invests most often the years of widowhood. She had prepared herself for this hour of unflinching endurance: with what torture, may none who read this page ever know! She had studied most deeply the part she had to play; she had composed her features, settled her aspect as we straighten the limbs of a corpse,—and truly her face now was very like, in its deep stillness, to the face of the dead. White it was, and rigid as theirs, fixed in the same indomitable calm; for even as they feel no more, so had she killed, within herself, the power of feeling, till this task should be accomplished. In her breast, however, the viper only slept: soon would it rise to sting her to the heart with redoubled vigour—but in theirs it should have no venom. She had laid her strong resolution, as it were, like a great stone on the fountain of her tears,—and there was not one now in those eyes,—although not more wildly, darkly mournful is the wintry heaven, than they were, with their deep sad gaze. She had smoothed the long hair on the tranquil dead—white forehead, and composed each fold of her fair garments, that in her outward appearance there should be no indication of the feverish restless agony within. Meekly were the pale hands folded on her breast,—so very calm, they seemed not truly to be laid upon a raging world of misery. And thus she came and stood before him, a strange contrast to himself indeed, for he trembled and was feeble, as though some mysterious power had smitten the strong man, and taken away his

strength.

They seemed to have reversed their parts, —the task she was performing should rather have been his to accomplish,—the weakness he was showing, none would have blamed in the timid woman.

But hers had been a noble love, and therefore she was ennobled;—his was a cowardly affection, a base usurper in his heart, and so he was a coward now. It is seldom that a man can read the depths of a woman's heart. Aylmer misjudged her now, as many like herself are misjudged.

He believed her to be as calm, as indifferent as her outward aspect denoted, only he wondered to see her look so pale.

She sat down opposite to him: he guessed not that she did so because her knees shook under her, so that she could not stand. Then the white lips parted, and she began to speak. Her plan was to conduct this matter as though she were herself the aggressor, in order by so doing to save him from the faintest shadow of remorse or regret on her account. She would further assure his immediate union with Juliet, by speaking as though she herself desired to see her cousin taken to be a substitute in her place, because she was conscious of her own defection, in abandoning her post as guardian of his happiness.

One who had learnt what poor Millicent Grey was never taught,—that all earthly feeling, though it were the most devoted and most pure, must give way, even in circumstances the most fearful, before the one unflinching principle of right, would have felt that not even the unparalleled generosity which prompted this course of proceeding, could justify the dissimulation with which it must be accomplished.

But her soul was blinded, because it had been unlawfully delivered up to the human adoration. There can be no pure worship except it be offered to the Alone Good. She knew that in utter singleness of desire her sole object now, was Aylmer's happiness, and she believed that through any means she must perform her vocation by securing it. She spoke,—the womanly pride which no suffering, no humiliation can ever eradicate, gave firmness to her voice.

"Aylmer, I have come here this day, in order to make to you one prayer,—one earnest request, which, although it involves the question of both our lives, I yet would say in as few words as possible, both for your own sake and mine. Stephen, we have both been mistaken,—you are as fully aware of it, I feel sure, as I am myself. There is no prospect of happiness for us in the union where we thought to find it. I have come to ask that you will give me back my promise,—that you will release me from my engagement."

Thus, while speaking no word that was not true in the actual matter of it, she conveyed the idea that, for her own sake, she would be free. He made no answer, for in truth he dared not speak, lest the wild rapture that rushed through his soul, as he heard the first signal of release, should burst forth into some outward expression of unseemly joy; but her quick glance caught the sudden light that flashed in his eyes, and it caused her heart to throb with such violence, that she was breathless from the intensity of pain. Soon, however, she went on: this interview must be short, or it would kill her.

"I know that in withdrawing from you my promise to be your life's companion, I am abandoning my post, and renouncing the charge I had taken upon me, of watching over your happiness day by day, and hour by hour; and, therefore, you will not think me over bold, if I speak to you now as a privileged friend,—if I confess to you, Stephen, that I shall know no peace till another more fitted, more worthy of your love" (her voice faltered in spite of her— self,) "till one who may be to you far more than I could ever be, has taken my place, and received your existence into her safe keeping,—you know who I mean,—so beautiful,—so beloved,—she seems destined for you, who are worthy of the best and fairest. Stephen, be generous; give me the comfort of knowing that Juliet is to be your wife; that you are as happy with her as—as I would have tried to make you, and then I will go hence in peace, and you shall never be disturbed with even the sight of me."

He was now so astonished, that for a moment he forgot even Juliet and the bright prospect opening before him, whilst he asked himself if it were possible that Millicent had never really loved him. He could not conceive the possibility of such generosity, as she was in real fact displaying, and the man's vanity was actually piqued. Juliet had of late striven earnestly to convince him, that Millicent was by no means in— different to Arthur, whose affection for her was evident to all, and she had done this none the less eloquently, that she well knew how absolutely false it was. Aylmer remembering the past, could not believe it; but now it seemed to him as though it must certainly be as that lying voice had said. He felt it would be the most intense relief, could he know that it was so indeed; and, speaking for the first time, he said eagerly:—

"Millicent, one thing you will admit I have a right to know, even in this hour,—Have you, indeed, never loved me?—or rather,—let us not touch the past, it is sacred,"—there was some emotion in his tone, as he thought on the days when her deep tenderness was displayed so brightly to his eyes that he might as well have doubted the clear light of heaven,—"but tell me that which affects the present and the future,—do you love me no longer?"

What a question! It had been less bitter for her to die, than to give him the assurance for which she saw that he was craving, as men crave for the life itself, when they have been near unto death. Yes, to know that she loved him no longer would be to him, the perfect happiness she so longed to procure him,—here was then the moment, when she was to accomplish his peace and joy, with her entire devotion; the sacrifice of her whole life was gathered up into the sentence she was next to utter. It **must** be the assurance he demanded; but how, even if she risked the falsehood, could her lips pronounce it, when the very heart within her was swelling, dying with the excess of its intense love for him? But she would not fail, she who had done so much for him, in this, the last momentous hour! She nerved herself to one tremendous effort,—this was her answer: he had said, "Do you love me no longer?" and she replied:

"Juliet does."

It was quite enough; he never doubted but that, unwilling to pronounce the actual confession that she had in heart deserted him, Millicent by this means sought to convey to him not only the assurance that in truth she did love him no more, but that Juliet had given him all that affection which she had taken away. What words could express the boundless joy that came to him with this conviction!—he could no longer restrain his passionate delight,—and why should he in truth? He believed that Millicent was as thankful as himself to be released!

All embarrassment, all gloom, all fear, passed away from his countenance. He rose up radiant with happiness; as if a new life were in him.

"Then," he exclaimed, "if so it is, if you love me no more—and Juliet does with all the tenderness, I doubt not, of her impassioned, generous nature—then, indeed, do I thank you for thus frankly putting an end to all idea of the union, which would have made us both so wretched. Yes, Millicent, and if your kind heart would seek the assurance of my happiness before you can enjoy that which you will so much better secure to yourself without me, I can give it to you most fully—for I shall, indeed, find it abundantly in her love. If she has given me her affection, I know well how deep, how true, how fervent it will be. Kind friend as you are, thus to care for my welfare, you may safely trust it in sweet Juliet's keeping. I know what a depth of tenderness is in her soul, and she will watch and tend the life of him she loves, as none, I believe, on earth could do."

In what inquisition had he learned to be such a torturer? It was most awful to her to see how well she had performed her work. Alas! alas! to think that he should dream that Juliet's love and Juliet's care, could ever be what hers had been and was even now! It was a terrible thing to see the joy with which he at once assumed that she loved him not, who, for his sake, could no longer endure existence. It was impossible for her to continue this insupportable scene: she rose up, confused and faint with the dreary bewilderment of her soul. The blinding tears were rushing to her eyes, her voice was choked, her words most incoherent.

"Then there is no need to say more—it is all fixed, all settled. I think we have arranged everything—I mean for the future—for your life—for mine. Oh, what am I saying!"

He did not so much as see her agitation, he was so mad with joy.

"Yes, it is all settled! Think no more of it, Millicent—have no remorse, no fear! All is well—most well, indeed! I will go to Juliet!"

It was Juliet—Juliet ever with him now; her image absorbed all other thoughts.

Weary, faint, bowed to the very ground, Millicent crept to the door; it seemed to her that now it was not required of her to live any longer. Then she remembered that her task was not done yet, not nearly done. She turned round to him again: her tones were now very low and faltering.

"Stephen, I have one more favour to ask! It seems to me that you may meet with many difficulties—that there will be much opposition to your marriage with Juliet. I think that I could remove them all if you will let me, if you will have no scruple. It will be happiness, yes, happiness, to promote yours. Juliet has no fortune: my uncle and aunt, and Colonel Bentley, might object; do not undertake any unpleasant discussions with them yourself, let me arrange it all."

He hardly understood that she meant to carry her generosity even to the extent of providing Juliet with a portion, but her words reminded him that, in truth, it would be no easy matter to satisfy the various parties

concerned in this change, and that most certainly none but Millicent herself could effect it.

He felt, therefore, deeply grateful to her for thus completing his happiness for him, even whilst he was confident that she did so in expiation of her own faithlessness.

"You are right, Millicent; there will, indeed, be difficulties which no one but yourself can overcome. You only can bring matters to a happy conclusion; and I do gladly and gratefully trust all to you. Blessings on you for the thought!"

That blessing broke her heart: she could endure no more, but rushed from him. It seemed the last effort of her strength, and, unable to advance, she leant against the wall in the passage, and gasped out, faintly:—

"Oh, death! oh, death! come quickly! Be merciful—come quick, and take me!"

Perhaps death would have been, indeed, more merciful than he whose selfish love now exulted over her final despair. Arthur, ever at hand, took her gently in his arms, and carried her to the next room, where he placed her on a sofa, near the open window; the cold air revived her at once, for she had not fainted.

She tried vainly with her pale, quivering lips to thank him, but her beseeching eyes told him she would be alone; he bent down, and kissed one of the folds of her dress, and then left the room. When he was gone she turned away from the light, and hid her face, with one long, deep sigh.

CHAPTER V.

MILLICENT GREY did not rest long; repose in truth, there could never more be for her, under the same roof with Stephen Aylmer. Her whole longing now was to escape from that place, to fly and hide herself in some far distant spot, where she should never see the face, or hear the voice of any one of those who had been with her in her days of joy, for ever gone. Her resolution with regard to her own fate, had been fully taken, so soon as she decided upon abandoning Aylmer. She would return without delay to Aix to poor John Forde, who had of late more than once written, expressing a wish to see her, and with whose mournful devotion to the dead,—whose passionate love for the mouldering ashes, she felt she now could deeply sympathize. In a few days she would be of age, and at liberty to leave England. She determined to take her departure on the very day that was to have seen her the wife of Juliet's future husband. Alas! her vows of life-long faithfulness and tender love were taken long ago, and she repeated them even yet in the deep of her heart, for she was learning now that sad mysterious truth, that an affection such as hers can feed even upon despair.

For the few intervening days she would go to Milton Lodge: to sleep another night at Rookcliffe was most utterly impossible. To be the witness of their happy love, would be to make the bitterness of her own miserable desolation beyond the power of human strength to bear.

In truth, she dared not trust herself so much as to look upon his face again; she trembled at the wild longing that rose in her breast,—to fly back to him even then, to pour out the depths of her soul to him,—to tell him that none, none upon this earth could ever love him as she did,—that although she never saw him more, he must for ever be to her, the all of life, and hope, and joy. Yes, she panted to tell him this, at the very moment, no doubt, when he stood by the side of Juliet, and rejoiced with her in evident rapture, that he was free from a detested bondage.

Oh! how this thought stung her to the quick; it roused her into action! She must up and complete the work that yet remained; she must toil on, on, unceasing, till her task was accomplished; she felt as though a strong power was goading her to that labour, till his entire happiness was secured, and not a thorn lay in his path.

She rose, and went at once to Mr. and Mrs. Egerton; her task with them was very easy. They were fully prepared for her coming,—the scene of last night, her interview with Aylmer, and now the fact of which they were aware, that he was sitting at Juliet's side, as her future husband, sufficiently explained the nature of Millicent's mission. They had arranged their tactics with great ability. They said they had long perceived that Millicent and Aylmer were **mutually** indifferent to one another—indeed, as it was purely a *marriage de convenance*, arranged by Colonel Bentley, it could scarcely be otherwise; and it was perfectly natural that when Juliet and Aylmer met, who were so well suited to one another, they should have formed an attachment. There was a certain indefinable feeling which prevented either of them from glancing at Millicent whilst they spoke all these cold, calculating speeches: had they looked on that wan face, they would have ceased for very pity.

Mr. Egerton could not help wincing a little when he found that she designed to give Juliet a positive fortune: she implored of him so earnestly to allow her what she said was her great happiness, and he was in truth so much embarrassed how to provide for his daughter, that at last, with a patronizing delight, he consented, assuring Millicent he only did so, because she said he could not refuse to let her make a wedding present to her cousin.

Mr. and Mrs. Egerton found the whole of their niece's communication extremely pleasant, but that which put the climax to their satisfaction was her declaring it to be her intention to return for some time to Aix. This would so effectually prevent all embarrassment and awkwardness that they could not resist letting her see how highly they approved of her plan, and equally of her more immediate arrangement, in leaving Rookcliffe for Milton Lodge. They had been thinking with much horror of the unmanageable Colonel Bentley, and were inexpressibly relieved to find him taken off their hands, and to receive Millicent's assurance, that she would obtain his consent to Aylmer's marriage with Juliet.

At her niece's request Mrs. Egerton at once ordered the carriage to convey her to Milton Lodge, and promised to come with her daughters to take leave of her before she left England. They did not fail to assure her of their earnest desire that she should soon return to live with them, but their words seemed to fall utterly meaningless on her ear, for she was struggling with her own failing strength, to gain courage, thus to quit the place where the summer time of her life had passed with its redeemless brightness.

Two hours had not elapsed from the time when she passed, in all her agony, from Aylmer's sight, before she crossed the threshold of Rookcliffe for ever. She heard the murmur of his voice as she passed the studio, and shivered with the strong spasm that grasped her heart at the sound; but her attention was almost instantly claimed by Arthur, who stood in the hall, still triumphant, though, in spite of himself, almost terrified at what he had done.

He could not remain unmoved when he felt that he himself had been the means of driving her from her home, and casting her out for ever from the only happiness she had ever known. He had not expected this abrupt departure, and it alarmed him for his own future plans. He seized her hand, and exclaimed,

"Oh, Millicent, what is it you mean to do? where are you going?"

She turned round to him with a wild, unnatural look in her eyes, whilst a strange smile passed over her lips.

"Where am I going? Drifting down with the current, Arthur,—the current that flows to the deep, deep sea, where the dead have gone to their rest. Who can arrange his own destiny, or tell what it shall be? Do you not know we are all at the mercy of the waves on that fierce stream of life: for some, it has smooth waters, and they go safely down; but there are others whom the stormy billows seize and dash against the rocks, and there they perish, Arthur." She flung back his hand as she spoke, and sprung into the carriage, leaving him with the terrible fear that her very reason was shaken by the intensity of her suffering.

As for Millicent, she snatched up, with a sort of frantic haste, a large shawl, that lay on the seat, and wrapped her head in it entirely, so as to shut out all sight and sound, while the carriage rolled away from Rookcliffe and from him for ever—lost, and yet not less, for ever dear.

It was bitter to be roused anew to the conflict when she reached Milton Lodge; but concentrating all her thoughts on the prospect of that hour of rest, when she should quit England, she gathered up anew her strength, and proceeded at once to seek Mrs. Hartley, There was a sort of instinct which made her feel that here she would be thoroughly understood; that she need enter into no explanations, nor yet attempt to conceal the reality of her unutterable sacrifice. She felt, indeed, from many words of Mrs. Hartley's, only now remembered, that she had known the truth long since, and that she would appreciate to the uttermost all Millicent had done and suffered.

The good old lady sat reading by the window. Millicent gently crept towards her and knelt down before her. One look passed between them, and Mrs. Hartley read all that had taken place, in the expression of intolerable anguish which that sweet young face now bore; then Millicent laid her head upon her kind friend's lap, and said, in a low, suffocated voice:—

"Dear kind friend, it is all over. I never, never more shall have a right to comfort him, or bless him with my whole heart's love; I never, never shall look upon his face again. How shall I bear it?—my very soul seems dying in me! Oh, that she, at least, may love him, not as I did, that cannot be, but so that he shall be happy!"—She could not go on. Mrs. Hartley was deeply moved, and yet this was but the hour that she had long foreseen. She saw that as she had expected, a message had come from Heaven to the soul of Millicent Grey, to tell her that she had mistaken her rest and her vocation—that her rest could not be in this world, nor the vocation of her immortal spirit to worship a human being or any other earthly thing. The messenger was dark and stern truly; and sharp the sword with which he had pierced that heart, to disengage it from the dust and clay to which it clung; but Mrs. Hartley knew that he was not the less an angel of mercy, and that in time the dim eyes of poor Millicent, made clearer by their bitter tears, would discern the glory of his countenance, and the radiance of the snow-white wings that soon would bear her up to heaven.

