

HER WEDDING



DAY

BY MARION HARLAND





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HER WEDDING DAY.

# THE LILY SERIES.

Uniform with this Volume.

The design of this Series is to include no books except such as are peculiarly adapted by their high tone, pure taste, and thorough principle to be read by those persons, young and old, who look upon books as upon their friends—only worthy to be received into the Family Circle for their good qualities and excellent characters. In view of this design, no author whose name is not a guarantee of the real worth and purity of his or her work, or whose book has not been subjected to a rigid examination, will be admitted into the 'Lily Series.'

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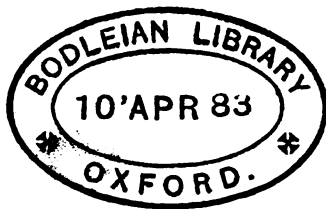
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# HER WEDDING DAY.

BY

MARION HARLAND,

AUTHOR OF "ALONE," "THE HIDDEN PATH," ETC.



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## HER WEDDING-DAY.

### CHAPTER I.

"**YES?**" said Aunt Ruth, with kindling interest.

**Y**ES? This important monosyllable was, in the mouth of this excellent lady, susceptible of an infinite variety and numberless gradations of meaning. Wooing encouragement; hearty and unequivocal assent; loving sympathy; lively curiosity and civil indifference; sometimes, upon sufficient provocation, a mild species of sarcasm or contemptuous incredulity—all these were habitually expressed by the gentle spinster through the medium of the little word, defined by mistaken masculine lexicographers as "an affirmative particle opposed to *no*." Opposed to "no," indeed! As if Aunt Ruth could not, and did not, make it mean "no"—and no uncertain negative, either—every day of her life!

She sat now in a well-cushioned Boston rocking-chair, dressed in a grey merino, and a cap trimmed with dove-coloured ribbons swinging slowly to and fro, knitting a lamb's wool sock. Upon the other side of the round candle-stand was her eldest nephew, Mr. Alexander Lay, yclept by his intimates and the community in general, "Aleck," lounging in lazy content against the stuffed back of a great easy-chair, covered with black leather, polished to shining sleekness by constant service during many years. His nether limbs

were supported by the brass fender, and a meerschaum was between his teeth. He was a fine-looking young fellow of four-and-twenty, with a well-developed, sinewy figure, black hair, and a beard whose length, while it would have given an *outré* air to the visage of most men, was highly becoming to his bronzed complexion and marked physiognomy. He had arrived unexpectedly, but three hours before, at his patrimonial mansion, after an absence of two years from his native land, most of which time he had spent in a German University.

"The neatest people upon the globe!" he had said, pursuing a description of a tour through Holland.

And Miss Ruth Massie, his maternal aunt, whose forte was housewifery, and who was famed, far and near, for the scrupulous cleanliness of her establishment, forgot the yawn lodged in her throat, provoked by his incidents of travel through Switzerland and Italy, and rejoined by the "particle" quoted above.

"I wished most for you when I visited Bröck," continued the tourist. "The streets are scoured as frequently and carefully as you wash your plates and dishes; the iron railings enclosing the little patches of brick pavement they denominate door-yards, are ornamented by brass knobs, brought, by dint of diligent friction, to the brightness of mirrors; and the fronts of the houses are deluged every morning by jets of water from a hose or syringe. Not an atom of dust or a cobweb is anywhere visible. They even tie up the tails of the cows when they have combed and brushed them, lest they should trail upon the ground, and be afterwards accidentally used to whisk their smooth sides."

"Yes!" Miss Ruth's eyes opened more widely.

"The chickens' nails are cleaned and pared each day, and I have heard, although I cannot vouch for the truth of *this* statement, that the hens' teeth are scrubbed at the same time, with a brush invented solely for this purpose."

"Yes!"

The "particle," this time, was equivalent to—"You don't tell me so! I never heard the like!"

"I felt sorry for the children," Aleck went on with the veracious narrative—"rosy, roly-poly, pudding-faced Dutch babies that they were! Fancy a childhood—above all, a boyhood—passed in igno-

rance of the glories of paddling in mud-puddles, with one's trousers rolled above his knees, and the delight of manufacturing mud pies? I never longed, before or since, to be an instructor of youth, but I did covet the privilege of initiating the unfortunate little wretches into such practices as used to enrapture Robin's soul and mine!"

"I don't believe their mothers would have thanked you! I recollect the trouble you boys used to give me by such tricks."

Aleck laughed. "Don't bear malice, aunty, since we have put away childish things—more's the pity! But I was going to tell you about the Dutch girls. Such complexions! such roses and lilies! such plump dumplings of forms—suet dumplings, you could not doubt! It made a fellow's mouth water to look at the angels!"

"Ah, yes!" Miss Ruth's slight nod heightened the significance of her arch, knowing tone. "Now you are coming to the point!" she meant to imply.

"Then, you should see them skate in winter. Ten or a dozen miles they fly down the canals to market, to sell their eggs and butter, and back again the same day. They have regular balls upon the ice. Shall I ever forget a day's sport upon skates, which I enjoyed with a blue-eyed beauty—fleet of foot as a greyhound; lips like cherries; cheeks like the sunny side of an apricot, and waist like a firm roll of butter! Ah, me! 'Joys that we've tasted!' That is one of the never-returning kind, I am afraid!"

"The one—was she?" interrogated Miss Ruth.