She laid her hands on the poor drooping head that rested on her knees.

"Darling, I have long foreseen this hour; but take comfort. By this very suffering shall a sweeter shelter be provided for you than any human love—a happier home, my child, than any dwelling even with the most beloved—"

These words, were strangely soothing to poor Millicent, although she scarcely understood them. She gave one low sobbing sigh; and then lay still, exhausted by that fainting of the spirit, which has no strength for tears, scarce even for thought. But soon the goading recollection roused her that her work was not yet accomplished, that his happiness was not altogether secured, and she felt guilty to be resting even in her very desolation. She lifted up her poor wan face, the heavy eyes so full of the sad bewilderment of sorrow, and entreated of Mrs. Hartley to assist her in the task which yet remained, the obtaining of Colonel Bentley's consent to his nephew's marriage with Juliet, nor get his consent only, but his willing approbation and his promise that Aylmer should not the less be his heir, that he had failed to meet his wishes respecting Millicent.

She said there must be no delay in this matter, for she had sent a message to Stephen by Mr. Egerton, promising, that if possible, he should have his uncle's consent that very evening, for she well knew how deep must be his anxiety, to obtain the full assurance of that on which in part his union must depend.

Mrs. Hartley at once proposed to undertake the mission, and said she would go to her brother that very moment, trusting earnestly that she might be able to prevail with him, so that it should not be requisite for her to call on poor Millicent to come and plead with him for her own despair. With one fond pitying kiss she left her unhappy charge, who remained still crouching on the floor, her hands clasped over her eyes; for when the heart is crushed as hers was now, it seems impossible for the feeble knees to uphold the weary frame, or the heavy head to lift itself from the dust where most it is content to dwell.

Mrs. Hartley had anticipated a scene of violence with her brother, and much vehement opposition to Aylmer's marriage, but the reality far exceeded her expectation; not only did he pour forth a storm of invective against Juliet, Aylmer, and the whole Egerton family, but he reproached even Millicent herself, and solemnly declared that he would disinherit his nephew forthwith, unless she became his wife on the day appointed.

Mrs. Hartley soon saw that she was quite powerless, and that the fiery scourge which had driven Millicent Grey to the accomplishment of all she had that day done, would not relax its cruel work till the whole of her bitter task should be fulfilled.

She went and brought her to Colonel Bentley; he was in the full paroxysm of ungoverned rage, his angry passions excited to the uttermost;—his powerless limbs quivered with the internal violence—his features were distorted—his voice, harsh and discordant, was uttering fierce words of menace. Then she came gliding in with face so pale, stamped with the holy seal of sufferings—for she had accepted the agony of this last effort with the patient meekness of entire self-devotion, and the soft submissive hands were folded on the torn and throbbing heart.

As the old man looked on her the angry tones died away on his lips, the stir of the human feelings seemed hushed within him as though by the presence of a thing unearthly. His fascinated gaze followed her movements. She came and knelt before him, for it seemed the only attitude in which she now found any rest. Very humble does intense love and intense suffering make us!

Then she lifted up the wan burning hands, and began to plead for Aylmer's happiness and her own entire misery, with an eloquence of supplication which these weak words cannot render.

No mother, wrestling in agony for the life of her first-born child, ever found such power of beseeching prayer as rose in wailing entreaty from that broken heart.

She entered into no explanation as to what had passed—she gave no reason for thus seeking to place an irrevocable barrier between herself and him who had been the hope of this mortal life, only she said it was for his happiness, and she prayed the old man by the dear name of mercy, to grant her deep petition. She laid down her head upon his feet, and said she would not rise till he had promised to send forth a blessing on that friend beloved, peace to his heart, and the offering of the crowning cup of joy unto his lips. For herself, she said if he would hear her prayer, she would in return devote her life to him—she would come back to him when **they** were gone, and be to him a child, a niece, seeking with the care and devotedness of years, to repay him for his goodness and mercy to her, this day granted; and the old man's heart melted within him at the sound of that sweet intensely-mournful supplication. The dark passion passed from his soul as the thunder cloud yields to the soft wind's breath; he could not tell why, his own will and wishes had lost all power to influence him, so that now he could act by hers alone, but so it was, and he only longed to assure her he would do all and everything she wished. His arms fell around her, the tears came thick into his eyes, he muttered hoarsely, "My poor child, I will do all you desire;" and when at these words, she rose and smiled on him in her deep gratitude, the sweetness and the sadness of that smile was all too much; he bowed, his head upon his breast and wept.

There was no further delay, Colonel Bentley wrote the letter to his nephew instantly; it was dictated by Millicent herself, and it breathed only love and kindness, and the promise that all should be done to ensure his happiness. With her own hands she carried it to the messenger who was to convey it to Rookcliffe, and when all was thus completed—terminated for ever—she allowed Mrs. Hartley to lay her down and compose her limbs in the attitude of repose; there she became in truth, like to the corpse of one whose hour of rest is come; and for many hours her friend sat moistening her white lips with cooling water, doubting almost whether the very life had not expired in her heart.

But the life was still there, the strong life turned to poison; and when morning broke, Millicent rose and made ready as for a journey. She told Mrs. Hartley, that great as had been her strength for endurance hitherto, she felt now there was a limit, beyond which the power of submission unto suffering could not go. To see again the faces of those who had been around her in her days of deep joy—to risk the mention of his name, whose image was eating like canker into her soul was, she said, beyond the human nature to endure. She had decided on going to London that very day, and hence sailing for Aix as soon as might be.

Mrs. Hartley felt she was right, and that it was better for all parties that so it should be; she undertook to explain this very sudden departure to the Egertons, who, she felt convinced, would be thankful if such an arrangement were made; and in a very few hours Millicent was on her way to London, accompanied by Nanette and her servant. Thence a week later she departed for Aix.

As Mrs. Hartley anticipated, the family at Rookcliffe were greatly relieved at having her, who was in truth their victim, removed from before their eyes thus happily; and as Millicent came of age during her stay in London, all necessary arrangements were there made with the lawyers, to terminate Mr. Egerton's guardianship, and leave her to act as she pleased, and to reside where she would.

From the moment of her departure all seemed to prosper according to their wishes. Aylmer, with the full consent of his uncle, hurried the preparations for his marriage with Juliet, which was already announced to the world; and in the delicious joy of having obtained that good, without which it had seemed so impossible to live, and of which he had despaired, he drove from him all thought of the past, and resolutely closed the eyes of his soul upon the mournful figure, whose image, at times, would steal across his spirit, looking up at him with sad reproaching eyes, and mutely wringing her pale hands.

There was one, however, to whom the news of Millicent Grey's sudden departure was for a moment quite paralyzing; but gradually a little reflection taught him that it was rather a matter of rejoicing to him—for who should prevent his walking in her shadow wheresoever she went—down into the very grave itself, would he not follow her? Yes! she was gone, but how? gone an outcast from earth's affection, desolate as those are only, who having trusted their life and soul to human hands, have seen them shattered and for ever ruined in that ruthless grasp! The fair plant of living hoping love, that had sprung up and flourished in her trusting heart, having sweet promise of much fruit in joy, was cut down and withered to the very core, consumed into moulding dust; therefore, surely, the barren blighted soil where it had grown, was all the more fit to gather in new seed to blossom forth with happier affections.

This was his hope; and swift as those of Millicent Grey herself, the feet of Arthur Egerton were on the shores of France, but unseen, unknown to her, gliding stealthily after her, to make his abode in secret near her dwelling, and there to wait his time; for deep selfishness makes a man most wise in his craftiness.

CHAPTER VI.

AND what has the lapse of a year done for thee, old man? dweller with the dead, companion of a corpse? how has it fared with thee, John Forde, in this long period, during which the thronging souls of many thousands, have gone up to face eternity from the fever of the life—long madness in which they fed themselves with ashes? The year which has seen the rise and fall of kingdoms—the convulsions of nations—the fading of many joys—the breaking of many hearts—the wakening of new hopes in youthful breasts—the bringing in of many spirits from the unseen to pass their earth—probation—and the year which has witnessed the wreck of a life, of which man could not have made one moment, but whose entire limit he had the will and power to destroy—the distorting, and paralyzing of a soul that came forth pure and glorious from the Creative Hands, by the sacrilegious touch of a being of dust and clay—while these things have been passing in the outer world, how has it fared with thee?

The year hath been to thee a wild and mournful dream, passionate and hopeless even as thy whole life; still hast thou sat there with thy head, now grey with age, bent down upon thy bosom, while round thee have been the clinging arms of that adored corpse, the dead eyes gazing on thy living face; the heart where feed the graveworms beating against thy burning breast. Alas! old man, it is an awful meeting, surely, that is preparing for thee with that dead idol in the life to come, where already she has known full well the eternity, which haply thou hast lost for her!

John Forde had been apprised of Millicent's return, but doubtless all recollection of it had passed again from his mind, too full of one absorbing idea to have the power of retaining any other. He sat in his usual attitude as she came into the room the same day that she arrived at Aix, and she paused to look upon him; for it was a strange thing to her to feel how thoroughly at last she understood him! Albeit life was in one sense to her but a deeper and more horrible enigma, yet, the secret of **his** existence was plain to her at least, for it had its root and spring in the same dark source as her own.

She advanced and stood before him, so that he lifted up his head to look upon her, and suddenly a cry burst from his lips as if he had seen a vision; his dilated eyes seemed starting from their sockets. It was in sorrow that her mother had last gazed upon him; and in sorrow, as her child now met his eyes, the likeness which he never before had observed between them became strikingly apparent; he knew well it was not **her**, his own beloved—he never could be deceived in this; but it sent an aching pang into his heart, a shuddering thrill into his frame to see a living form so like to hers.

"Oh, what and who are you that come to me," he said; "pale and stricken even as she came, mourning for her first-born, with death at her heart, and anguish in her soul?"

"I am her most unhappy child," said Millicent; "and like her, I come mourning,—mourning for my first-born hope, which is a dead and buried corpse, and I would there were the mortal death at my heart which wrought her rest so speedily, for truly there is the bitter anguish in my soul!"

"Her child—yes, it is true, I now remember all, you are her child, and in agony of heart! Millicent, she will not sleep calmly in her grave if this be so—can I not comfort you? I shall hear her wailing through the dust for you this night if sorrow is upon you; tell me what is your grief, that I may soothe you and bid her rest."

"Alas! she will never more repose if my anguish can make her restless in her coffin! I have neglected your warning—I have forgotten your instructions, and therefore am I here a lost and stricken being. You bid me never seek to make my rest upon the hard rock of a human heart, but I have disobeyed you, and have laid down myself and my whole life upon it; and I have been driven forth from that inhospitable home, all bruised and wounded, to fall down hopeless at your side."

And she fell down as she spoke, abject as the despairing ever must be, whilst he bent over her in mute compassion, for there was entire sympathy between them now; their souls had met on the level of their common anguish; and the young girl, for whom the glory of life's summer should but have been commencing, and the old man who was fast entering into the shadow of the tomb, were as one in their mutual desolation.

From that hour the life of Millicent Grey may be described in the single word—**vacancy**. We have said that she had no hope—nor thought of seeking any, beyond this life—and in this life, her lips had attested to the truth—all hope was dead, so it was darkness above and around, and utter apathy and lifelessness within. She had not yet learned the lessons which the history of her existence had been appointed to teach her—she had believed

that the spirit's rest, the longing of the whole being, was to find its full satisfaction in human love; she had sought it there, and instead of rest had found a gnawing anguish; instead of a satisfying joy, an intolerable desolation; yet she continued to believe her early creed most true, convinced that this unhappy consummation was but the evil of her special destiny, and **not** the result of one incontestable truth—that in human love, as in all things human whatsoever, no soul immortal can repose. This lesson her future career was still to teach her; but meanwhile she did but believe, that she had risked a bold venture in the great game of life, and had for ever lost—that she was but one in a thousand. Multitudes like her might lose; some few might win: it was the mere playing at hazard, in which the fate of each one, for good or ill, was sealed as it were by the fling of the dice. This was her wretched philosophy, poor child, for none had ever spoken truth to her, the sweet accents of mercy were unknown to her heart; but soon it was decreed that the voice of her own sorrow should speak them to her.

So day by day she wandered to and fro, the mute, pale semblance of a living agony. Aylmer had driven her out from his arms into a bleak, cold wilderness, and she was as a stray leaf blown by the blast of destiny upon that desolate shore.

She saw not the figure of him who watched her hour by hour, and ever sought to discover whether those despairing eyes seemed a shade less dreary, that he might come to speak to her of hope renewed; but Arthur dared not still approach her, for never yet had they looked up to tell his far-off wistful gaze, of aught save love unchanging, even in its great despair.

One evening, when all was very still and lovely in the serene heavens and the quiet earth, Millicent Grey went forth in her miserable restlessness, to wander over the plain which extends beyond the fair town of Aix; and she dreamed once more, as she walked along, of that day to which ever her weary heart was turning,—the day when last she wandered the joyous bride of Stephen Aylmer, through the old woods of Rookcliffe,—before ever that fiend-like soul, clad in angelic beauty, crossed her prosperous path,—the day when, for the first time, her eyes and his had looked on Juliet Egerton.

Overstepping the intervening anguish, she loved to rest upon that hour, the last of her departed brightness,—the closing scene of her dead life of joy; and as she thought upon it, all that she had suffered since, her intense, intolerable misery, of every moment, day and hour, seemed to gather itself up in one vast load upon her breast, so that, unable to bear the overwhelming pressure, she lifted up her eyes with an awful appealing look to heaven, and gave vent to a long, deep sigh.

And now, hath it ever been known that the sigh of one poor helpless mourner, by the hand of a fellow creature stricken, ascending up to the retributive skies, hath been answered from thence, in thunders on the head of him who wrought the woe?

We know not,—we can but tell how it came to pass upon this night with Millicent Grey and Stephen Aylmer. On the selfsame evening, at the self-same hour, that through the clear blue air of sweet Provence, that deep, heart-breaking sigh went up, Stephen Aylmer walked with her, for whom he had committed murder on the life-hope of a fellow mortal. In the fair woods of Rookcliffe they stood, in the very path where he had stood with Millicent, on the night which she was now remembering in her agony,—and he, like her, remembered it; but only that in the recollection he might triumph with an unholy joy over the violent rending of the ties which then had bound him,—only that he might turn and look with a mad exultation on the glorious beauty which he had purchased to himself, with the despair of her who once had stood his promised wife upon that path beside him. The very thought how, in that hour, whose memory was upon him now, there had been an insurmountable barrier between himself and the radiant bride he had so dearly won, made him linger with a most cruel pleasure on the contrast of that day and this.

Beautiful as she was at all times, Juliet sought on this night to appear so to him surpassingly; she so gloried in her own loveliness that she was never weary of continual efforts to attract renewed admiration; more especially was she desirous at all times to win Aylmer's look of enthusiastic love,—not because her own affection yearned for such an answer, but because she delighted to satisfy the artist's refined imagination, and to feel that she had subdued, to the worship of living beauty, the haughty soul, who so long had refused to acknowledge that aught supremely fair existed, save in his own mental visions.

She was wildly joyous this evening. He believed that she was so, because a few days more were to see her for ever consigned to him, as his wife. How would his heart have revolted from her, if he had known that her gaiety resulted from the delight, with which she anticipated going forth into the world with a free independence, under

the sanction of his name, to gain the admiration of all whom her unholy soul might seek to fascinate, and allow the fair face on which no eyes but a husband's should have looked with joy, to be profaned by many an approving glance from others. She was ever most charming in her graceful vivacity, and with delight he watched her fitful movements now, each one calculated more than another to place her in some attitude of exquisite symmetry.

The evening was not calm and beautiful, as on the shores of France, but full of that ominous sultriness which often oppresses the air in the first warm days of early summer; black thunder—clouds were passing across the troubled sky, and it was plain that a furious storm was brooding; at length a flash of vivid lightning rent asunder the thick dark curtain which obscured one part of the heavens, and the tempest, like a wild steed freed from the rein, came bounding forth in all its madness with thunders and with sweeping blasts.

At the first crash of that sublimest music, Aylmer drew Juliet closer to him, and proposed that they should at once return home, lest any danger chanced to her; but she was one naturally fearless, to whom the excitement of peril was delightful, and whose bold free spirit sympathized with those convulsions of nature. She loved to set even the elements at defiance, and to brave the very storms, for she had ever found her dominion over man so complete and boundless, that she dared control, from the powers of creation itself.

Instead of yielding to his entreaty that they should seek a refuge as speedily as might be, she answered him with a bright smile of daring, and springing from his grasp, darted on to a small hillock, which rose in a most exposed situation in the centre of the park; her swift feet brought her in an instant to the summit, where neither tree nor shrub were to be seen; and there she stood, her graceful figure coming out in strong relief, with its white robes against the dark lurid sky, the fierce wind wantoning with her hair till it drove it, like a stream of golden sunshine, over her face, and her deep, dark eyes, lit up now with the glare from the heavens, turning back to him, with their sparkling glance of playful defiance.

He stood rooted to the spot gazing on her; his heart well—nigh bursting with its fierce exultation to think that this being was his own.

Then her voice came sounding above the roar of the elements, sweet and clear as a silver bell.

"Take heed, *preux chevalier*, of your fame as a brave knight; why stand you there gazing, when I have passed through the storm, and believed you would follow me? Do you fear this great battle of heaven, where the lightnings are flashing like swords? Oh, shame on the man's failing heart, when the woman herself is undaunted!"

He answered the merry taunt with a smile as gay, and then bounded forth through the tempest, to fly to her. She saw him coming in the strength of his manhood, beautiful he seemed to her, and was in truth; noble the face and stately the form,—proud and free was the spirit within,—he came with his haughty steps firm on the ground, his dotting eyes fixed on his earthly love. And then it was that in the still plains of the far Provence, the deep sigh went up,—the breath, as it were, of the breaking heart, and straightway, in the selfsame moment, from the angry heavens a thunderbolt came crashing down. It gleamed through the clouds, but it tarried not there; it lit up the mountains, but it had no mission to them; on through the boundless air direct to one spot, the fierce dart of that lightning came—bright arrow of heaven—on the head of the guilty Aylmer it struck, with an aim unerring, and down, down to the dust, in the pride of his days, the strong man fell like a fainting child.

No sight more awful ever passed in the face of day, for the form that stood upright in its beauty and power, in one second of time had gone down to the earth as a shattered mass, burnt and blackened, a quivering heap! She saw it lie there a human frame, as it seemed, no longer, but a shapeless, distorted thing, horrible to see, fearful to think on; and wild through the air her piercing voice rang out, shriek upon shriek, in her agony of horror! One moment's bewilderment, one moment doubt whether, it were possible that the proud, stately man, in this brief passing instant, had, indeed, been transformed into that black mass of cinders and ashes, where the stir of the life that yet lingered among them but rendered the sight more terrible. And then the conviction that it was so indeed, that he was stricken down by the wrath of heaven, came deep and strong into her soul. It came and with it, to her clear, subtle mind, an image of all the results that must follow this awful event, and with well—nigh a curse on her woman's lips, for the sudden failing of her schemes of pleasure, she fled wailing and shrieking through the woods of the park. She fled, but not to him, for she loved him not, pure love would have overcome the revolting of humanity, from the sight of the blackened, palpitating mass; but Juliet even in that hour, had a care for herself.

She had a horror of death, a horror of suffering, a horror of all which could render life, to her eyes, other than a bright vision of triumph. To **enjoy** all the world can give, with an intensity of selfishness, was her aim and her principle, her hope and her faith; whatever aided this plan of existence was sought for and cherished,—whatever

marred or destroyed it was hated and abandoned;—whilst Aylmer could assist her in attaining her object, she trampled all under foot to bind him to her. But now, when by this awful judgment, he could do so no longer, even though life yet lingered in the scorched and distorted frame; already was she his no more. She must act her part for the time, however, and truly she had no need to feign her consternation, for she did feel an intensity of dismay as well as sore grief and anger for the destruction of her own bright hopes,—so shrieking and in tears she fled on to her home, and sent them forth to bring back the shattered corpse (it might be) of her lover. But they found him still living, and it was the lingering of life in that calcined heap which most struck on their hearts with horror; not a feature was discernible, seared, blackened, and scorched, not a limb but was full of distortion, and evidently paralyzed by the dreadful shock.

They carried him home in mute terror and grief; physicians were procured, but they said if he did not die at once, it would be many days before they could give an opinion; the great dread seemed to be of his living, so frightful, if he did, must be the life in that stricken frame. Then followed an interval of dreariness and mourning—the house silent and darkened—the voices hushed—the steps of attendants only stealing to and fro. Mrs. Hartley came from Milton Lodge, and night and day waited unremittingly on her unhappy nephew. Mrs. Egerton, too, was ever at his side; but Juliet declared that her delicate frame could not endure such fatigue and anxiety; she retired to her own suite of rooms, and there surrounded herself with everything bright and pleasant, that could shut out all thought of the horrid scenes else—where enacted in the house. She was but waiting for the medical decision, to know whether this stricken man could ever more be made available for the purposes of her life.

After a time, the fiat of the physicians was definitely given; Stephen Aylmer would live—but he would live, blind and a paralyzed cripple: stone blind he was, and irrevocably so; he that with such idolatry had worshipped the Beautiful, upon the beautiful never more should be allowed to gaze; not only the sight was gone, but the very eyes were burnt up in their sockets; nor was this all, a complete paralysis had possession of his frame. It might with the lapse of time diminish, the physicians said, but the limbs would never regain their form, nor the features lose that fatal distortion. So convulsed the frame—so seared the once fair countenance, that Stephen Aylmer, proud and noble as he had been, was now an object moat unsightly, from which com—passion only, could prevent his fellow creatures turning even with loathing! His faculties were unimpaired, excepting the hopeless fearful blindness, of which he had a full consciousness, from the moment that his senses returned.

When Juliet heard the final report of the case, and learnt distinctly that there could be no further change, she expressed a wish to see him, but that he should not himself be made aware of her presence; she was one who chose always to be convinced on any matter of moment by personal observation, and she desired to confirm with her own eyes the information she had received respecting it. If indeed, it were correct, she must straightway depart to seek for other instruments to effect her enjoyment in this life; and into the presence of him, now powerless to serve her, she never more would come.

So she went into the darkened room where he lay, and with no gentle hand drew back the curtain from the window, that she might the better scan his countenance. We have described the revolting spectacle that wretched man presented, for truly he was but a living soul, linked to a mass of powerless clay; she looked on him, and over that beautiful face there passed an expression of contemptuous disgust! Who shall measure the degradation to her whole being, of which that look gave evidence! Then she let the curtain fall, restoring him truly to a two-fold gloom, and passed from his presence for ever. They never met again on this side of the grave.

CHAPTER VII.

JULIET EGERTON left Rookcliffe the day after her silent interview with the man, who, for her sake had bartered honour and truth, and righteousness; she said, that after the shock her nerves had received, her health required an entire change. She returned to Italy with her friend Mrs. Wilmot, and not many months after she was the wife of an Italian nobleman.

The first word that Stephen Aylmer uttered when his speech returned to him was "Juliet;" he had been quite conscious long before the paralysis was so far overcome as to allow him to articulate, but even then he could utter only the unformed hesitating sounds, which form so painful a peculiarity in the palsied; and this defect, the physicians said, could never more be remedied. He who had so largely possessed the gift of free and noble eloquence, whose voice had been as most melodious music, must never speak but in those gabbling hateful accents, and of them, at present, he could make use but sparingly.

Still, his first word of difficult utterance was "Juliet,"—it was to Mrs. Hartley he spoke, who sat beside him; he had formerly manifested by signs, that he was fully aware both of his irrevocable blindness and of his melancholy paralysis; therefore, she knew he would understand her, and she thought it best he should know the truth of Juliet's desertion at once. The tone of agonizing anxiety in which he uttered that name, showed that he well knew what he had to fear; her answer was to bend down over him and whisper, "Heaven have mercy upon you, and give you strength to endure the life which has been restored to you."

The look of agony which settled down upon the countenance, already made hideous by its distortion, as she spoke these words, was too dreadful for her to look upon; she saw that he had understood his cruel abandonment,—he lifted up the one scorched arm of which alone he retained the use, and hid his face upon it, whilst he said in a tone that told how fearful an import he gave to the words:—

"It is darkness—darkness without and within!"

From that hour he sank into a complete and most mournful lethargy; nothing could induce him to utter a word, and he never spoke again for many months—he became as a mass of lifeless clay in their hands.

They might move him from place to place—they might try remedies of all sorts they might leave him alone or surround him with the gaiety wherewith they thought to enliven him, he seemed alike indifferent and unconscious of all; he had not yet recovered the power of walking, though it was hoped he might ultimately regain the use of his limbs, and day after day he lay like an inanimate heap, refusing to respond so much as by a pressure of the hand to the solicitude of those around him. It was as though the soul like the body were palsied for ever; no one could look on him without grieving that he had not expired altogether under the blow which had deprived him of light, and hope, and joy, and all but the mere mechanical process of life.

It seemed plain that this regret was so strong in his own breast, that he sought to be in actual truth as one dead already; no word ever passed the parched lips—no voluntary movement ever indicated that there was life in the frame; and, yet it was an awful thing to think on all that was really passing behind the impenetrable barrier, which his sightless eyes and his resolute dumbness had raised between himself and the rest of mankind.

Fearful, indeed, to feel that the soul **was** alive, a prisoner—in darkness, silence, and solitude, within that dungeon of powerless flesh, and not alive alone, but with powers unimpaired, only that they could no more be exercised,—with talents undiminished, only that they must lie rotting in inaction,—with wishes unquenched,—only that for ever vain they must eat into his heart like fire, and with the strong fierce ungovernable love which had made him in his pride of strength and beauty, perjured and well nigh a murderer, still as deep and as wildly resistless,—only that the hope so near a reality, of its entire blessedness in her continual presence had been torn away from him, like the rending of the very life from his body. There remained nothing now but the maddening certainty that he might with unabated affection yearn and pine for her, as a mother over a slaughtered child; but that more readily the dead would rise at the call of love in agony, than Juliet Egerton return now to him, to be the maimed and wretched cripple's wife.

Oh, the howling tempest, incessant, day and night, that raged beneath that lifeless calm exterior!—the world and the things of it had been all in all to him, and from that world he was now debarred as utterly as any captive, chained in some prison, fathoms deep within the earth; but its influence was strong as ever, and whilst he lay powerless and like some senseless clod—the ardent, earthly love—the burning ambition—ambition alike of joy

and fame, were trampling down his very soul with their mad impatient struggling for release. He knew well, however, the utter hopelessness of his condition, and it was despair which bound him in that frightful changeless lethargy.

Thus the days passed on for Stephen Aylmer, once as proud and noble a representation of humanity as ever mortal eyes beheld; the gifted genius,—the man of winning eloquence and lofty intellect, subduing many minds to his,—now cast there at the feet of any who came to look on him with pity,—a spectacle revolting from infirmity, piteous to behold, in his blind solitude and dumb despair.

It became necessary to remove him from Rookcliffe, whose threshold truly, his feet had passed only to bring dark evils in their train. Mrs. Hartley determined, for the present, to devote herself to him, though it was sad for her to leave the poor old Colonel, now half broken-hearted with his nephew's calamity.

The physicians recommended that Aylmer should be conveyed to certain baths, in a mountainous region of Switzerland, and thither Mrs. Hartley proceeded with him, as soon as he was able to move.

It was thought that the efficacy of these mineral waters, would gradually restore to him the use of his limbs, as well as his power of articulation; and this expectation was ultimately realized; but it was many months before any such result took place, and in the interval he was unable to bear an exertion greater than that of being wheeled in his chair from room to room. It was during this period, however, that the events occurred which must now be recorded.

The dwelling in which Mrs. Hartley fixed their abode was a solitary *châlet*, half hidden among the rocks and pine trees of lofty Swiss mountains; the baths were close at hand, but at that season, fortunately for Aylmer, the place was entirely deserted, and the solitude as complete as even his despairing heart could have desired. It was not until things were completely established in this new home that Mrs. Hartley determined on making Millicent Grey acquainted with all that had taken place. No one had written to her from Rookcliffe, feeling, perhaps, that it was at once too painful and too difficult a subject, and her kind old friend knew well, therefore, that she was at present under the firm persuasion that Juliet Egerton was the most happy wife of him she had loved as a woman loves but once.

It was impossible to divine all that might occur when Millicent should be made aware of the truth, but Mrs. Hartley was resolved that she should be acquainted with the simple facts without word or comment from any one, and that the result must be left as a problem which no human hand could solve.

She had deeply felt, throughout the whole of the strange drama, which had been played in the lives of Millicent and Aylmer, that powers, not of earth, were, dealing with them; she knew, by the instinct of those who have been enabled, because of their very simplicity, to draw deeply from the wells of spiritual knowledge, that this was a case with which no mortal dared tamper: clearly there was a struggle going on for the souls of these two living creatures, and the judgment which had fallen on Stephen, with the whole series of events now passing was but the outward machinery, of the hidden power that was working within them.

Mrs. Hartley would not venture to interfere by word or act in the development of their destiny; she conceived it to be her part merely to sit by a silent spectator,—ready, if ever human agents seemed necessary, to step in and befriend them both. This much of active duty only she believed was hers in the matter, to take care that Millicent should be apprised of all the truth, and then she would leave her to act as she might be led by mysterious influences, too subtle for her human eyes to discern.

And Mrs. Hartley wrote,—she gave a simple detail of the awful calamity which had befallen Stephen Aylmer, and of his present condition. She quietly stated the fact of Juliet's marriage, which had just taken place, without even the delay that a mere consideration for the forms of the world would have demanded, of her, so recently engaged to the unhappy man whose sore punishment she had left him to bear alone. Further, Mrs. Hartley gave a brief account of their present mode of life in Switzerland; she and her nephew were, she said, entirely alone,—not only cut off, as they wished to be, from all society, but with only one or two servants, as Aylmer could not endure the tumult of many persons near him. She concluded by saying, that on this account he required from her more attendance than she was able, at her advanced age, to give him; that it would have been well if she could have read to him for several hours each day, in order to withdraw his mind from the distracting thoughts which, notwithstanding his unbroken silence, she knew must be preying on him; especially as at night he was often seized with paroxysms of pain, which rendered it necessary that he should be carried into a freer current of air, and watched over for hours together.

This letter arrived at Aix one day when Millicent Grey was walking in the garden with Arthur Egerton. It was now some time since he had made her aware of his presence in the town, and had been admitted to her society; he had not decided on taking this step, however, because he had perceived in her any indication of that forgetfulness of the past, which could alone give him hope.

So far from that, it was rather because he had found it too great torture, to watch unseen the hourly manifestation of the deep, loving faithfulness, even in anguish, of that breaking heart,—and the longing to hear her voice again, to meet her sweet, sorrowful smile, drove him, almost as hopeless as herself, into her presence at last. It was at first a great shock to her to see him,—she thought it would be utterly insupportable to her, to look again one of those who had been around her the time of her dream-like joys—when she could lift up her loving eyes, upon the dear face, for which she now pined, as one in utter darkness pants for a ray of light; but after a time she found that when the mind is intensely absorbed by one great agony of thought, no outward circumstances can much affect it. She saw that it was as life to Arthur Egerton to be with her, and her sweet, gentle nature was not changed; she was willing and glad to give him, what she felt was but the poor joy of living in her presence, for she never imagined one single instant, that he could suppose it possible for her so much as to tolerate the expression of any other love than that of Stephen Aylmer's.

Millicent Grey was one of those, whose refinement of spirit and instinctive purity of feeling causes them to hold, almost as a holy doctrine, the sacredness of the one affection sufficing for a lifetime,—it was to her a very sacrilege, to think of giving to another, that throne within her soul where she had placed one only human being; what though he had abandoned that high dwelling, and left her breast a desert waste, yet had she consecrated her life and herself to him (woe to her that she dared so to do by any human being!)—and now it was revolting to her, even to suppose that any would dare to profane that offering, by so much as a word of affection.

Long before she had learned these things by her own experience, it had been to her one of the bewildering anomalies of this world, that any should have the power or the will, to admit two affections into their life; she would as soon have thought of holding two opposing creeds at once.

Millicent never dreaded, then, any expression of attachment from Arthur, for she imagined he must plainly understand this feeling, and share in it himself, and she therefore admitted him to her presence, the more compassionately that herself would have been so well content but to have received a like permission to hear the voice and see the face of him she loved, as hopelessly as she believed herself to be beloved.

She was so far right in her conclusion, that Arthur did read and understand the depths of that heart thus consecrated to one feeling only, but still in his own madness of hope, he would not despair,—he had so worked himself into a frantic intensity of love for her, that he felt, what was in truth the case, an utter impossibility within his soul to endure the absence of all hope; such a consummation would produce, he felt certain, a very convulsion in his nature; and he clung to the faintest shadow of a chance with the tenacity of one who feels he is grasping, as it were, at the last shreds of life.