"One of them!" said the male coquette, heartlessly.

"Yes! yes!"

Which was, being interpreted—"Aleck! Aleck! you are a sad fellow!"

"Can't help it, aunty! If the girls will be fascinating, they must take the natural consequence of their behaviour, and endure my devotion with the best grace they can."

"I thought you were going to bring her home to America with you?"

"I would have done so, assuredly, had I known that you desired it, and if I could have decided which 'her' you expected me to elect to that supreme felicity."

"Yes!" said Miss Ruth, in affectionate ridicule of this conceited speech. "The 'her' I meant was that Gret—Gretna—or some such



name you went crazy about, six months ago. It's queer I can't remember what you called her."

"Gretna Green, perhaps?" suggested Aleck, with praiseworthy gravity.

"You didn't mention her surname, but I think it more than likely that's the one—the beautiful German girl, whose singing and dancing, you said, had carried you into the seventh heaven—and all that sort of nonsense."

"Gretna Green is of Scotch extraction. Perhaps Gretchen was the word you could not recollect."

"Yes. Where is she?"

"I really can't say. Probably married to some lager-loving Herr Von Something, making his sauer-krant and brewing his bier. I have not thought of her for months, that I know of. I do remember, however, since you have alluded to the subject, that she was quite a pretty girl, and sang tolerably."

Aunt Ruth shook her head again—now, in sorrowful deprecation of the criminal trifling he avowed so carelessly.

"I was in hopes you meant to settle down for good and all! Not that I fancied over-much your marrying a foreigner; and of the two girls you've spoken of, I'd rather you had brought home the Scotch than the Dutch."

"German!" corrected Aleck.

"It's all the same—isn't it? Aleck! what possesses you to smoke that dirty-looking pipe? May be you haven't noticed how the amber is staining it through and through?"

"Aunt Ruth! I am ashamed of you! This is a genuine meerschaum, and cost more money than Robin could get for the best horse in his stable!"

"Yes? Let me see it!"

She inspected the shining black bowl, with its curious cloudy veins, and the curved stem.

"A mere sham—did you call it?"

"Yes, ma'am. There are so few of the real articles among the many that pass with the verdant purchasers for valuable, that the contemptuous title deserved by the counterfeit has gradually been applied to all. There's a moral in the fact, if you will take the pains to study it."

"It wants burning out badly!" said his aunt, disregarding his philosophizing, and handing back the vaunted "real article," with an unmistakable contortion of the nose and upper lip. "It would be the sweeter, and so would your mouth, for that matter, if you would leave it under the back-log there, all night. I could caution Marthy to be careful not to crack or break it when she takes up the ashes to-morrow morning."

Managing his facial muscles with considerable difficulty, the fun-loving nephew explained that the discoloration she condemned was the prime beauty of the pipe, adding divers reminiscences—authentic, of course—of the high estimate set upon long-used and well-blackened meerschaums by discriminating Teutons.

"Reckon they are not such overly clean people, after all!" was Miss Ruth's conclusion, enunciated with disdainful emphasis. "But seriously, my boy, what has become of this girl? not Miss Green—the other one! What broke off the match? You as good as told me you were going to marry her right off."

"I did! When and how?"

"In a letter, crammed from beginning to end with her praises, which you wrote me half a year ago."

"Ah! that was the end of the matter, I fancy. The flame burned itself to ashes in that epistle. I cannot remember certainly what disenchanting me. I have an idea that it was Gretchen's immoderate fondness for cabbage in an advanced stage of decomposition—so called sauer-kraut."

"Yes!" Aunt Ruth sighed.

"You don't think that a sufficient cause for a breach of promise, I see," said her nephew, in pretended anxiety.

"I am afraid you will never marry, Aleck!"

"If I ever do, my wife's favourite dish shall be neither cabbage nor onions."

"You are as bad as Colonel Floyd! When he has bacon and cabbage for dinner, he won't allow Mrs. Floyd and the girls to come to the table. He says it is only fit for men to smell. Once in a while he has an old-fashioned neighbour there, to whom he wants to be polite; and since his rich friend must have the dish, it is prepared, and the ladies don't make their appearance until the cabbage is removed. I've heard, though that Helen will not submit to this

nonsense since she came of age—that she will take her place at table and entertain the company in her aunt's absence."

"They are all well at Belleview, are they?" questioned Aleck, puffing away rather faster at his meerschaum.

"Yes."

Mr. Lay turned at the hesitating tone, enwrapping so much of mysterious meaning, and ominous of ill-tidings.

"Why, what's the matter there? Has any thing gone wrong?"

"Nothing new—nothing but what has been wrong from the start, and that was more years ago than most people dream of. Only—from all I can gather from people's sly whispers—nobody dare say anything aloud—things are *looking* crookeder of late than they used to."

She stopped to count the rounds in her sock, preparatory to turning off the heel. Aleck said nothing, and seemed to watch the briskly-rising rings of smoke.

"This marriage is a serious business—one that is generally entered upon too carelessly," resumed Miss Massie, oracularly. "I don't know but you are right to be cautious about risking a chance in the lottery; but there are many worse faults in a wife or husband than a breath scented with cabbage or garlic. Colonel Floyd always reminds me of the men of old who used to tithe mint, anise, and cinnamon, while they neglected the weightier matters of the law. If he had been as careful of his wife's property and happiness, and his children's real good, as he is to spare them a few trifling annoyances that nobody else would ever think of, they'd be better off in mind and estate. They say he gambles awfully—worse than ever—and that if half his debts were paid, he would not have a dollar or an acre of land left that he could call his own."