He persuaded himself, also, that he was not so utterly mad, in refraining as yet from despair, because Millicent gradually manifested some pleasure in his society. She did not hide from him, but that was merely because she found a melancholy enjoyment in talking with him of the days of her departed happiness; it seemed to prove to her that all was not a dream,—to convince her of what, in her extremity of wretchedness, she almost doubted, even that joy **did** exist in the world, and had existed for herself; but still, though he knew this was the feeling, which made a faint light steal into those sweet dim eyes when he came near, it was not only unutterable enjoyment to him to meet their glance, but a something less than hopelessness to win it.

So they walked in the garden together, and Arthur was thinking, during one of the long fits of abstraction into which Millicent fell perpetually, that, notwithstanding the exquisite torture it was to him, to see the faithfulness of her soul to Stephen Aylmer, this was still, well-nigh, the brightest, period of his existence,—for she was his alone, at least, to look upon; **he** only heard her voice, **he** only gazed upon her face, none shared with him the air she breathed,—he could close the eyes of his memory, as it were, and believe for a moment that her inward love was his alone, as fully as her outward presence. And then it was to him, ineffable delight, to gloat over the fact in which he implicitly believed—that Stephen Aylmer was long since the husband of his sister Juliet; he had no reason to suppose the contrary, as he had carefully concealed from his family where he had made his abode, and, consequently, had received no tidings from them.

It was Nanette who brought Mrs. Hartley's letter, she came running as fast as her little feet could carry her; for

she knew that if anything could have rendered the spirit of poor Millicent more desolate and heavy than it had been these many months, it was the singular silence which all her English friends had so long preserved;—she little dreamed their motive!

She believed that they had abstained from writing out of tenderness to herself, because they must have communicated the fact of Stephen's marriage. Mrs. Hartley, especially, who, at first, had been her regular correspondent, she could well imagine had lost the courage, to write her the details of that which was her life's calamity; yet she felt that if this was their motive, it was a most mistaken kindness. What was the one object she had set before herself when she entered on the stern and terrible path of complete self-sacrifice? Was it not his happiness, and his alone—was not this the reward to which she looked when with her own hand she plunged, as it were, a knife into her breast, and had she not then a right to know that her work was accomplished, and her mournful recompense granted unto her?

Poor little Nanette, who had been utterly bewildered by all that occurred in England, the whole proceedings being most incomprehensible to her, had, after a vain attempt to discover who it was she ought to hate for Millicent's sake, decided on remaining enraged with the whole world, except Père André,—because some one, she did not know who, had somehow, she could not tell why, made her darling miserable! but most of all she was furious at finding Millicent again consigned to the barren solitude of her life at Aix. To poor John Forde, Nanette had a mortal antipathy, resulting from what she conceived to be his most unjustifiable obstinacy, in maintaining a gloomy silence. Talking was to this good little woman, the great business and pleasure of life, and she looked upon it as a positive crime in her master to throw away his gift in this respect,—she declared he was worse than any owl she ever had heard of,—for they **did** hoot at night, which Monsieur Forde never condescended to do; and her great object was to induce Millicent to leave him, lest she should acquire the same fatal propensity.

The arrival on this day, therefore, of a letter for Miss Grey, was a source of immense delight to her, as she trusted it might contain her recall to England. So tumbling along like a little, fat, round tortoise in a hurry, Nanette made all speed through the mulberry walks to her mistress.

"Une lettre, une lettre," she shouted, pitching her shrill voice at some extraordinary height; "it comes, I dare say, from that detestable Angleterre (Je n'ose pas dire ce maudit pays, le Père André ne permet pas de jurements; mais c'est égal, je sais ce que je pense). Une lettre, ma chérie, ça te fera sourire peut-être."

It was not a smile, however, but an ashy paleness, which spread over the face of Millicent Grey as she took the letter in her hand.

She never doubted but that it contained the news of the final union of Aylmer and Juliet; and though she did in all sincerity desire the assurance of that happiness for which she had laboured with such bitter toil, yet the thought of seeing the irrevocable words made her spirit quail within her.

She tore it open and began to read; Arthur watched her with a most inhuman exultation, for he interpreted the arrival of the letter as she did; and it is extraordinary, when a powerful principle, like that of his love for Millicent, is working in the mind of a man, unguarded by the yet loftier and supreme aim of inward rectitude, how it turns all other feelings within the soul to very poison.

Suddenly, however, his cruel pleasure passed away, and he stood aghast as he saw the wild, changing expressions which were passing over the face of Millicent Grey, like clouds driven by an inward tempest; he saw at once that some extraordinary tidings must have done this. The mere confirmation of the misery, which she had so resolutely accepted as her portion, by the announcement of Aylmer's marriage, could never have aroused all the passionate feelings which he saw were agitating her now; that would have produced only the settled fearful calm of utter hopelessness, but nosy there was plainly on that expressive countenance—horror, and sorrow, and anxiety. What could it all mean? Suddenly Millicent let the letter fall, and clasped her shaking hands, with a wild mournful cry.

Honour be to the true woman's heart within her; she did not for one moment exult that Juliet never was—never would be his wife, nor triumph in her base and heartless desertion, so different to the deep love, faithful in uttermost despair, which came gushing round her heart at that moment. No, she had but one thought in this hour, it was for his suffering; but one desire,—to weep and to struggle, and to spend her life in heart-breaking supplication, that he might be restored to light, to joy, to comfort by any means, in any way; and never—never would she ask that in this renewed life, he should bless her with so much as a thought!

"Millicent, what has happened? In the name of mercy, speak! say what has happened? Why do you look so

wildly to heaven—what can have occurred? They are married, are they not? Aylmer is married! only say that nothing has prevented his marriage with my sister!"

The cold drops literally stood like dew on his forehead as the terror took possession of him, that some event might have occurred to prevent that union.

Millicent pointed to the letter, intimating that he might read it himself; then speaking rather to her own fainting soul than to him, she exclaimed—

"Oh, why am I here? What have I to do in this place? **he** is suffering in pain, in darkness, in solitude; and why am I lingering here?"

She smote on her breast, as though like a guilty one, she would have breathed out her own confession of sin; and then bounding from the spot with the energy as of a new life awakening in her, she disappeared from his sight.

And he too read the letter; he read that record of the working of mysterious powers in this matter, where he had deeply sworn he would accomplish his own will. He had been willing, if need be, to accomplish it by the sacrifice of all that is noble or holy in the soul of man, and by that unrighteous offering, it had seemed to him that already he had effected much, and was likely to effect much more. He, it was, in actual fact, who had torn Millicent from Aylmer's love; his were the hands that dug out the great gulf which had divided them, and now when that consummation was on the very point of taking place, which was, as he believed, to have flung her, wounded in spirit, broken in heart, into his grasping arms,—the very thunders had bestirred themselves to send the lightning-flash, which had again removed the barrier from between Millicent Grey and Stephen Aylmer! It were not easy to describe the impotent rage of this unhappy man, when he found that these things were so. True, Stephen was a helpless cripple, and in this he boldly rejoiced; for as we have said, his whole mind was perverted by the influence of the fierce passion which ruled him; but he felt not the less, that since no union with another could separate them now, this very infirmity and suffering would but make Millicent cling the more closely to him, and live the more devotedly for him, in heart and soul, even though she never took the name of his wife.

Arthur felt that he should lose that sweet presence now, in which he had lived, as we live in the warmth and light of the sun in heaven. He saw not only that she would go to Aylmer, flying back to him like the stricken bird to its beloved nest, but that even if he followed her there, it would be to see her so wrapt and absorbed, in but the mere fact that Stephen Aylmer was present with her, (though even still in heart estranged,) that never more would fall on him so much as one of those pitying glances for which his longing spirit pined.

And this just when faint gleams of hope were stealing, however falsely, into his dark life. Oh, that he could have annihilated the truth contained in that letter which he tramples under his feet now in frantic rage! But soon this first burst of passion subsided, and a feeling rose within him, which produced a complete though a fearful calm.

It was the conviction, joined to the indomitable resolution, that he must and would obtain this, the object and desire of **his** soul, or perish most utterly in the struggle; he had ever felt that his whole heart—his whole being demanded the presence at least, if not the love of Millicent Grey, as a stern necessity—a principle of life for life required; and he knew, as if it had been revealed to him of another man than himself, that whilst the human breath yet lingered on his lips, and the vital flame burnt in his breast, he would so toil and battle for the attainment of this, the great good of his existence; that at least, his worst of failure, should be, her expiring with him in the mortal strife.

CHAPTER VIII.

SWEET and fresh as an angel's breath came the mountain air through that open window, and the music of nature's deep voice was with it; a voice most glorious, the mingling of many tones ever chanting the same burden, the great mystery of love. What aching heart ever heard it and refused comfort? None who understand the language it speaks; but there are some who do not, and Stephen Aylmer was one! The melody with which it sung to-day, was the rushing sound of the wind in the pine-grove, and the far off echo of falling waters. So soft, so soothing, one would have thought it must have stolen into his charmed soul and wakened him from that frightful lethargy; but the soul **was** awake for its own greater agony, the lethargy was but of body, assumed, that none might torture him by probing his cankering wound, or remind him that he yet belonged, blind and degraded, helpless and despairing, to that race among whom he had walked as of a nature superior to all;—so strong in his talent and beauty, having but to stretch forth his hand, to take at his will, of earthly joys offered to him by the noblest and fairest.

He lay in the position which he seldom changed, on a sofa drawn close to the window; the face scarred and seared by the scorching of heaven's own fire, to that heaven was upturned in sullen despair; the darkened eyes closed—the lips indomitably sealed; the hands into which the power of movement was beginning to return, laid motionless on his breast.

It was thus that he remained day after day, taking no heed of any, manifesting neither pleasure nor pain at all that was done for him, yet making it sufficiently plain that he was not only always perfectly conscious, but that his unimpaired senses had acquired that acuteness which blindness most often produces. It would be impossible to conceive a figure more perfectly expressive of a rigid, mute, and dogged suffering:—in every line of that countenance, and even of that listless frame these words seemed written—

"Would to heaven I had died!" Mrs. Hartley sat by his side; and often the work which occupied her fell from her hands whilst she lifted up her eyes to look on that melancholy picture, and wonder if ever those pale stern lips, closed over such tortures, would open to reveal them again; and then in her beautiful patience of faith she would resume her employment, feeling sure that the strange dark history was not yet over, the probation not fulfilled, the trial not complete; and the working of mighty influences with Millicent and Stephen Aylmer, still progressing with a secret energy and power, that soon would reveal itself in great events.

Whilst Mrs. Hartley thus pondered, she heard a movement in the room without, which was divided from that in which she sat, by a door, now standing wide open: what she heard was the echo of a faint footfall, with a sort of fluttering sound, and the whisper of a soft, sobbing breath.

The impression it gave her was as though some poor dove, with throbbing breast and failing wing, had come wandering in, and was expiring there,—but her own heart's sympathy told her what it really was. She rose and passed into the other room, where she found, as she expected, poor Millicent Grey leaning against the wall with a face white as marble, and hands icy cold, faint, and oppressed, almost dying under the overwhelming conviction that she was breathing the same air as Stephen Aylmer.

Mrs. Hartley took her in her arms, and let her lie there silent, feeling with intense pity the quick, fearful throbbing of that poor heart against her own. She said merely what she knew would give her a soothing assurance.

"I expected you; I hoped you would come." And then kissed the quivering lips that had not power to answer. Millicent lay very still in that kind embrace for a few minutes; but when she raised herself Mrs. Hartley saw that her dilated eyes were fixed with the most painful anxiety on the door of communication; she released her instantly, and went to close it, lest any sound should reach Stephen Aylmer; and returning to her, said softly,—

"You are right, he is there:" her words sent the blood back to that heaving breast. Millicent tottered for a moment on her failing feet, but they carried her at once to the spot, and kneeling down, she rested her head against the wood which separated her from him who had trampled with cruel feet upon her heart, and to whom that heart was rising up again in this his hour of desertion and solitude, faithful and tender as the day he had first asked it from her,

It seemed to give her great rest and peace to remain there, in that attitude, and Mrs. Hartley did not disturb her. She saw that she was becoming quite composed, and she waited quietly till she rose and came towards her; then

she drew her to her side, and Millicent began in a low, beseeching tone:

"You said you expected me; then you will let me stay—you will let me be with him to watch over him, as no mother ever watched over a darling child, to toil and slave and work for him. His poor darkened eyes will never know who waits on him, and you could not condemn him to a hired service in his sufferings—when such an ocean of deep free love is here! you could not condemn me to such a death in life, as to know him full of pain, and wretched, and I not here to soothe and to tend him! Oh, you will let me stay; surely he is my own, mine, by a love that has no name in human words; mine by the sacredness with which his image has lain in my soul, through all my night of gloom, unprofaned by a thought but of the most devoted tenderness. **She** has deserted him; let him not think there is no truth, no purity of faithfulness remain—ing in the world,—surely, he is my own, my treasure;—**she** thought that treasure worthless, because of his darkened eyes, and his crippled form; but to me his infirmity, his helplessness, his misery, does make him only more dear, more deeply, more intensely dear. Say that I shall stay with him, to be as his hired servant,—it is ennobling to wait on those who are sacred by suffering. Oh, say the word, for in truth, I cannot leave him; my life would pass from me in the effort."

Mrs. Hartley had let her go on making all this humble, imploring petition, because, in fact, she was almost suffocated by the emotion which that mournful pleading voice, and those words wrought in her; but now she exerted herself to speak.

"You shall stay with him, darling; it is, in truth, your place, allotted to you by no hand of man. He shall be your care, and you his gentle protector, for he is helpless as an infant. The strong has become weak, and the weak how marvelously strong! Strange things have come to pass, truly, and stranger yet await us, if I mistake not. But I tamper not with it, go where you are led,—do as the hidden guiding bids you. Only, sweet Millicent," she hesitated, dreading the effect of her words, "he must never know that it is you who are his kind attendant."

Mrs. Hartley felt convinced, knowing how Juliet yet occupied his whole soul, that Millicent's presence would be insupportable to him were he aware of it.

Millicent's face blanched at the words: she most fully understood them, but she answered calmly, for she had that strength within her now which most women acquire, in time of trial for the weal of others, even when they are weakest for their own.

"Yes, I am fully aware he must not ever know it. It would deeply pain him, I know well, and would, in truth, be very sad for him, to feel that one so hated was near him. But I will be very careful, and I do not think that he will recognize my voice. I am so changed in that and in everything."

"You are, indeed, my own poor child. I do not think that there is any fear," said Mrs. Hartley, sadly; for truly it was a heart-breaking thing now to hear poor Millicent's voice,—the dear, birdlike tones had died into so sad, uncertain a murmur, always weak and trembling, as though with the load of suppressed emotion.

Even as Juliet Egerton had chosen to look on the stricken man alone, when he was not aware of her presence, so did Millicent Grey now desire to see him. The one had so willed it, that in her cold, calculating selfishness, which seemed to belie the very woman's nature belonging to her, she might ascertain the incapacity of Aylmer to serve her any further, and then desert him for ever; the other cherished this wish solely that no one, not even himself, might be aware of the lowly loving homage she pined to render unto one, now sacred in her eyes by suffering.

Mrs. Hartley said she might go at once quietly in to see him, as the blind man, even if he heard a movement near him, would take no notice of it, and afterwards she herself would tell him that she had provided a new attendant for him, when Millicent might enter without delay on her chosen and noble duty.

So soon as the desired permission was thus given, Millicent rose. She was resolutely calm, and Mrs. Hartley saw **her**, whom he had betrayed and deserted,—whose spirit he had wounded,—whose life he had destroyed,—glide into the presence of Stephen Aylmer; she saw her sink lowly, on bended knee, before him, and press her lips with a beautiful respect,—a deep, pitying love,—to the feet of the wretched, unsightly cripple, and then she closed the door, for she felt it was a scene far too sacred to be profaned by human eyes.

As usual Stephen Aylmer made no answer when Mrs. Hartley told him he was to be waited on by another attendant,—it was to him, like everything else, a matter of perfect indifference; and Millicent at once quietly entered on the post, full of labour and suffering, which she would not have exchanged for a royal throne. She was careful at first not to let him hear the sound of her voice, but it was soon evident, as the days passed on, that he was beginning to observe, and to be pleased with, the unspeakable tenderness of the care she bestowed on

him,—it was impossible indeed but that the atmosphere of love with which she surrounded him, should fail to penetrate even unto his soul.

Gradually he began to show by his movements, and the faint smile which passed over his face when her light step sounded near, how soothing and sweet to him her presence was; it was plain he loved to feel her soft, cool hand resting, as often it did, for hours together, on his burning forehead, and to know that her ever-watchful devotion was around him; but as yet he had never opened his lips.

At length one day she ventured to read to him,—it was the only service his attendants could render him, which always appeared to give him pleasure,—it drove away for the time the dark thoughts which well nigh maddened him, and as Mrs. Hartley's advanced age rendered her incapable of performing it, Millicent was the more anxious to ascertain that she might so do without risk of his discovering her. At the first sound of her voice he started violently, but the very sight of this emotion on his part, only made herself the more agitated, and in the low, indistinct tones with which she continued to read, it did indeed seem impossible that he should recognise the sweet, clear voice with which of old she used to greet him. It was evident that he did become reassured, and remained listening with quiet enjoyment to her reading; not only it seemed to be like a soothing melody to his restless and wearied soul, but there was apparently something in the soft tremulousness of that voice, so full of the deep love she bore him, which moved him greatly, for when she had concluded, he suddenly broke the sullen, stern silence of many months, and said to her—

"I thank you very much,—I hope you will never leave me."

Oh the tide of wild emotion that came gushing through her breast, as she thus heard again the voice for which she had hungered and thirsted so long! she could not remain in the room, but fled away, to give free vent to her agitation, by a happiness to which her poor desolate heart was now so little accustomed,—for not only she had heard his voice, but she had heard it addressing herself, in accents of kindness.

From that day she read to him constantly, and was with him always. He spoke to her, but to her only, and that sparingly,—whenever any one else was in the room he was invariably silent. He became impatient of any attention but hers, and openly manifested the pleasure he had in her society.

No words can ever tell the intense joy all this was to Millicent Grey; it was greater even, perhaps, than in the days when she had been his prosperous bride, for then she had not felt that wearing sorrow which so enhances a return of happiness; and now, too, she felt that the joy, mournful as it would have seemed to any other, which she experienced in ministering to him in his helpless state, was far more secure than the rapturous delight of brighter times, for the frightful infirmities which had cut him off from his former friends, and from the very world itself, had shut her in, as it were, with him, into his dark solitude, and delivered him up, by all others deserted, to her faithful care alone.

But soon, to her unspeakable delight, his health began to improve greatly under her unremitting care. He was able at last to walk a few steps through the room, leaning on her arm; both Millicent and Mrs. Hartley soon became aware that this physical improvement, was chiefly the result of some change which was taking place in his mind; an ingredient strangely like the sweet leaven of hope, was plainly working in the spirit long so dead and heavy.—Hope! but of what? It was not till Millicent had been with him two or three months, that the presence of this, our angel of mercy, in his soul, became apparent, and with it his whole manner and appearance altered. Millicent had taken the name of Mary, by which he always called her; and once when he questioned Mrs. Hartley respecting her, wishing to know who she was, and whence she came, she had so resolutely abstained from giving him any information whatever, and had so calmly answered, that she was merely a person whom she had provided to wait upon him, that they were convinced no outward circumstance could in any way arouse his suspicions.

Yet that they were aroused in some way was plain; the intense happiness it evidently was to him to have her near him; the eagerness with which he listened for her step; the mournful impatience which tormented him in her brief absence; and above all, the peculiarly meaning smile, that often brightened on his countenance, when he heard the tones of her voice, all showed abundantly that some strange idea was working in his mind respecting her.

As these facts became day by day more evident, there was a deep, fluttering delight which stole into the heart of Millicent Grey, and there abode, making her often faint with excess of happiness; for if he suspected the truth, as both she and Mrs. Hartley were inclined to believe, if he had divined who she was, the discovery, beyond a doubt, had been one of rapturous pleasure to him. Oh, if it were so, how was her deep, patient love rewarded!

What better, higher glory,—what dearer joy did she ask for life, than to be allowed thus to watch over him in his helplessness until her dying hour. And to do so not in secret, but with his own glad permission, were to make for her this mortal existence a very vision of delight.

But that even the hope, the sweet belief in the possibility of such happiness, was too inexpressibly dear to be lightly risked, she would already have made her happy confession to him, and learnt whether, in truth, her bright dream was to be realized.

Besides, Mrs. Hartley counseled her to wait with patience till Aylmer should himself explain what he really thought. When she remembered the passionate agony of the tone in which he had uttered the first word after his accident, Juliet's name, she felt doubtful of any such sudden revulsion of feeling.

Meanwhile, most restless and most miserable was Arthur Egerton, haunted by the unhappy love on which he had staked, and as it seemed, lost his life, even as a man is pursued by the spirit of one he has murdered. Day and night, day and night wearily pondering, dreaming hopelessly, he wandered on the mountains which surrounded Millicent's dwelling; he had followed her to Switzerland, and she knew it. At times he came to the ch[^]let, but he could not remain long, all he saw and heard there was too insupportable to him; and Mrs. Hartley was always terrified lest the sound of his voice should reach Aylmer's ear, as she knew that the vicinity of Arthur would soon have betrayed Millicent's presence to him.

It was inconceivable what this unhappy man suffered at sight of her devotion to Aylmer, it drove him well-nigh frantic with rage. What! was his true, unchanging, fervent attachment, to be treated with scorn and indifference, whilst the man who had crushed her with his base desertion, who even now, perhaps, loved another but too fondly, was to receive unknowing the outpouring of her whole soul's deep tenderness, the offering of her very life! Stephen Aylmer and he were more than equals now, infinitely more frightful than his repulsive countenance or ungainly figure was the poor crippled man's appearance. And the deadly hate that swelled up in Arthur's heart towards Aylmer, had a terrible power in goading him to a recklessness of evil, which a short time since would have appalled himself; he was not, however, in any degree quiescent in this state of unholy anguish. Day by day more deeply he swore that, living or dying, Millicent Grey should yet be his,—or, at least, that she should never be Stephen Aylmer's.

CHAPTER IX.

SOME weeks had passed while matters continued in this state, when Millicent on entering Aylmer's room one day found him in evident agitation. She herself had prepared to come to him with a trembling anxiety, for they had parted the evening before, after a conversation which had filled her with mingled terror and hope. His health and spirits had continued to improve manifestly, under the influence of her presence, and not of her presence only, but of some secret and sweet belief connected with her; he could not have failed to discern from the first moment of her attendance on him, that hers was a service of love, and it was very plain that he had not only pondered much, from **whom** such a devotion of affection could have come, but that he had arrived at a decided opinion on the matter.

This decision, whatever it might be, was one full of rapturous joy to him, as every word and movement indicated when Millicent Grey was near him; but latterly he had shown an impatience of the silence she still maintained, which proved to them all, that concealment would soon be impossible.

The night before he began to talk to her of Rookcliffe, and she saw by the manner in which he turned his head towards her, and the eager, watchful expression of his face, that he had chosen this subject solely in order to discover by the tone of her answer, whether it caused her any agitation; he had reason to be abundantly satisfied, for her voice shook, so that she could scarcely speak, and he almost felt in the vibrating air the trembling of her frame as she stood beside him.

A sudden terror had taken possession of her—she saw that he was about to speak again, and she doubted not it would be to demand the truth from her, and she had hurried away to prevent it, for full of hope as she was, that he had long since guessed the real state of the case, and had proved by his evident happiness, how utterly her deep love and faithfulness had prevailed at last over his wayward heart,—yet this summer—time of hope had been so inexpressibly sweet to her, that she dreaded any change, even were it to richer blessings; she had known too much of misery—sudden, blighting misery, not to cling to the present joy with a shrinking dread of aught that could vary it in any way. She saw at a glance, however, on entering the room next morning, that this hour was to be decisive; the manner in which he took her hand on her entrance, and held it with a grasp from which she could not escape, showed that he was resolved that she should not leave him without an explanation.

Millicent sat down on a low seat by his side—her accustomed place, and the sightless eyes turned to her with an almost frightful anxiety, as though the frantic desire of the soul could enable it even yet to look through those darkened cavities. Meanwhile the grasp tightened on her hand; he spoke at last, his voice was low and tremulous.

"I have been so longing for you, my light, my joy!"

She started; he had never called her by such terms before:—he went on:

"I shall never call you Mary again, it is a false title; you have a dearer name for me, my earthly guardian angel." Her heart throbbed so violently that she could scarce remain tranquil, but his strong hand closed on hers and seemed to control her; she listened now to what he said, entranced as when in dreams we hear a sweet unearthly music.

"Listen, gentlest and tenderest of friends," continued Aylmer. "I long to tell you all that has been wandering through my heart this many a day, breathing, as it were, new life within it. When you came to me,—a vision of sweetest mercy, I was plunged in a despair for which earth has no parallel; my longing eyes were shut up from the light of day—deprived for ever of their rapturous delight in beauty, and my pining soul was exiled from the light of life, deprived for ever of its intense enjoyment in that love which is the moral beauty of this world. When you came with that soft tender hand, that sweet voice, whose faintest tone breathed volumes of affection, which it was unutterable joy to me to hear; then light and beauty both returned to my soul, for they were in the devoted, disinterested love I felt you gave me. I knew, however, that it was no stranger love which was around me, brightening every moment more and more the blackness of darkness to which the wrath of heaven had consigned me! Had it been,—(a thing incredible indeed!) some really new affection roused by pity for me, it had but added a thousand-fold to my great torment; for what to me were the love in which I could not share, for which I felt no shadow of a wish? valueless indeed, as is that sunshine now, on which I cannot gaze, were the attachment in which I could feel no sympathy! But I knew it was not so—with the very first sound of your voice there sprung into my soul a hope brighter, dearer, more glorious, than any which ever shone upon my days of pride—the hope,

that one who loved me when we were in some sense equals, now with a beautiful generosity, a faithfulness worthy to be crowned with noblest honour, had returned to the poor, wretched, helpless cripple in his deep adversity, and sacrificed to him the priceless treasure of her heart and life,—freely as though he were not a very pauper in this world, more abject, more degraded, more utterly stripped of all earthly good than the starving beggar who can see the sun!"

"Sweet angel, as this hope brightened in my heart, no words can ever tell the tide of matchless joy that gushed in with it; I felt, and I feel now, that almost would I gladly sacrifice the sight of these blind eyes again, to have so glorious, so unexampled a proof of that love which alone is precious to me on this earth."

"So very sweet that hope, I could not bear to change it even for a more blessed assurance—but I have lived in your presence, happy,—as in the days of light and joy—feeling that hour by hour, with your most tender care and most devoted watchfulness, you were twining yourself around my heart with a power which you never possessed, even when I could claim you as my promised bride. Dearer grew life, yes, even to the blind cripple how intensely dear! Fender, holier, brighter grew your image in my soul, till I felt that ample was the compensation for all that had been taken from me, in the gift my very infirmities had procured me—of a love which could not otherwise have existed in its utter unselfishness and generosity. I never thought you could be to me, what you have been these last few months. I never thought in my time of triumph, to feel for you the intensity of tenderness which now absorbs me; therefore have you made my suffering truly a most blessed thing."

"But now I can no longer be content with but the hope, however firm, I must have the certainty—that certainty which shall make the blind man's darkened life, far brighter than that of any who look upon the light of heaven—that certainty without which I must even die! for I can truly feel that my existence now is literally bound up in you. Speak, then, you who are my life, say that I am right, that you are—Juliet!"

JULIET!—those few minutes when Millicent Grey sat with her hand in Stephen Aylmer's, listening to those words of his which we have just recorded, had been the happiest of her life—and that happiness had been of a nature which it is rarely given to mortals to enjoy on this side heaven—for she had firmly believed that he was speaking throughout of herself. She imagined him to be fully aware of Juliet's marriage (which had, in fact, been concealed from him), and therefore it never occurred to her that he could have so far deceived himself, as to have mistaken her for her cousin. She had sat there hearing him speak of his perfect happiness, to gain which she had so toiled—a fearful, painful toil—and hearing him say that he had obtained it by the very means which was to secure her own—instead of his life being made blessed only by the utter cursing of hers—and it had seemed to her while he spoke that mercy had been at last extended to her, and that her great prayer, into which her whole existence had been embodied for his well-being on earth, had been granted in such a way as to secure a bright joy for herself.

She thought that her long sore trial was ended—that she who had been so tossed on the deep waters of despair, so driven to and fro by storms of misery, so chilled to the very soul by biting blasts of human cruelty, was about to enter on her rest at last—and that even she had reason to rejoice in all that had occurred, since it had wrought for her a far more perfect joy—for he who had coldly loved her formerly, already spoke of the intensity of tenderness her deep devotion had called forth. And now into the very ocean of calm and exquisite enjoyment in which her soul had floated while he spoke, there came breathing in the name of Juliet—that word of fearful import! even as the cry of "fire" sounds in the startled mariner's ears when the summer's seas are all tranquillity, and tells him that destruction is come upon him, and he is about to perish for ever in the remorseless deep. She fell back, stricken down by that name, almost as he had been by the thunder-bolt, and by that movement, plucked her hand from his grasp with sudden violence.

Aylmer was startled, almost terrified—he raised himself on his elbow, and it was sad to see the intense anxiety with which the force of habit sent the poor sightless eyes wandering in search of her.

"Where are you?" he said, with a mournful cry. "What can have happened? Why will you not speak? Think, think how my life is depending on your answer; it cannot be that I was mistaken—oh, it cannot be that such anguish is preparing for me, such a dawn of hope to fade into so black a night—but no, no—it is only that you are agitated, and so cannot speak. I can hear your heart beating, I know that it is so, and I know you are my own, my own Juliet. I could not mistake that dear voice, so sweetly familiar."

She shuddered violently—that fatal resemblance of voice, once before had cost her agony—but now! Still she was silent, but for the convulsive drawing of her breath, which he heard distinctly—the paleness of a deadly alarm

spread over his face—he stretched out his shaking hands, groping frantically in his great darkness. At last he touched her; then he seized her by the arm; he dragged her close to him; he passed his hand over her head and face—"Speak, speak!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Do you know what you are doing? Do you know that you are killing, me? If you are not Juliet Egerton, if you are not **MY** Juliet, the beloved of my heart, the light of my soul—the joy, the hope, the charm of my life—I swear to you that I will not live—I **will not!** to be so wretched, so accursed a thing—blind, baffled, miserable!" He almost shouted the last word, and it roused her from her extreme agony to feel that she must think—that she must decide what was to be done in this horrible emergency; and again towering over the soul of Millicent Grey, over her passion of distress, her almost delirium of suffering, there rose the one desire, which had been the abiding principle of her existence, since first she had looked on Stephen Aylmer—the desire for his happiness—this arose predominant over all—his words rung in her ears,—he would not live to endure the misery of knowing he had been mistaken. She compared this with his glad outpouring of joy a few minutes before. He **had** been happy—how happy in the belief that she was Juliet; and now, what a prospect of intolerable desolation was before him. And wherefore should he endure it? Why should her revelation bring it darkly upon him? He had been most unspeakably blest in a delusion—why should not the delusion continue?—for months he had believed that Juliet was with him—why should he not believe it, and rejoice in the thought to his dying hour? What should prevent it but her own want of courage, of devotion, of faithfulness, to perform so fearful a penance, as thus to personate for him the rival he loved?

Millicent never thought of the falsehood such a plan must involve. Those who worship their idols of flesh, soon forget the pure laws of a holier faith.

She thought only that she had consecrated herself to his happiness, and again by martyrdom was she condemned to obtain it.

There was no time for delay; the clinging hands were tightening frantically upon her arm—the countenance of Aylmer was distorted with the most fearful emotions.

She bowed her head, her spirit resigned itself—it delivered up its hope and its joy as a man gives up life, and the breath on his lips. She accepted her penance.

She pressed her lips to his hands that were cruelly crushing her own, and whispered "I am her, indeed, who has loved you so well."

How bitterly, long after, did she rue that perjury! but she thought not then of the crime, remembering only that she was to be the instrument of his peace, by what means soever that peace might be effected.

And he, the full tide of joy rushing back to his heart, assured that she was Juliet indeed, how he tortured her soul with his wild cry of delight,—how he caused her whole frame to shiver, in the horrible mockery of the embrace bestowed on her for the sake of another. She endured it for a while—then life seemed passing away altogether, and she said,—"I am faint—let me go—I will return."

And he released her. He thought in truth such joy was bewildering. She crept away lost, hopeless, and in torture. Yet even then her thought was for him; she must take care that no other took from him the joy she had given—fearful the cost, and secure must the recompense be.

She went to Mrs. Hartley, she told her all—she besought her not to destroy the poor blind man's delusion. She said it was done,—it must be so,—that her task was appointed now to the end of her days,—the, daily, hourly agony of receiving his love for another. She said that his happiness was her own right, her charge, her care, and none must dare tamper with it—had she not bought it with suffering such as human words could not reveal? Mrs. Hartley hesitated long; she felt it was wrong to permit a deceit, but she was a woman, and weak,—her heart was wrung by the pleading of the desolate being now sobbing before her. She said she would not affirm a falsehood, but she would not undeceive him.

Millicent thanked her for this permission to live a life of inconceivable anguish, as though for the highest boon; and Mrs. Hartley ever dreading to interfere in so dark and fearful a history, added in sorrowing accents,—"My child, I fear you have taken to yourself a torture you will find insupportable."