"Nobody is surprised at that, I imagine. People have prophesied that for years past;—although, as you say, the real condition of his affairs may be more generally known, and spoken of more openly than it used to be," said Aleck.

Miss Ruth's needles rattled nervously against one another.

"Yes; but there's one thing that worries me more than all the rest. While I am, of course, very sorry for poor Mrs. Floyd and the children, still it's natural to feel most uneasy about one's own flesh and blood, and—well—maybe I ought not to speak of it, even to

you—but I'm very sure that Robert has lent him money, and a good deal of it, and I am doubtful whether he will ever be paid."

"You need not be. There is a moral certainty that he will never see a cent of it again. No man ever did yet, who was so foolish as to lend anything to the colonel. You can set your mind at rest upon that score."

"Yes, I suppose so; but it is a pity and a shame, Aleck! I wish you could put Robert upon his guard. He's so soft-hearted and open-handed that he can't say 'No' to anybody, much less to a friend. And he always defends Colonel Floyd when he is attacked; says he's not so bad as the world is disposed to think, and has some fine traits of character, and has always been very kind to him, and all such talk. You know Robert, and how easily imposed upon he is; and the colonel certainly puts himself out to be polite and attentive to him, and, Robert told me, gave his consent in the most handsome manner to his engagement with Helen Gardner. Gracious, Aleck! you might have broken it all to pieces!"

Aleck stooped to pick up the pipe that had slipped from his fingers, and remained in that position for a minute, busily brushing the ashes from the gaily-flowered hearthrug—a manifestation of care and neatness which, if Aunt Ruth remarked, she attributed to the effect of his residence among the cleanly Hollanders.

"Ugly and dirty as it is, it would have been a pity to break what cost so much money, and is so hard to replace in this country!" continued the thrifty housewife. "'Tisn't cracked, is it?"

"No! But I interrupted you! What were you saying?" Aleck refilled and relighted his pipe, after seeming to examine it solicitously, and stretched out his feet as before. "You were talking about the Floyds."

"Yes! so far as I can judge, there is no love lost between Helen and her guardian. I don't think there ever has been. He has always found her an unruly charge, I reckon. So it isn't to please her that Robert let him have money, when he asked for it. It's just his own good-nature, and he will suffer for it."

"They have been engaged for some time, have they?"

"Who? Robert and Helen? Four or five months. They seem very happy together, as contented a couple as I ever saw. They

expect to be married at Christmas ; but I suppose Robert has told you all about that."

"At Christmas! and this is the first of November!"

There was a dreary echo in his tone that reached even Miss Ruth's apprehensions, and elicited a responsive sigh.

"Yes! it will be a change for us all—for you and me, as well as them! But I hope it is for Robert's good. He will make one of the best husbands alive; and she has steadied surprisingly—sobered down more than I once thought she ever could, since they were first engaged. Do you recollect how wild she used to be?"

"Yes!"

And after this musing articulation of his aunt's favourite monosyllable, there was an interval of silence. Miss Ruth plied her knitting-needles assiduously, and looked over her spectacles into the crackling fire. The nephew smoked slowly, and seemed to study the same blazing pile of hickory logs. What were her motherly and housewifely meditations, it concerns us not to inquire. The central figure in his dream-pictures was a young girl, with flashing, laughing eyes, and dark chestnut locks wound in heavy braids about her nobly-shaped head: form erect, yet pliant; dancing feet whose rapid beat was sweetest music to his ears.

"Did he recollect how wild she used to be?"

"Mrs. Floyd, sober and shocked, had oftentimes expostulated with him for aiding and abetting her harum-scarum niece in her hare-brained pranks and lawless proceedings. He had taught her to sit firmly his most spirited hunter, in leaping fences and ditches; to fish, and, most barbarous of all pursuits for a young lady—to hunt! to carry her fowling-piece and bring down her game with the coolness and address of a veteran sportsman. This last-named accomplishment was rather practised in secret, than alluded to in public. It was doubtful whether Mrs. Floyd was ever quite sure that Helen had really acquired it. Many a day had she spent in the woods in company with Aleck and Robert, when governess and guardians had granted her permission to pay a proper, hum-drum visit to Miss Ruth. An unfortunate accident finally cured her of her Nimrod proclivities. The three were out turkey-hunting, one day, and Aleck, having stationed Robert with Helen behind the blind of brushwood and bushes, to await the coming of the frightened and

scattered flock, grew impatient of the tardiness of the dogs sent to "flush" the birds, and started off himself to seek and direct them. He was not long in discovering a fine gang of turkeys, and after assuring himself that many of them had taken the direction he desired, undertook to regain the covert by another route. Crouching low, that his head might not appear above the undergrowth of the wood, he made his way rapidly and stealthily towards the ambuscade. He was within twenty yards of it, when the crack of a gun rang out upon the forest stillness. Helen, excited and impetuous, had mistaken the slight motion created by his passage among the bushes, for the advance of the expected game, and fired before Robert could interfere to prevent her rash action. The charge from her weapon lodged in Aleck's shoulder, and the upper part of his chest, inflicting a severe, and, as they, in their inexperience, feared, a fatal wound.