CHAPTER X.

AND Mrs. Hartley was right; there was a torture beyond the power of language to express, in the life Millicent Grey had chosen to herself, yet not insupportable, nothing is insupportable to that love which alone deserves the name, a love free from the least taint of selfishness. Willingly she had accepted the sacrifice—willingly she performed it; but it was not as formerly, one sharp fierce trial, one convulsive effort, and then the calm of inaction; it was now the renewed and continued struggle of every moment, the fresh wound of each hour, the daily offering up of self, with a bleeding and a broken heart.

The very excess of her suffering was in some sense sweet, because all was endured for **him**, but it was in truth a very fearful penance, to sit day after day by his side, and hear him give her every name of the softest endearment, every assurance of that affection which alone could have been her life's sunshine and to know it was all designed for another! to feel the loving grasp of his hand, and tremble to think how with that hand, he would have driven her from him, had he known the truth;—to hear him delight himself in giving her all the torturing details of his intense love for her cousin, from the very first hour he had seen her,—to listen to his declaration of exquisite unutterable happiness in the belief that Juliet was near him, whose presence alone he desired in this world.

Then, often, he would speak of Millicent herself, as of one whom he had never really loved, but sought only to marry for his uncle's pleasure; and who, because of her indifference, or perhaps for the sake of Arthur Egerton, had been so ready to give him up: he said that her coldness of heart was plainly proved, since she had never so much as inquired after him since his fearful accident; how different from his beautiful, his beloved Juliet, whose unexampled devotion was lovely as her own sweet face,— whose pure generous soul shared the beauty of her outward appearance! how thankful he was that he had been saved from wedding Millicent Grey. He shuddered to think on the anguish he would have suffered had he seen Juliet Egerton, when already the husband of one he must have learnt to hate.

Poor Millicent wept very sore when he spoke thus, and if he felt her cold cheek wet with tears, he took it as another proof of Juliet's feeling heart, and lavished on her thanks and praises that were but too torturing. It might have seemed that the woman's pride within her, would have revolted against such treatment, but pride could have no place in presence of such frightful infirmities as those which were laid on Stephen Aylmer;—her deep humility of devotion could never be degrading, when offered to so miserable, so unsightly an object of compassion as he had become.

In the deceit she was now practicing, Millicent Grey had made that fatal mistake, that subtle but most unrighteous error, which supposes that self-sacrifice or a noble generous aim can **sanctify a falsehood**. Many crimes have been committed, not of falsehood only, but of deeper dye, by means of this fallacy, so inviting to ardent and misguided minds.

But Millicent soon found, as must ever be the case with any deviation from truth, that she had involved herself in a labyrinth of difficulty. Aylmer had constantly asked her to assure him again and again, that she had told him only what was her determined resolution, when she had promised to devote her life to him, and this she could with all truth affirm, for she did love, and designed to live, in and for him only.

Gradually he made it manifest for what purpose he had sought this assurance; he said if it were so, if really he was to be so unspeakably blest as that she should never quit him more, she must take the sanction of his name, she must assume the title that once had been so nearly hers, and become his wife.

It may be imagined what terror there was in this proposal to the wretched Millicent; it was utterly impossible to carry the deceit so far as to let him marry her under his present delusion, and yet it was both difficult and bitterly painful to refuse him; for whilst in her own rightful person she would have been too thankful to have thus bound herself more irrevocably to the care of his existence, in her strange and peculiar position he could only attribute her hesitation to a repugnance against a marriage with one so unfortunate; thus believing her withheld by the very infirmities and helplessness, which would have drawn her in actual fact more closely to him.

Aylmer did not reproach her for her refusal, but she saw that he felt it deeply, and this cut her to the very heart.

Still, the days and weeks, and even months went on, whilst they continued to lead this painful and unnatural existence; but Millicent little thought the while how the very ground beneath her feet was being undermined.

It will not be supposed that Arthur Egerton, with his fierce will, and subtle mind, could remain inactive or content with an arrangement which rendered Stephen Aylmer perfectly happy in the entire enjoyment of Millicent's society, and bound herself to him as with an indissoluble tie. From the first moment when Arthur heard of the extraordinary system of deception into which Millicent had been drawn unawares, he saw therein a bright hope for himself.

Knowing Stephen Aylmer to be thoroughly convinced that it was indeed Juliet, the only being he had ever really loved, who was giving him hourly proofs of such unequalled affection, Arthur felt certain that the disappointment, if ever he discovered his mistake, would be so terrible and so bitter, that the angry man would not scruple to cast off poor Millicent for ever.

Ungoverned passion is a fearful thing, and Arthur knew its power too well in his own soul, not to judge accurately enough of its effect in others; he had never yet been allowed to see Aylmer, but he heard enough in his visits to Mrs. Hartley, to show him that the blind man was becoming day by day more absorbed in the happiness which he believed he derived, from the presence and the affection of Juliet only—so that to find how, in actual fact, she was far distant from him, would be to plunge him in a despair over which the unhappy Millicent could have no power. Arthur's great object, therefore, was to undeceive the blind man as soon as might be. Strange! to think that to this cruel, unrelenting persecution of one most unfortunate, he should have given the holy name of love! He would have dealt more tenderly by Millicent Grey, had he long since driven a knife into her heart, than thus by repeated blows to pierce her, ever living, to its very core.

He found it by no means an easy matter to effect his purpose. Millicent had prevented him even seeing Aylmer, lest some unguarded word from him should betray the truth; and although he was fully determined to steal into his presence whenever he had an opportunity of doing so unobserved; yet as Mrs. Hartley or herself were always with him, this was not soon accomplished.

One day, however, when some months had elapsed, in which the blind man had lived most happy in his sweet delusion, Arthur Egerton found means to penetrate into his apartment. Mrs. Hartley had gone out—and he had by a stratagem succeeded in having Millicent sent for to speak to some person on business in another part of the house.

Then he stole like a stealthy serpent into the blind man's room.

For a moment Arthur Egerton stood appalled at the sight he saw—he remembered so well the pride, and the beauty, and the strength of that deformed repulsive-looking being. Yet, with that wreck of humanity before him, telling of what elements this life's treasures are composed, he went on, preparing to devote, and, perhaps unawares to sacrifice altogether, his deathless soul for the attainment of an earthly good. Remembering he had no time to lose, he went up and took Aylmer by the hand.

He asked him if he recollected him, and inquired, with much apparent kindness, respecting the state of his health.

"Arthur Egerton, is it not?" exclaimed Aylmer. "I recognised your voice; I have been wishing much that some of Juliet's family should visit us; I am very glad you are come."

Arthur was delighted to hear him in his very sentence introduce the subject on which he wished to speak. It was necessary that he should give his information speedily, as Millicent was certain to return soon.

"I am truly happy to see you, my dear Aylmer," he replied; "I fear, however, I can give you no news of Juliet which will be agreeable to you."

"News of Juliet!" exclaimed Aylmer. "Arthur, what can you mean? how should I require news of her when she is with me every hour of the day?"

"Juliet with you?" replied Arthur, throwing into his voice a well-feigned expression of surprise; "you must be labouring under some extraordinary mistake. My sister is not here, I can assure you."

"That is, you are not aware of it; you are but just arrived, and it is plain she has concealed from you that she has been with us these many months; but it is best there should be no such mysteries. I will persuade her to see you, and tell you all the truth to-day."

"Aylmer," said Arthur, with great decision and solemnity, "I know not what motive they have for thus grossly deceiving you, but I give you my word of honour that Juliet Egerton is not and never has been here; she is in Italy, where I saw her not long since, and whence I received a letter from her this morning; I can read it to you if you like, as a proof that I tell the plain truth."

He was careful not to tell she was married; it might have induced Aylmer more readily to forgive poor Millicent. An expression of the wildest agitation had passed over the face of the blind man; he started up, the darkened eyes staring wide open.

"In the name of mercy, what is it you say?" he exclaimed; "am I to doubt the evidence of my own senses? it is not half an hour since Juliet left the room—"

"Aylmer, I grieve to remind you of it; but you must remember that you are deprived of the use of that sense which could alone enable you to ascertain the truth on this point. I repeat to you, and indeed it were best for you to receive the fact, however painful—you are deceived, cruelly deceived—Juliet has never been here."

"But I know her voice—the touch of her hand, Arthur; I tell you she has been at my side for hours, and answered even to that name."

"There is often a strange resemblance in voices, and where there is the premeditated resolution to mislead one blind as you are, it is not a difficult matter; but it is needless for you to argue the point any further with me. I tell you I have been here for months, and constantly in this house, only they would not let me see you, lest I should act a friend's part by you, and undeceive you. I have watched the person who represents Juliet for you; I know who she is, for I have seen her face day by day, though you could not."

There was an evident truthfulness in this last speech of Arthur's, which suddenly carried complete conviction to the mind of Aylmer. He no longer doubted that it was even so—that he had been utterly deceived, and that all the intense, most exquisite happiness he had enjoyed in the society of her he believed to be his Juliet, his living ideal of glorious beauty, was in truth but a false and bitter mockery. If a man, by a single word, could suddenly call up the whirlwind out of a summer sky, and were unexpectedly to see the raging tempest springing up at his own unguarded wish, he could not be more utterly appalled than was Arthur Egerton, when he saw the horrible expression of frantic rage, that now distorted the features of the unhappy Aylmer.

All that had been deepest joy to him, in the delusion thus rudely destroyed, all that was horror, darkness, and despair in the prospect of his life without it, had gathered itself up into one fierce passion of unrestrained tremendous anger against her who had practised this deceit upon him. He had ever been of fiery temper, he could ill brook contradiction even in his best days,—and now to find that advantage had been taken of his very infirmity to mislead him, and prepare for him an agony of disappointment, against which his whole soul revolted, as the body would shrink from the rack itself,—was so maddening a discovery, that it flung him into a convulsion of rage, full of the one wild desire to wreak his vengeance on the false Juliet who had betrayed him. The violence of his passion impeded his speech for a few minutes; then his countenance became livid with its excess, and he burst out in a tone that almost struck terror to the heart even of the strong man before him—

"Who is she then, where is she, who has dared to deceive me, that base, most treacherous, being—who is she, that I may know whom to hate, with all the power of the false love I felt for her, turned now to deadliest poison?"

"She is here to speak for herself," muttered Arthur, shaking from head to foot, as he suddenly perceived that Millicent had entered unperceived, and was standing close to the blind man, with her horror-dilated eyes fixed full on his face. She had heard Aylmer's terrible speech.

"Here!" he exclaimed, and stretched out his hand; it fell on the shoulder of Millicent, and closed on it with a grasp fierce and cruel as that of a tiger. He dragged her to him with such violence that she fell to the ground; then he shouted in her ear with a voice more awful to her than the thunders in their wrath, "Who are you—what are you—impostor, deceiver—that have dared to betray the blind man? Vile hypocrite, creeping here with your soft lying words, to steal my heart's love on such false pretences. Speak, is it true, has he spoken the truth?—which of you has lied to bring a curse on your heads, for baffling the blind?—are you not Juliet Egerton, my only beloved?"

"Forgive, forgive," gasped Millicent, in convulsions of anguish and fear.

"Forgive! is there ever forgiveness for a deed like this? I will know who you are, most wretched impostor; speak at once—lest in my fury I take from you the power of speaking for ever—who are you?"

"Millicent!" She felt as if her heart's blood gushed out with that name.

"Millicent!" It seemed as though a lingering of hope had remained for him till that word was spoken; and now all was blackness in the spirit, where hope and joy reigned so brightly before.

With all the force of his strong hand he flung her away, as a thing too worthless to claim another thought, and

then bowing his face on his hands, he gave way to irrepressible sorrow, crying out for Juliet, Juliet—his own, his only love—beseeching her to come, wafting and lamenting in uttermost desolation. Millicent had gone reeling from his heavy hand till she fell against the wall, and sunk to the ground stunned and bruised with the blow; but that voice, the fatal name of Juliet breathed in such accents of mournful tenderness, recalled her to the bitterness of life. She could no more endure those sounds, than a criminal on the scaffold could have borne the insults of the exulting people. She rose and staggered out; as she passed Arthur, she turned her wan face, where the prayer for death was written in legible characters, and cast on him one look of gentlest, most touching reproach—

That look was with him to his dying day; and years after, when he was sinking in his mortal sickness, he told one who watched by him, that he believed that white face, with its pale dumb lips, and awfully eloquent eyes, would look at him through the coffin lid. So Millicent Grey wandered away from the house, no one knew whither, and Arthur Egerton, who saw not which way she went, fled in the opposite direction, appalled and yet exulting at all he had done.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Mrs. Hartley returned she found only Stephen Aylmer within the house, in a state of mind which baffled all description. She guessed what happened, but he told her all in detail; and his fury returning as he thought how bright had been the dream, how bitter the waking, he repeated the cruel words he had used to the wretched Millicent.

Mrs. Hartley could scarcely contain her indignation, when she heard how he had treated that generous faithful friend. Poor Millicent had erred certainly in departing from the truth, but was **he** the one to punish her so fiercely for the error that had sprung out of the patient love he inspired? His aunt saw it was time he should learn to know the value of that true heart's rare and devoted affection, and that the mask should be stripped from the false worldly being he worshipped so madly.

With a tone of solemnity which forcibly arrested his attention, she told him to compose himself, and listen to the truth of his own life, which had been since the hour he met Juliet Egerton presented to him in such false colours, that he had fallen into those grievous errors, whereby he had utterly destroyed his own peace and that of others.

Mrs. Hartley knew Juliet's real character most thoroughly,—one of her own married daughters had known both her, and the Marchesa with whom she had lived at Milan very intimately, and had detailed to her mother the whole circumstances of Juliet's conduct there, which was in no case at all favourable to her. This lady had also fortunately a full acquaintance with all the particulars of her first conversation with Aylmer, as the Marchesa who was her rival in reality, though her friend in name, had not scrupled, after Miss Egerton's departure for England, to tell all who cared to know, the history of that deep-laid scheme, to entrap by a little artful mystery, the inaccessible Englishman, supposed heir to so immense a fortune. When Mrs. Hartley wrote, therefore, asking the real facts of this mysterious acquaintance of Aylmer and Juliet, from which they assumed a right to act in so strange a manner at Rookcliffe,—her daughter was able to give her a faithful account of it, with a deep insight into Juliet's subtle mind and hateful character.

And now Mrs. Hartley began from the very commencement, and detailed all this to Aylmer. She cared not what pain it cost him. Truth, and truth alone, must be sought for now. She displayed to him with a clearness which he could not misdoubt, the vile calculations which had induced Juliet to detach him from Millicent,—she showed beyond the possibility of mistake, that there had not been a gleam of love in that false heart for him, and she contrasted that coldness veiled in a hideous mockery of affection with the very ocean of pure deep tenderness, which Millicent Grey had once devoted to him, and never recalled. He had not understood it, even in the days when he was prepared to marry her, because in truth it was too sacred, too intense and adoring a feeling to be displayed, even to his own gaze; but Mrs. Hartley told him now, of all that true heart suffered,—how often she had come to her fainting with sorrow, and how the principle she had set before herself, as the object of her being, was only to labour and toil for his happiness.

She described what that toil had been, racking her soul as the limbs of the poor slave are racked at his work, and how up to this hour in desolation and faintness, poor Millicent wrought still, to accomplish this end.

She explained the history of their parting, telling how Millicent had seen his own letter, and straightway for the accomplishment of his peace on earth, (that deep desire of her spirit) consented to slay her own hopes and give herself up to the worst desolation.

She spoke of her that evening at Milton Lodge, when Aylmer in his delirium of joy and Juliet in her insolent triumph, thought nothing of her, who had bought it all for them by the death-like anguish she then was enduring. Mrs. Hartley passed on to the time of his accident; she detailed Juliet's conduct so revolting and heartless; and she saw that he writhed under her words, but **she** heeded it not; she went on to tell how she who had promised to be his wife for better for worse, had demanded at last to see him in his helpless condition alone. Mrs. Hartley said, during that interview she had entered the room unperceived, and had seen Juliet standing over him, with a countenance where contempt and disgust were struggling together. Aylmer uttered a cry of torture at these words, yet he seemed fascinated by her recital, and still she went on: Juliet passed her, she said, and went out of the room, disdainfully tossing that beautiful head; she departed for Italy, and now she had long been another man's wife—married!

As this intelligence rang on his ear, Aylmer felt as though the lightning had struck him again—but this blow was **more** fearful than that of the thunderbolt, for that had but quenched for him the natural light, and this drove his soul into the darkness of night. But still the solemn voice went sounding its fearful details, and he seemed compelled to listen as to the sentence of fate.

Mrs. Hartley spoke now of Millicent, of her patient agony in the solitude of her home at Aix. It was soothing to Aylmer as a sweet strain of music, to hear of such love, when his breast was convulsed with the knowledge of Juliet's defection; it was touching to hear the scene of Millicent's arrival at the *châlet*, to know with what a beautiful love and respect she knelt down to kiss the feet of the blind man in his helplessness. Aylmer knew more truly than Mrs. Hartley could tell, how tenderly Millicent had cared for him since then, and how the days and the hours had past when she lived but to minister to him; then she bid him recall all he said, when he told her he believed she was Juliet, which Millicent never suspected, and how not only it seemed that the happiness she laboured to gain him would be lost for ever if his delusion were destroyed, but that even he affirmed most solemnly, his very life must depart, if this sweet dream went from him.

Poor Millicent was but a woman, weak, timid, and trusting; she believed he would die, or she believed if he did live, it would be to great misery—there seemed no other means of preserving his peace, or gaining his happiness but by this continued delusion; she thought only of the bitterness of the trial to herself, and not of the error—and precisely because it **was** so bitter, because the sacrifice was so fearful, she believed her devoted love was designed to accomplish it—and so she had taken upon herself, for his sake, an existence of torture. And Aylmer again knew better than all how unrepiningly she performed her terrible task—how, without a murmur, she heard his deep words of love for another, and listened with only the tears falling silent, to his aspersions on her own undying affection,

"And now, Stephen," said Mrs. Hartley, as she concluded, "you know and understand what has been and is, that love in its most generous tenderness, which this day you have punished so heavily."

Aylmer was deeply moved, but almost too much bewildered, with mingled sorrow and remorse to speak or to think. Mrs. Hartley left him; she was anxious to find the unhappy Millicent, for she almost believed from his manner she might speak words of hope to her—but she sought her in vain, she was not in the house, and no one knew where she was. One of the servants had seen her creeping out of the *châlet*, when her ghastly appearance had terrified the woman, who had already been alarmed at the sounds of vehement passion which had burst from Aylmer's room; she had watched Millicent wandering away, with feeble and uncertain steps into the woods, and then she had seen her no more. Mrs. Hartley became excessively anxious when she heard this account; she knew that Millicent must have been in a most fearful state of anguish, and she trembled for her reason, or the results of a momentary madness of grief. She dispatched the servants in all directions to seek her, and went herself to Arthur's abode, which was not far distant, in the hope that he might have followed; here but she found him stretched on his sofa in a deep sleep of exhaustion, for often he wandered the live-long night round Millicent's dwelling, and only snatched a few hours of rest by day.

He was startled beyond measure when he heard she had not returned; he himself had not seen her since she quitted the house; but full of terror now at thought of all that might occur, if with his own hand he had driven her desperate, he rushed down into the woods to seek her.

Mrs. Hartley returned in extreme agitation, and along with the servants sought vainly for Millicent till nightfall. It had been early morning when she had gone wandering forth in her great despair,—driven out by the cruel hand she so often had kissed, and now the darkness was come, and where was she seeking her rest that night?

Mrs. Hartley sent for a party of peasants, who were to search the woods and drag the rivers till morning; whilst she waited their arrival, she went for a few minutes to Aylmer, who had sent for her repeatedly.

"What is all this?" he said to her, in a voice full of agitation, "where is Millicent?"

"Who can tell," said Mrs. Hartley, the tears streaming from her eyes as she spoke; "perhaps she is resting now, as living she never has rested! My poor child, my poor gentle child—it has been a cruel world to her!"

Aylmer shivered in every limb, and the cold dew stood on his forehead.

"In the name of mercy," he said, "you do not mean—" his lips refused to articulate further.

"I do not know," replied Mrs. Hartley, "none can know anything as yet, but my heart misgives me—death, natural or by the violence of insanity, seems the only termination one can imagine to such anguish as hers must

have been." She made no attempt to spare the feelings of Aylmer in speaking thus, though she saw he was suffering torments; his conduct aggravated in her eyes, by the fatal result she dreaded, had seemed to her so heartless and cruel, that she could scarce believe him capable of much feeling now, or overcome the indignation she felt.

Mrs. Hartley was wrong, however, in thinking Aylmer heartless or naturally cruel; he was a man of passionate temper, and the violent disappointment he experienced, had goaded him into a passing madness; but the truth of the whole matter had now risen clear on his soul; he saw what Juliet was—he understood what Millicent had been,—if indeed her young life had expired in the excess of her sorrow; and the deep, fearful remorse which took possession of him, as Mrs. Hartley left him, might truly have expiated, in its bitter intensity, the errors he had so carelessly committed.

It was a most awful night he passed. All that Millicent had done for him, all her precious unexampled love, rose up before him with an agonizing truthfulness of detail. Never, never again in this world—he felt it deeply—would he find one to love him as she had done! and after all, the being he had so fondly cherished for these last six months, because of her tender care, her matchless devotion to himself,—the being to whom his desolate heart had clung, as never to Juliet in the time of his triumphant happiness, was Millicent in very truth, and not as he had imagined—Juliet, softened and ennobled by a generous affection to a poor and helpless cripple. What mattered it to the blind man, that the tender guardian of his life and happiness, these many months, possessed not the radiant beauty which had charmed the artist's eye, nor bore the name which once for him contained the promise of all earth's joy?

Whoever, whatever she might be that, angel-like, had tended him with such a loving mercy, she was still the friend, who by her disinterested tenderness had drawn his very soul towards her in grateful, true affection; he had felt by a natural, though mistaken fancy, when he found that as Juliet, she did not exist for him, as though he must lose her altogether,—and that the happiness he had derived from her society under that name, must utterly pass away, when he was told she had no claim to it. He saw now what utter folly his was: the individual he had loved, as of necessity, ever since she came to him, a living sunbeam in his great darkness, was still the same,—and still would have been ready, no doubt, to have blest him with her loving care, had he not, (so to speak,) trampled her under his feet, in punishment of her very love's excess.

It is certain that Stephen Aylmer would not so soon have experienced this revulsion of feeling, had he not been made aware of Juliet's real character which to him, with his great refinement of mind, was most revolting in its peculiar qualities; and likewise a most powerful effect had been produced upon him by Mrs. Hartley's evident conviction, that his harshness had most literally broken the heart of the unhappy being, who had sacrificed to him her all of life, and died at last as it were at his command.

Stern indeed must be the man who could hear unmoved, that the heart which loved him best on earth, is cold in death, never more to beat in warm throbbing as it has beat for him; priceless then becomes the humble clinging love he lightly held, or carelessly repulsed before. Bitter grows his longing, to feel but once again the loving pressure of the hand, for ever stiff and lifeless—from which too often his own has been withdrawn. And Stephen felt with an intensity of mournful regret, that he would have given all on earth to have had once more those gentle arms supporting his aching head; he thought with horror unspeakable of the violence he had used to that shrinking frame, when he flung her from him in his cruel passion,—and the strong, heavy hand lay on his breast like molten lead, when he remembered, that with its weight he had driven her out to her untimely grave.

It seemed to him so piteous a thing, to think of this poor stricken creature, loaded with the curse of his unkind rebuke—wandering away into the green woods, to die there like a wounded bird beneath some tree; and this was the image, that through that long night of watching, presented itself again and again to his remorseful soul.

Morning came at length, and with it Mrs. Hartley, merely to tell him in a voice choked with sobs, that no tidings of poor Millicent had been obtained. Aylmer could not speak, his self-abhorrence was so intense—he started up to seek her, and die with her if need be', then remembering the blindness, the helplessness that chained him to his couch, he fell back in an agony of most impotent sorrow. Mrs. Hartley, who was utterly exhausted and now almost despairing, sat down for a few minutes to think what further efforts should be made, however hopeless she feared them to be—and there was a complete silence in the room, whilst they remained together absorbed in their bitter thoughts.

It was during this stillness, that both of them suddenly heard the measured tramp as of many feet, coming

along the path which led past the windows to the house. Mrs. Hartley perceived at the same time, and in an under tone communicated to Stephen, that a party of peasants, carrying a sort of *brancard*, had entered the hall.

Intense agitation rendered them both motionless. She endeavoured to rise, that she might go to meet them, but all power had deserted her aged limbs, and she could only wait listening to the ominous sounds without. Aylmer's condition was fearful, blind and palsied in such a moment, it was as though he were chained down with bands of iron. The peasants, finding no one in the outer rooms, came on with their burden to that of Aylmer; the door opened,—slowly the tramping footsteps entered; they carried amongst them a rude litter, formed of branches roughly cut, and upon it, gathered into a heap, lay a fragile form, altogether motionless, her clinging garments wet with the dews of night, her dripping hair veiling the pallid face; one cold white hand hung down, and seemed to have beat against the stones as they bore her on, for it was cut and bruised.

"Is she dead?" sobbed Mrs. Hartley, falling on her knees beside the litter, and hiding her face on Millicent's arm, that she might not look on so piteous a spectacle.

"Not dead, we hope, as yet," said one of the peasants, "her pulse fluttered a little when we raised her, but she is altogether senseless."

"We found her lying just as you see here, under one of the forest trees," said another, "and we think she must have lain thus motionless all night, for the leaves which the wind has swept down since last evening, had gathered in a heap on her head and face;—her breath had not stirred them."

Mrs. Hartley took courage then to look upon her, as these words seemed to give some hope, and gently lifted the wet hair from the sweet face she had so loved to gaze upon. Millicent was like a marble statue, colourless and rigid,—no breath on the white lips, not a shiver in the blue-veined eyelids, sternly closed. Mrs. Hartley saw that she was in a death-like trance, from which it was doubtful if ever she would awake. She understood it all. Stricken at heart, sinking under the load of his bitter reproach, she had gone staggering out; and as, darker and darker, rose the thought of his hate upon her soul, and the memory of the intense love with which he had uttered Juliet's name, the life had seemed to ebb back from her breast,—for there is a limit to human suffering, there is a point at which the frail powers within us can endure no more,—and then her fainting soul had given way. This mercy was extended to her that she ceased to feel.

She had fallen down senseless, motionless, among the stones and thorns, beneath the rocking branches of the forest trees,—and there, the livelong night, that desolate child had lain. The dews of heaven had wet her pallid face, the mountain winds had beat around her helpless form,—the thorns had pierced her,—the night air had chilled her to the heart, but she neither felt nor heeded nature's persecution; for colder, keener than the mountain air, more dread than the mountain blast, sharper than the merciless thorns, and poisonous as ever midnight dew, was the one deadly thought that struck her down, perhaps to perish there—the thought of his revealed hate.

The peasants' task was now complete; with many a look of lingering pity on that hapless being, they took their leave, and Mrs. Hartley, restored to energy by hope, went to seek restoratives which might recall poor Millicent to life.

When she returned she found that Aylmer, who had listened in silent agitation to all that passed, had groped his way to the spot where Millicent lay, and had fallen on his knees beside her. He had raised her head, and wound his arms round her; he was calling her now by every most endearing term, breathing on the cold lips, that his warm breath might recall hers, holding the chill, wet hands in his bosom,—and Mrs. Hartley paused with a feeling of awe, for she felt there was a stronger power at work to recall the ebbing life of Millicent Grey than any she could use. The declaration of Stephen Aylmer's hate and anger, had brought her to the verge of death—would the expression of his love restore her? It was even so. The deadly paralysis relaxed in the heart that faintly began to beat against his own,—the chilled breast softly warmed with its first faint sigh,—the poor glazed eyes opened with a dim wandering gaze, as the fluttering lids rose and fell, and settled at last on the face of him so awfully beloved, whilst he bent over her with intense affection.

She seemed utterly bewildered, her senses had evidently not returned fully, only she was conscious on what arm she lay, and a sense of unutterable sweetness of repose passed through her soul. She nestled closer to him, and her eyes closed again, as if thus to die, were rapture beyond all words, and the yet feeble life seemed almost to forsake her, for she fainted again.

But now the swoon was only temporary, his voice had fully restored her to existence, and Mrs. Hartley carried her away to administer the care which at last was very necessary.

A serious illness was the consequence of Millicent's exposure to the night air, and during its duration, Aylmer seemed to live for her alone; when he was not allowed to be with her, he lay at the threshold of her door, and there could be no doubt that her recovery was greatly facilitated, by the consciousness that his love had at last come forth abundantly to answer hers.

Yet when, after she was fully restored to health, he pleaded with her, that now, at length, after such storms and weary conflicts, they might both pass into a haven of rest in their mutual affection; when he besought her to become his wife, and terminate for ever the desolation in which both had suffered much, it was Millicent who shrunk from a union, and hesitated to give the promise he so longed for.

Not that she feared him, or that her deathless affection was diminished one iota, but that at last the natural dignity of the woman was roused within her; she could not forget the tone of his voice when he shrieked out Juliet's name. It seemed her, who had never known a shadow of change, in her true heart, that he could not have turned such passionate affection back to her again; she did not understand how much of delusion there had been in his love for Juliet, how deep-seated the tenderness which her own noble character had raised in his breast, since his blindness proved her worth to him. She feared it might be compassion which had caused the change within him, that else would have rendered her so supremely happy. And what woman could endure such a thought as this! most deeply it rankled in poor Millicent's heart after all her trials.

Mrs. Hartley and Aylmer long combated the idea vainly; It was in truth most utterly false; Aylmer valued and loved her now as she deserved, and esteemed the treasure of her noble heart as a gift beyond all earthly price. Gradually this truth, so apparent in every word he uttered, found its way convincingly to her mind; but it was not until one day, when with all the eloquence of real feeling, he pleaded his infirmities as a claim upon her charity, that she yielded, and became once more his promised wife.

CHAPTER XII.

IT would have been hard to have found in the wide world two happier beings than Millicent Grey and Stephen Aylmer, when at last,—her hand tight clasped in his, they sat together, day by day, and spoke of the long life of joy, which was so shortly to commence for them, in each other's society.

Millicent believed she had found the spirit's rest at last, the satisfaction, complete and full, of the mysterious longing of her whole being.

She still was convinced that none could find it elsewhere than in human love, but she thought, judging from her bitter experience, that all played not well or wisely, their parts in the difficult game of life, and so lost their chance of the one sole means of happiness, which existed for man in affection felt and answered. Therefore still holding this mistaken creed, Millicent did but rejoice the more ardently, that after many struggles, the prize was hers—that she had not, like so many, drawn a blank in that great lottery.

If anything even for a moment disturbed her perfect happiness, it was the frequent apparition at the window of the room in which they usually sat, of a haggard, fearful face—that with the tangled hair hanging over a brow dark with despair, and a look of indescribable anguish in the wild, sorrow haunted eyes, cast in upon them a glance of utter wretchedness, that might have touched the coldest spirit.

But happiness is a selfish thing; in sadness mostly we have compassion on the kindred suffering, and we cannot bear to see the tears of others, when our own are falling, because we know their bitterness. In the time of her own great desolation, Millicent had mourned for Arthur Egerton; but now in her absorbing joy, it is doubtful if ever she remembered what he must be suffering, except when that face of agony passed like a frightful vision before her eyes.

This indifference on her part served but to exasperate the unhappy man. He knew all that had passed; he saw them, day after day, before him, for he was drawn to that sight which pierced his very soul, by some irresistible attraction. He saw them in their perfect happiness, and truly all hope for him seemed utterly destroyed; nor was he otherwise than inconceivably wretched, but still, not yet had there passed from his soul the strange, mysterious conviction, which had haunted him, ever since Aylmer first came, and stood between him and Millicent,—the deep certainty, that in some way it would be given to him, to tear her out of his arms, even at the very last! And this he still believed. He knew not how it was to be; he had formed no plan, no cruel or wicked intention respecting them. Most utterly as his apostate soul was prostrate in idolatry before her, never yet had its degenerate condition prompted him to crime; but like all men who turn a deaf ear to the voice of truth, he was a fatalist, and what he imagined was written in the decrees of destiny,—destiny, he felt sure, would accomplish. This idea supported and sustained him—in it he lived, or the sight of their happiness must have driven him to insanity; and they knew not that he tracked their steps wherever they went; for Aylmer was now able, led by Millicent, to walk out daily into the woods, and breathe again the sweet breath of nature. They knew it not, or they must have pitied the maddening envy with which he watched the blind man lean so tenderly upon the dear hand, whose happiest task it was to smooth life's path for him; and saw the sweet eyes, which Aylmer called his light of day, for truly they gave sight to him, by their unceasing watchfulness, ever turning to him as the sunflower to the sun.

"And do you really mean you are going to leave me one whole hour?" said Aylmer fondly, as Millicent sat by him on a bright summer morning.

"I really am; but I shall go so quickly, and return so soon, you scarce will miss me."

"Not miss you! even for a single instant, darling? You would miss the light if it were taken from you but one moment, and so you are my light, and I cannot bear that you should go from me, any more than you could bear an utter darkness."

It made her heart beat thick and faint with joy to hear such words.