Bleeding and suffering—ignorant as his companions of the extent of his danger, the elder brother still retained his habitual power of resolve and command.

"Leave me here—both of you!" was his order. "Robert, you will see her home! then ride over to Greenfield and bring a couple of men back with you. And, my dear fellow! mind! *I did it myself!*"

Helen interposed with a passionate burst of self-accusation. It was all her work—her unpardonable stupidity! her cruel, cruel blunder! and she alone should be blamed for it! She deserved the most severe things that could be said of and to her!

"Nelly!" The wounded youth looked up with his own saucy smile. "Do you remember what that old Hebrew king—Abimelech, I believe it was—said to his armour-bearer, when a woman cast a piece of millstone from the wall of the besieged city, and cracked his crown? 'Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me—' *A woman slew him!*'" Robert, you will do as I said!"

Robert hastened away in quest of help; but Helen's will was not to be borne down in this matter. For two hours—long in their anguished suspense to her;—short and delicious as a dream of Paradise to the injured boy,—she lingered beside him in the heart of that lonely forest; stanching the blood with such appliances as were within her reach; making him a pillow of leaves; fanning

him ; gently wiping his brow, when the pain, that could not extort a groan from the manly heart, or dim his grateful smile, forced great beads of sweat through the pores. Nay, more ! when the sound of voices was heard approaching the spot, and he besought her for both their sakes to make good her retreat before she was perceived by curious or unfriendly eyes, she gazed long and earnestly into his face, a look that awoke a new thrill of life in the fainting heart, and, the tears raining down her cheeks, bent over and kissed him.

When Robert and his attendants arrived at the scene of the accident, Aleck was alone, lying quietly upon his leafy couch, more than serene, with a happy light upon his countenance that glorified and elevated every feature. It was but the commencement of a splendid hunting season—the finest that had been known for years—when he was shot, and he lost the whole of it. Miss Ruth marvelled at and lauded his patient endurance of his tedious confinement ; his comrades were affected with equal surprise at the cheerful equanimity with which he received their raillery upon his awkwardness in hitting himself,—he, the best shot in the country !

“Merely a difference of game, boys !” he said, gaily. “I went to look for turkeys, and brought down a great goose instead !”

Robert carried daily health bulletins to Colonel Floyd's, and never returned without some token of remembrance or sympathizing message from Helen. Sometimes she wrote to the invalid. Every one of these hastily penned notes—incoherent, girlish, extravagant—was treasured up to this day—locked away, as too sacred for other eyes ;—perfumed with the roses she had sent by his brother's hand. The three guarded well their secret ; but Helen never hunted again. If she had not lost her unfeminine hankering for a personal participation in the amusement, she shrank from its practice with trembling.

She was but fifteen then,—scarcely more than a child. Robert was two years older, and Aleck his senior by eighteen months. He was twenty-two when he went to Germany, and it was still “Aleck,” and “Nelly” between them. Still they laughed, danced, rode, and sported together, the acknowledged ringleaders of every frolic—the wilder the better—and Robert was the balance-wheel to their impetuosity. He was mirthful, and loved fun as dearly as did either of the others, but he exhibited a gentle steadiness of demeanour, a

graceful propriety of action, that caused him to be extolled by all the matrons of the region as a "pattern young man, and a safe chance for any girl." Nobody called Aleck Lay an unsafe chance, yet his popularity never equalled his brother's. He was too unscrupulous in speech, often reckless and imprudent in manner. The weak-minded and timid feared his lash of ridicule; hypocrites and pretenders, his fearless exposure of their true characters. Little cared he for popular judgment, for public favour, or public reprobation. Aunt Ruth petted him; Robert loved him; and Helen was his willing ally, his fast friend, his confidante upon all subjects save one.

Their farewell, prior to his departure for the Old World, was spoken in the interval of the dance, at a large party given at Colonel Floyd's, in celebration of Lily Calvert's—a niece and another ward of the colonel's—birthday.

"It would hardly be honourable in me were I to say to you all that is in my heart," Aleck had said, hurriedly; "for this avowal would force you to a corresponding frankness—and I shall be absent a long time—and we are both very young. It would be basely ungenerous, were I to attempt to bind you by a promise now."

His colour came and went almost as rapidly as did hers, and his whole behaviour was oddly at variance with his usual easy, self-assured bearing.

"But if my presumption in daring to speak of this matter—to think of you, to hope and dream, as I have for years, has not offended you: if you will still keep your early play-fellow in remembrance—still permit him to cherish your image where he has always worn it—in his heart of hearts—may I ask you to wear this while I am away? It is no signal of bondage, recollect! It leaves you free as air. When I return, if I do not see it on your finger, I shall, nevertheless, have no right to feel myself ill-treated—shall never molest you by demands for any explanation."

They stood apart from the crowd, at a window partially concealed by a curtain. Without a word—only with one thrilling look into his eyes, that revived the memory of the forest scene, she drew off her glove—his hand touched hers—held it for a second! The next minute a partner claimed her for the ensuing set, and led her away, dreaming as little of the ring hidden by the snowy kid, as did the



throng at large of the wild throbbings of the heart—the mingled rapture, pain, and unrest masked by Aleck Lay's laughing face. Helen was never more gay than during the remainder of the revel; and his spirits seemed to keep pace with the rise of hers. Their last dance together was a dashing, sweeping waltz, whose almost frantic swiftness, and the length of time they kept it up, set all the prudes' heads to wagging in holy horror, and drew from kind, loving, charitable Aunt Ruth, a deprecating remark to her nephew Robert.

"She's a good-hearted girl, I don't doubt, Robert! And I have great confidence in her principles; she wouldn't knowingly do a wrong thing; but it's a pity the poor child has no mother!"

The rout over, the adieux were brief—a single glance was interchanged, and a hand-clasp, fervent, but not prolonged;—a jesting phrase intended for the benefit of the bystanders—

"Good-bye, Nelly! Take care of yourself!" and

"Good-bye, Aleck! I suppose we shall not see you again until you are a fat Mynheer, whose thick tongue will be unintelligible to untravelled ears."

This was all! As he had said, they were both very young then; it was his choice to leave her untrammelled by the shadow of a pledge. The ring might have been a friend's parting gift. She was a woman now—more grave, more thoughtful, more judicious than in the days when she seemed to prefer his society to that of other admirers—even to Robert's; a woman who had chosen for herself a life partner, and who would, in seven weeks more, be his brother's wife!

He thought all this over, without the change of a muscle or an audible sigh. His will was strong, and his pride stubborn; himself one of the men who can meet death, however horrible its form, with a steady or smiling front, if it be proved to be inevitable, and there are others looking on to mark how they sustain the trial.

His voice, cheery and unfaltering, ended the protracted pause.

"Ah, well, aunty, you and I need not stay here to embarrass the movements of the rightful master and mistress of this establishment. Greenfield is a dear and lovely spot to us both, but duty and expediency unite in forbidding my longer residence here. Maple Hill is sadly in want of a tenant, and I have always looked forward to a settlement of myself and worldly goods there when I should be ready

to begin life in earnest. But I cannot keep house by myself, you know. It would be a doleful and disgraceful Bachelor's Hall, that would cause you to disown me for ever. I must have somebody to scold the maids, to pour out my coffee and lecture me occasionally. You will not mind the change of home so much as if I invited you to be my companion in a strange neighbourhood and unfamiliar house, will you ?”

“I was born there, lived there until your mother and grandfather died, and your father begged me to come here and take charge of you boys !”

A tear found its way from beneath the spectacles.

“And you have no idea what an exemplary character I mean to become,” pursued Aleck. “Not quite so good as Robin, to be sure, but a very decorous and decent young man, notwithstanding beard and meerschaum.”

Miss Ruth smiled up at him affectionately. Scapegrace though she was often obliged to consider him, he had ever been her favourite of her adopted children ; and the vision of an independent home with him was far more pleasant, more in consonance with her tastes, than the thought of resigning the insignia of authority, *i.e.*, the key-basket, into the hands of Robert's wife, and the meek acceptance of a secondary position in the court where she had reigned supreme for upwards of twenty years.

“You were always kind-hearted and generous, Aleck ! one of the sort whose worst side is the outside. I hope you'll get a good wife of your own some day.”

“Don't trouble your brain with such useless wishes and unprofitable imaginings, aunty ! I do not ! Why ! it is ten o'clock ! Is Robert generally so late in returning from court ?”

“No ! I'm afraid he went home with Colonel Floyd ! He often does. It is naturally hard work for him, now he is in love, to pass the Belleview gate on his road, especially when he thinks that there is nobody here but me, and knows that I am never lonesome. We had not an idea of seeing you for a fortnight to come. How stupid and selfish it was in me not to think sooner of sending a boy to the colonel's to inquire if he was there. But, you see, I kept expecting him every minute.”

“Exactly ! I understand ! I am glad your after-thought came so

late. I would not have him disturbed from his present agreeable quarters on my account. You think that he will not be home to-night, then?"

"Hardly. He usually stays at the colonel's all night when he goes there from court. I suppose that, like most other courting couples, they have endless things to say to each, though what about, I can't think. I should think they would have talked it all out before this time, but that is always the way. Engaged people never seem at a loss what to say to one another."

"Theirs is a theme which is exhaustless, until after marriage!" said Aleck, yawning and rising. "I feel tired after my journey, and it is already long past your bed-time. Good-night!"

His chamber was the same he had shared with Robert until their separation, two years before; the same in which he had lain, helpless and suffering during the weeks that followed the accident already described. There was a bright fire on the hearth; his mother's picture, the object of his boyish idolatry, still smiled down at him from its place above the mantel; every article of the old familiar furniture was endeared to him by its associations of a happy childhood and joyous, hopeful youth, yet the place was inexpressibly cheerless and desolate; awoke a sensation of homesickness, more acute than any he had felt in the way-side inns of foreign lands.

He looked through the window. The moon shone with fitful lustre between flying clouds; the high autumn wind roared through a pine-grove to the right of the house, and tore showers of leaves from other trees—the dismantled boughs groaning in every fibre as they gave up their summer treasures. It was a weird, dreary night to a solitary and sad watcher, whether his lonely vigil were kept above a dead form or a dead hope; a night to make friends draw closer the ring surrounding the social blaze, and talk more earnestly and frankly; a night to cause lovers to cling more nearly and fondly to one another, to feel, as they had never done before, the warmth and blessedness and glory of that heart sunshine which beamed the fairer for the rush and crash of outward storms.

"This is my welcome home!"