"Indeed, it is bitter to me to go even for one little hour, but I must do it, it would not be right to neglect the poor creature who is waiting for me."

"I do not see why you should be kind to any one but me," said Aylmer, playfully. "You are mine, my own most treasured possession, and I will have it, that it is your highest duty to stay with me."

"And so it is my high and happy duty," said Millicent. "Do you know, I do not think, that above three times in my life, it could be my duty to leave you; and so this is the first time, and I hope the other two will not occur for

twenty years to come."

"Could you not put this one off for ten, or even five?—five years hence I will let you leave me two whole hours instead of one; come, is it a bargain?"

"But you forget, that if I agreed to that, the bed-ridden old woman to whom I am going, must wait five years to know whether her son is alive or dead, who fell from a ladder in the village next hers; and now I am to tell her to-day that he lives, and to make her happy, dear Stephen. **We** know what it is to fear for those we love, so most of all we should show compassion."

"You shall go," said Aylmer, touched by these words; "and which road do you take?"

"The path by the cliff, where we walk every day."

"I know that road so well, I am sure I could find my way alone, so if you do not return in an hour, I shall certainly come to meet you."

"Oh, do not attempt that!" exclaimed Millicent, anxiously; "there is a part of the road which is extremely dangerous; it leads along the very edge of the precipice."

"Ah, that is where I feel your hand clasp mine so tightly, and you guide me with such care. I am sure that pleasant recollection will make me know the spot, and then I can walk cautiously."

"No, dearest Stephen, pray do not try it alone; indeed, I should be in terror if I thought you would; a false turn just there would be destruction. Promise me you will not go."

"Indeed, I shall promise nothing of the kind," said Aylmer, laughing, "for if you are afraid, it will make you come back to me all the sooner."

"That it will, most certainly," said Millicent. She kissed his hand as she spoke, in token of farewell, and so they parted.

On that path, their accustomed walk, where day by day, Arthur Egerton waited and watched for hours, that he might look on **her** face as she passed him, he now lay hidden expecting the coming of Millicent Grey.

And his patient, miserable watching was soon rewarded; he saw her approaching earlier to-day than usual, and alone. She came springing up the mountain path, with the dancing step that told what a light, joyous heart she carried,—glad and bright was her face as the morning itself,—sparkling in her eyes was the sunshine of hope, as the beams that lay fair on the rugged hills,—wild and gay as the song of the woodland bird, her sweet voice carolled in the clear, blue air,—a very vision of gladness and joy she seemed, bright in her youth and happiness, as when first he saw her in the old halls at Rookcliffe, and felt that his soul was hers with a surpassing love.

Surely the worm that crawls the earth, is not so abject as man, in the egotism of absorbing passion? She was his fellow creature, inheritor with himself of the common death, condemned, like him, to a life so full of sorrow, and in joy so rare,—susceptible to the misery he now was enduring, whose anguish he knew so well,—and yet, rather would he have seen her as she had been heretofore, wasted and wan, and bowed to the earth, loaded with that burden too heavy to bear,—an affection unsought and unshared,—as now in her gladness and peace; triumphant, with the cup of life's happiness full to the brim.

Onward she came, with the sweet voice singing, and back he shrank from her bright approach as the serpent from the light of day; he cowered among the bushes unseen, till the light form went by, and then the parting branches showed the dark, haggard face gazing after her with baneful glance. She had paused on the dangerous spot of which she had spoken to Aylmer, where the path edged off from the precipice and took an abrupt turn to the abyss, and her thoughts flew swiftly to him who lay dreaming of her even then, and back she looked, with her eyes of love, to the *châlet* whose very walls were dear for his sake. Arthur caught the glance, and shrunk closer down to the ground where he grovelled, whilst she went on with a swifter step, and her echoing song floating far on the wind.

Long hours he lay there, for despair has no time or space, and his soul was stretched on the rack of thought.

At length, on that mountain path, another step came sounding near, toiling up, slow, heavy, and feeble, where she had past with her bounding feet,—wearily straining his new-found strength, the blind man came, cautiously trying his uncertain powers.

Arthur Egerton shrunk not from him, as he had shrunk from the sweet face Millicent,—a sudden impulse constrained him to rise, to stand forth and confront this blinded cripple, who had stolen his light of life from him.

Aylmer heard the sound of the moving feet, and guiding his steps by the stick on which he leant, drew near.

"Who is there?" he said.

"Arthur Egerton!"

"Ah, is it you? I am glad I have met you. Did you see my Millicent pass this way?"

"I saw Millicent Grey go past."

"Then I shall meet her returning soon."

"Then I shall see you come back together."

"Yes, together!—as we shall soon be for life; but tell me, am I taking the right direction? The path turns here to escape the precipice, it leads this way, does it not?"

He advanced a few steps, and paused for an answer.

A bitter laugh rose to the lips of Arthur; the blind man was within one yard of the precipice—he had missed the turning, and one step more would carry him over an abyss some hundred feet deep. Arthur Egerton stood and looked at him, waiting there so unconsciously on the brink of destruction. He had no thought of murder in his mind, though he hated that blind man with an intense hate, but there was a very whirlwind of passion raging through him; fierce and strong did the tide of exultation sweep over his soul, as he thought how, at one word of his, this man, possessor of all he most coveted on earth,—this man, but now triumphing over him in the calm of his happiness, assured in her love,—this man, the bane, the curse of his life,—would even now go crashing down this fearful abyss, to a death most frightful; yes, one word—one word—and the fond eyes of Millicent Grey would seek him in vain on the face of the earth! One word—one word—and never more living love should stand between her and himself! Yet he thought not of saying it; degraded as he was, his heart would have shrunk from so tremendous a crime with horror and fear; only he loved to gloat, with the fiercest delight, on the feeling that Stephen Aylmer was now in his power—that revenge, consummate and full, and the desire of his soul, in the death of that man, were before him. He prolonged the time, that he might taste this unholy ecstasy—but the voice of Aylmer sounded again, more impatiently,

"Tell me, am I not right?"

Now was the moment when, with one breath from his lips, he might have accomplished all his spirit, long hungering and thirsting, required. Oh, ruin! to relinquish the power,—his own but for one brief instant! Oh, horror to use it!—horror impossible to contemplate!

The blood rushed to his head, his temples throbbed furiously, every pulse in his body beat madly—the hands were convulsively clasped—the lips opened gaspingly—forth came the sound of his answer "**YES!**"

"Yes!" not **his** the voice that uttered that word most fatal, he swore it to his dying day; not his, but some demon who spoke it through his own cursed lips. He had not meant it—he had not thought it—he would have given his soul to recall it ere well it was past; but the word had gone forth with a human life freighted. On that breath, from his mouth, an existence hung, and for the soul of a man, that breath contained the thunders of eternity. It past his lips, it went forth with its mission, blind agent he was, of a supreme decree—not the less an agent in guilt. The word was spoken—the step was taken—down, down, crushing down, through the dark abyss, Stephen Aylmer plunged on to his death.

Whirling down through the deep blue air, caught for a moment by the jagged rocks, flung back by them to the stones that waited below; revolving in a thick cloud of dust, bearing with it the fragments rocks and trees, swifter than the eye could follow, ere the living heart could have beat a few times, the body lay mangled—soulless—**DEAD**, struck down in a shattered heap at the foot of that great ravine.

For Stephen Aylmer this world was nought—for Stephen Aylmer this life was done. The trial was over, the doom was sealed—the soul was gone, to the Far Unseen.

And gay on the mountain air, was the sound of the sweet voice singing, as down through the pine-wood she sped to that path, and thought on the arms that would open to greet her.

He heard it—he heard that voice—the unwilling murderer, as with ghastly face he peered over that dread abyss, which seemed to him filled with an ocean of blood, whose waves were swelling up to engulf him.

At the sound of the sweet voice singing, he fled.—Heaven save us from that man's agony! The demon went with him who had uttered the word, the taunting, laughing, exulting demon! And another went with him,—a spectre, the great gaunt spectre Remorse, who twined her hideous arms around him and clasped him close to her breast as a loving bride—for now she was his wedded companion for life.

Then through the chaos of horror that raged in his breast, certain words,—certain words heard in childhood, came with a deepening agony, and seemed to inscribe themselves in letters of burning fire on his soul—they were

these:—

Cursed is he that maketh the blind to go out of his way. And it was as though he heard echoing loud on his ear, how the deep rolling voice of the people answered and said, **AMEN**.

CHAPTER XIII.

AND it befell Arthur Egerton, as many a condemned man on the scaffold might attest it befalls most criminals,—he who had lived all his life in practical, if not in intellectual, unbelief, now that the consciousness of a deadly crime was on his soul, became possessed of a full, perfect, and for him, most appalling faith, in the revelation of a future judgment and an eternal punishment. Deep penitence came in like a flood upon his soul—penitence not only for the crime, but for the idolatrous, unrestrained love which had prompted it.

One thought, one wish, one dream was present with him night and day. To be forgiven, by years of a life of penance; to show repentance, and to be forgiven; but he felt that he dared not ask, nor pray, nor so much as breathe the faintest desire for the pardon of heaven, till he had obtained that of her, whom on earth he had so deeply, fatally injured.

He knew nothing of her, excepting only that she had not died, when the link that bound her to earth had been so rudely snapped asunder; he knew not how it had fared with her, since she took her last look of the mangled form, she would have cherished with her heart's life.

He knew that the lifeless body of Stephen Aylmer had been found, and carried home the same day that he met his cruel death, and that shortly after it had been conveyed for interment to a burial-place adjoining a church on the mountain; but never once, from that hour to this, had his eyes looked on the face, or his ears heard the voice of sweet Millicent Grey.

Yet henceforward, for him, all existence was gathered up into two great works, which living he must accomplish:—first, to obtain mercy and pardon from her—and then to seek the mercy and pardon of heaven.

So, night and day, he wandered round the châlet, wearing the rocks with kneeling close to it, for hours together, still ever hoping—hoping—he might but see her come, where he could lay himself at her feet, and bid her trample on him, if she would. And months passed on, but he had patience, for he lived but in this thought; and so at last, the longing, wasting desire, was accomplished.

It was a fair summer morning, glorious and bright, just such a day, as that on which she went forth in her gladness, with the sweet voice carolling, and light step dancing, to meet her final despair.

The murderer, with the spectre Remorse, to whom he was wedded, at his side, knelt on the rock, whence he could see her dwelling;—when it was given him to look upon her once again. Across that threshold, with a calm, gliding step, there passed what seemed to him more like a spirit than a human being—so wan, so wasted. Surely death had passed already on that bloodless cheek, that pure, transparent forehead.

Surely no inhabitant of earth ever looked to heaven with eyes so spiritual, so holy, glittering with pure light, like the stars in the sky. What a stormless serenity on that face, pallid and delicate as monumental marble! What an imploring expression of meekness in the white, half-parted lips! What a depth of utter submission in the folding of those pale hands on the still fair bosom; but so fragile, so unlike a living being, moving with the light wind, like the slender form of a white and stainless lily, gliding along without a movement of those quiet hands, or a change of expression in the serene, pale countenance. It was thus, as with spirit-feet, that she passed him, and he arose and followed after her.

Rocking to and fro with every breath of wind, while gently waved the white robes around her, the tranquil figure glided on: in the golden sunshine, in the warm, glowing hues of day, she looked like a pale sheeted ghost, flitting back with its noiseless step to the rest of its own quiet grave.

And to a grave she went,—in one sense her own, for her heart lay buried there. They had made the couch of his deep repose beneath a tall pine-tree, a sweet, fair spot, for the long grass waved there and the flowers were growing, and none need have dreamt of the worms beneath; and she passed on, so light the form, her feet left no mark on the turf,—and by the side of that grave she knelt down. Then she folded the meek hands prayerfully, and upward fixed those pure, holy eyes, with a rapt and intense contemplation, as though the glory of the skies were drawing her soul through them to heaven. Her lips moved not, and no sound was uttered,—she might have been what she most resembled, a statue of snow-white stone.

Creeping on to her, cowering earthwards, like a dark, blighting shadow, came the penitent man; nearer and nearer he stole, trembling and gasping, fearing almost he should see her pass away like a vision, too fair and too angel-like for this cold cruel world.

But still she remained, so calm and so motionless: the fair lids drooped not over the deep, longing gaze, and her quiet breath stirred not the soft summer air. Then he came and laid him down in the dust beside her.

He told her all,—all his terrible tale, and confessed that from him had the word gone forth, which consigned the being she had loved so well to his death of anguish, and herself to despair. He writhed on the ground as he spoke, for it seemed to him superhuman that she should think of forgiveness now,—yet he asked it, as the frantic man, dying of thirst, asks the draught of pure water that alone can save him. He had not looked on her face, so he knew not how she had borne these tidings, and her sweet voice had breathed no sound while he spoke; but when he asked for pardon her answer came slowly. She rose from her knees and stood upright, softly she laid the fair, transparent hand on the dust-soiled head of the penitent man,—clear and sweet as the loveliest music, her voice breathed out on the summer air:—

"I forgive you deeply and fully, as I pray that I may be forgiven."

The hands rested there a moment as if with a silent blessing, then, like the white wings of a dove, from his head were lifted and folded meekly across her own calm breast.

She resumed her place on the quiet grave, and he felt as though waters most pure and refreshing had passed on his guilty soul; but he dared not linger near her, lest a feeling of joy should steal into his heart. No right had he to know aught on this earth save that one word **repentance**, yet his heart groaned to know that she was, indeed, comforted,—his gentle, beloved victim. Faintly he whispered,—

"Are you, indeed, at rest?" and she answered,

"I rest, as I never rested on earth before:—hear me, and learn life's truth from my lips,—if sorrow hath not taught you already. I thought that the soul's repose was in human love, and thus far I was right, that in Love alone the immortal spirit can live, but the human love is only the type of that which can never die. For the glorious substance I mistook the faint shadow, and therefore I erred and suffered. Then in mercy, to the sweet earthly love bright wings were given, that bore it away from my breast to heaven, and my soul following after it, upward stole, to find **there** the True Love that faileth never. I found it, and now I rest in a rest undying,—so may you find it, and so repose."

The low voice died away on his ear like the sigh of the summer wind when night closes in. He heard the light feet echo past, and the waving of her garments as she glided away, but he dared not look up, he was spell-bound there.

So never more did he look on her face, or hear her sweet voice again.

Arthur Egerton went out from the shores of Europe, to the burning regions of tropical lands; he joined himself to a company of men, strong in purpose and stout of heart, who had devoted themselves to the good of their fellow-creatures. They had made an offering of their lives for the one great purpose of raising a brute people from their deep degradation,—a nation who lived like wild beasts of prey,—whose existence was but vitality,—whose spirits were steeped in a moral death.

The life of their benefactors among them was full of torment, and danger, and toil; but none so toiled in torture and pain, as the remorseful man that went with them. He willed to be the slave of all,—he chose the heaviest burdens,—the hardest task; no complaint passed his lips, no rest did he seek:—to a practical repentance he vowed his life, and well hath he kept that vow.

* * * *

Long years had past, when in the twilight sky, one summer's evening, a sunbeam lingered. It was the last sweet smile of the dying day, a soft ray of golden light, and it followed not the sun when he sunk to rest, as though it yet had a mission on earth. Down from the darkening heaven it stole, and sped over forest and plain,—it did but tinge them with its pale pure light, for it rested not till its task was done, and onward passed to the appointed place. To a vast noble city it swiftly came,—along crowded districts and narrow streets it carried its gentle radiance, till through the latticed window of a lowly house it passed into a still dark room.

That house was known to all who suffered near,—refuge for the orphan,—home for the penitent,—dwelling for the blind, the infirm, and aged; no sorrow that touches the human heart, could fail to find sympathy there.

And the sunbeam entered the quiet room, for here must its work be done,—and it settled in glory on the pure pale brow of one who lay there most placid and calm.

That beam might have travelled the wide world over, and failed to meet a sight more holy and bright, than that which it lit with its glory now.

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For the countenance where it shone in its golden light, wore that aspect of loveliness most serene, which never on earth can be found, save only on the face of the holy dead.

Oh the unutterable beauty of gentle sleep, with which the white lids rested on the whiter cheek! oh, smile of ineffable joy that lingered on the pale sweet mouth! How the aching heart, throbbing so thick and fast, faints with desire to know that rest!

Fit mission for the last bright sunbeam, to lend its radiance to that fair corpse, for the night shall be short for both, and a glorious morning shall wake for them.

Those who had known her past history, had placed in her dead hands the types of her life. In one, they had laid a few flowers of earth, for in those she had trusted in her morning of days; now the white fingers held them not, and they had withered away as they rested there. But the other hand, still in a tight fond grasp, remained closed round the holy symbol of her faith which she had pressed to her dying heart; and there it yet lay on that placid breast, earnest and pledge of the rest, her spirit had found at last.

THE END.