He left his look-out; went to a trunk which, with the rest of his baggage, stood against the wall, unstrapped and opened it, and took from its depths a pretty casket. The lid of this was raised, and

a subtle perfume stole through the apartment—the odour of rose-leaves. Then, the entire contents of the box were emptied upon the table: notes, dried flowers, a knot of blue ribbon—lastly, a lady's cambric handkerchief, with dark-red stains upon it. With this, the rude compress of moss and bruised herbs had been bound upon his shoulder on that memorable day. One corner bore a name. He tore this off and threw it into the fire, turning his back that he might not see it burn; the rest, cambric, papers, withered stalks and petals, were rent into small bits, not impatiently, but carefully, deliberately, as one performs a solemn duty, re-collected and re-turned to the casket. The November blast screamed hoarsely past his ear as he lifted the sash. In a second it caught the pile of fragments; whirled them aloft; dashed them downwards; scattered them far and wide over plain, hill, and grove.

“So let it be!” was all Aleck said, as he lowered the window.





## CHAPTER II.

**T**HERE was no lack of cheerful company in Colonel Floyd's parlour that evening. The colonel himself read the papers he had taken from the post-office in the afternoon—seated by a round stand at the warmest corner of the fire-place. So real was his absorbed interest in the sheet he held, that his presence imposed less restraint than it was wont to exert upon the innocent hilarity of the junior portion of the party. He had enjoyed in his younger days the reputation of being the handsomest man, the best rider, and most graceful dancer in the county; and the years which had frosted his hair, and made rigid the once flexible lines of his face, had not bowed the stately form, robbed the eye of its fire, or the limbs of their strength. He looked proud and resolute, and he was both of these, and more—proud, with a haughtiness that inspired dislike and fear, rather than respect; arrogant and overbearing to an extent which made him popular throughout the region where he would have ruled with absolute sway. In his family, he was an autocrat; upon his plantation, a despot, whose laws were Draconian in severity; everywhere, in theory and in practice, he was an aristocrat of the sternest type. It was a common saying among the working classes, that it was almost as much as a poor man's life was worth, to press Colonel Floyd for the payment of a just debt; yet no tradesman or mechanic durst refuse him unlimited credit. It is a sight that may be seen every day in other communities, North, East, and West, where the feudal system has never prevailed as it did at the date of our tale, in this old Potomac county of Maryland—I mean the supremacy accorded to a single individual by

those, his equals and betters in all respects—merely because he, out of the pride and mightiness of his inflated heart, chooses to proclaim himself a prince and a lord over them. Some of those whom he counts his vassals are too indolent, others too cowardly, others still too amiable, to dispute his reign, and, unchecked, he flaunts his dictatorship in the eyes of his amused or disgusted fellow-citizens, until a Tyrant, stronger and grimmer yet than he, forces him to discharge the last humiliating debt of Nature; proves him to have been, after all his pomp of place and circumstance, but common clay.

The Floyds had, from their family seat of Belleview, governed the adjacent county for three generations back; and distasteful as was the bearing of the present proprietor to his well-born, well-bred, and wealthy neighbours, they never thwarted, very rarely contradicted him. Behind his back, he was stigmatized as violent, unscrupulous, and dissipated—a *roué* and a gambler; a bully and a swindler; yet, not one of his uncomplimentary friends ever thought of testifying his disapproval of a course so disreputable by declining the hospitalities of Belleview, and obliging his wife and daughters to do the same; none withheld from him the grasping hand and hearty salutation of delighted civility; few there were who did not feel and express themselves as pleased and honoured by his visits to their houses.

Upon the opposite side of the hearth was Mrs. Floyd, mild, inane, and faded, as might have been predicted of the sweet-tempered, spiritless beauty and heiress, who had, at eighteen, wedded this imperious partner. She feared her husband, loved her children, and found her chief pleasures in housekeeping, gardening, and the participation in an occasional weak and innocuous dish of gossip with some congenial visitor. At the period of her marriage, she had represented several ciphers, prefaced by a more important figure, and these, it was surmised, had formed her principal recommendation, *malgré* her bright eyes and peachy bloom, in the sight of the bridegroom. But beneath his hot, hasty fingers, the sum of which she was the sign and seal had melted away, until the total and her consequence to her spouse had dwindled, in a like proportion, to a forlorn 0. Yet they maintained the state they had borne when cash was plenty, and houses nor lands were overshadowed by cumbering mortgages. In mansion and farm and stables, there was no symptom of

the decay of wealth or gentility. People said that they were going down-hill, while all agreed that, during the colonel's lifetime, his family would never be allowed to soil their dainty feet with the mud; that to those, reared as they had been, lies a dread and hopeless quagmire—filthy and unfathomable, in the vale of Poverty. As for Mrs. Floyd, it may be safely affirmed that the idea of such a descent, the bare prospect or possibility of this terrific fall, had never occurred to her mind.

She was half-dozing now over a knitted edging she was manufacturing of fine spool cotton—a vacant smile upon her features, a meaningless smirk, that was supposed to indicate excessive amiability, which brightened mechanically, as, now and then, a merry outburst from the group of young people reached her drowsy senses. This was her usual style of entertaining her nieces' visitors.

This group, consisting of six persons,—three ladies and a corresponding number of gentlemen—were gathered about a table in the middle of the large room, engaged, evidently to their own most lively gratification, in the game of "Consequences." The table was littered with the folded slips of paper, so well known to the lovers of the play, and each one held a pencil. The member of the little band who would soonest have attracted the notice of a stranger, was Lily Calvert, the younger of Colonel Floyd's wards, and his own niece. Her chair was set in the full glare of the lamp that lighted the scribes in their employment. She was nearly nineteen years of age, but not taller than many girls are at ten, with pale gold curls floating loosely upon her shoulders; exquisitely shaped and extremely small feet and hands; large, melancholy blue eyes, with drooping fringes, and a voice clear and sweet as that of a bird. But her complexion, to which she owed her pet name, now the only one by which she was ever called, formed the marked peculiarity of her appearance. It was white as the purest wax; never warmed by a tinge of colour, whatever were her feelings; and her lips had, usually, a bluish tinge. The most obstinate unbeliever in the reality of such phenomena could not, in surveying her, help crediting the explanation of this one, commonly reported among those who were conversant with the family history.

Egbert Calvert had married Colonel Floyd's only sister, and settled with her upon the estate bequeathed to her by her father. One night,

less than a year from the wedding day, he was brought home a corpse, stark, cold, and bloody, having been picked up from the roadside by some belated passers-by. He had not a known enemy in the world; no man was more popular and respected, and, in the absence of all testimony tending to prove human agency in producing his death, the ghastly cut upon the back of his head, which had crushed in the skull, was somewhat lamely accounted for by the supposition that his horse—a fiery and imperfectly broken colt—had thrown him with violence against the rocky road on which he was lying when found. The poor wife never smiled again; seldom spoke a voluntary word after recovering from the swoon into which she fell at the fatal spectacle; but it was not until Lily's birth that she manifested unmistakable signs of derangement. Lunacy was not reckoned a disgrace in this patrician community. On the contrary, its frequent appearance in the best, that is to say, the wealthiest and proudest classes, caused it to be recognized as an aristocratic complaint, produced, as it undoubtedly was, by the need of an admixture of fresh, new blood with the thin, blue current cousin had poured into cousin's veins, from one generation to another, for a hundred years and more. The Floyds had, like the rest of those who plumed themselves upon being of "good old stock," been pertinacious in the practice of intermarriage. Grandfather, father, and son had espoused first cousins, and the State Asylum was the more populous by reason of their adherence to ancient customs.

So Charlotte Calvert, bereaved of husband, and, more mercifully, of reason, was consigned by her affectionate relatives to the safe and comfortable retreat where others of her race were enjoying a peaceful home; her brother assumed the control of her property, as guardian of her child and trustee for herself, and Mrs. Floyd opened her motherly arms to the worse than orphaned babe. She had no daughters of her own,—had been, as the phrase is, "unfortunate" in her children. Her eldest boy was born an idiot, and, at the time of our story, was an inmate of the same asylum in which his aunt, Mrs. Calvert, was confined. The second, a beautiful, intelligent child, lived to be two years old, and was then snatched from her within a day after the commencement of the disorder by an attack of croup; the third, a girl, died a few hours after its birth. This event occurred almost simultaneously with the little Lily's advent, and the latter



gained, by means of this association and her own sad helplessness of condition, such a hold upon the heart of her foster-mother, that the subsequent arrival of four sons, three of whom were still alive, could not dispossess her of the first place in the good lady's affections. Her uncle did not pet her; he never petted anything, not even his most valued racer; but neither did he scold and rebuff and cuff her, as it was his habit to treat his own offspring, and thus she grew to regard herself, and to be regarded by others, as a favourite with him. She was a spoiled child from the beginning of her existence; but more self-indulgent than selfish; exacting of notice and love, and disposed to be jealous of superior attentions bestowed upon others; yet it was so natural to admire and humour her; she was so pretty and *petite*, and her naïve, winning ways so like those of a gleeful, graceful little girl, that it was not often she had reason to complain of being overlooked.

Her supporters on either hand at the table were Tom Shore and Junius Dickson, beaux from the vicinity, who had made this their halting-place on the way homewards from the county court-house—quite a fashionable practice with the young men for twenty miles around. Facing her sat Virginia Shore, Tom's sister, an intimate friend of the cousins and a gay-spirited rattle; next her, Robert Lay, and beside him, his betrothed, Helen Gardner, looking very much as Aleck's yearning heart was then picturing her in his fireside visions, only with a richer maturity, a ripeness of womanhood upon her, that Miss Ruth may have had in her mind, when she essayed to describe the change that had taken place in the girl since her engagement. Robert was a trifle shorter than his brother, but still a well-made, tall figure, with pleasant hazel eyes, light hair, clear complexion, a mouth that betokened sweetness of disposition and delicate sensibilities, a voice at once manly and gentle, and a full, curling auburn beard. He was a handsome fellow; companionable to a charm; easy-tempered to a fault; and universally beloved by high and low. By unanimous acclamation, he was chosen reader of the party; and in his manner of collecting the folded slips, as each writer pronounced his or hers ready, there was a frank, smiling courtesy, so natural and customary with him, that he was unaware of its manifestation, but which wrought its effect upon those he addressed.

"Are you ready, Miss Helen?" he said to his right-hand neighbour, when all the others had given in their contributions.

"Not quite! I am stupid to-night!"

"I believe you are!" retorted Lily, with a slight spice of pettishness in her manner. "You have been behindhand in every round. If you will write what you are dreaming about it will interest us, I have no doubt."

"Never mind! There is time enough, and to spare," observed Robert, kindly, as Helen bent down, her face crimsoning with shame or impatience, and scribbled away desperately at the limited space remaining for her to fill.

He pretended, further to relieve her, to be busied in sorting the narrow strips of paper deposited in his care.

"There!" Helen pushed hers towards him, and threw herself back in her chair. "My invention is exhausted! I shall retire at the next round."

"Do as I do, and write whatever nonsense first occurs to you," replied young Lay. "I should never progress beyond a single line if I attempted to be brilliant!"

The game of "Consequences," I may as well state, for the information of those who, from the misfortune of ignorance, or the wilfulness of superior wisdom to such frivolous amusements, need enlightenment upon the subject, is conducted after this wise. A half sheet of note-paper is furnished to each person who desires to take part in the entertainment, and he or she writes at the top of this a character or personal description applicable to a lady—as "the fair and witty," or the "homely and shrewish"—folds this down so carefully that no part of the writing is visible, and passes it to the one sitting next the said him or her, on one side, receiving at the same moment a similarly prepared page from the neighbour on the other hand. Next comes the lady's name, usually that of some friend or acquaintance of the writer; then, a description masculine, and a name; the place of meeting; what he said, and her reply; the consequence of the interview, and, as a finale, the world's opinion upon the matter. The best fun of the performance is the marvellous and oftentimes ludicrous coherence of the narrative, written piece-meal by so many hands, each scribe being perfectly ignorant of a single word that precedes his own addition to the story. There were a few blushes

and a great deal of laughter upon the present occasion, as various good hits and strikingly appropriate allusions were given to the auditors in the reader's best style.

At length came a tale that awoke different sensations in the breasts of all, that was felt acutely by at least one member of the company :—

“The graceful and winning Miss Lily Calvert and the refined and chivalrous Mr. Robert Lay met in Colonel Floyd's parlour. He said,—

“‘How happy could I be with either,  
Were t'other dear charmer away!’”

“She answered, weepingly,

“‘The moon looks on many brooks;  
The brook sees but one moon.’”

“The consequence was, that the loss of her wits followed upon that of her heart, and his comfort and happiness were not at all damaged thereby. The world said—‘Poor thing! what else could have been anticipated from her antecedents!’”

One or two tried to raise a spasmodic laugh, and nobody looked at Lily, whose forced mirth jarred upon every ear, while her taper fingers interlaced each other tightly on the table.

“Bah!” said Helen. “That is the flattest thing we have heard yet! Give us another, if you please, Mr. Lay.”

No one, unless it were himself, in their private interviews, ever heard her call him “Robert” now-a-days.

“This looks racy!” remarked he, catching a glimpse of the names heading the one he was unfolding.

“The witty and accomplished Miss Helen Gardner, and the learned but cynical Mr. Alexander Lay, met behind a turkey-blind. He said—‘False as fair! did you not plight your troth to me? Was not this ring the seal?’ She said—‘Alas! it is too late! They told me you loved another!’ The consequence was that she married his brother, and he lived and died a crusty, rusty, fusty old bachelor. The world said—‘It is dangerous, this playing with edge-tools!’”

Robert's smile was free of all unpleasant meaning, as he flashed a merry glance at his betrothed.

“Reefs ahead!” he said, in a playful “sàde,” inaudible to others, amidst the chattering that succeeded the reading of this, the last paper. “I must be on the look-out! You know that we expect this dangerous rival of mine in the course of a week or two, do you not?”

"No—I had not heard! Let me look at that nonsense!"

She took the slip he was twisting between his fingers, perused it scrutinizingly, probably to assure herself that no two sentences were penned by the same individual, cast it down contemptuously upon the pile with the rest, arose, and left the room.

The entrance of a servant with a tray of refreshments diverted the attention of the others, and Robert was not long in finding and improving a favourable opportunity for following Helen. They often met, when there was company in the parlour, in the dining-room just across the hall, where the fire was never suffered to go out in cold weather; and since he had signified to her, earlier in the evening, his wish to see her alone by-and-by, it argued no unreasonable vanity on his part that he fully expected to find her there awaiting him. But the room was deserted. The fire had been recently replenished, doubtless by some sagacious servant, in anticipation of the conference he hoped for, and the ruddy shine showed him distinctly every object in the spacious apartment. An unlighted candle was on the table; two comfortable chairs were set in affectionate and suggestive proximity to one another, in front of the hearth.

"She will be in presently!" was his mental comment upon the disappointment, and he sat down to bide her pleasure or convenience.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes went by, and while he chafed less at the delay than a more irritable man would have done, he yet experienced a growing and disagreeable sentiment of impatience.

"At last!"

Footsteps approached along the corridor. He stood up to welcome the late-comer, with no intention of offering her a reproach, or even a remonstrance. True gallant that he was, he never thought of assailing her with such. If he were her knight, he was her vassal likewise; bowed to her will in glad humility, as in courtly grace. His countenance changed as he listened. Helen's light foot never trod the floor with that lazy shuffle; nor was it her habit, even in the days when she "used to be so wild," to proclaim her coming by whistling—

"Possum up a gum-tree,  
Raccoon in a hollow."

But it was a melodious whistle, and deftly executed; the original

melody being artistically varied by fantastic trills and cadenzas; and it was a good-humoured face which was illumined by the candle borne in the intruder's hand.

"Beg pardon, Mars' Robert! Come for Marster heavy boots! He want 'em, byme by!"

He was a negro lad of fourteen or thereabouts—boot-black errand-boy, and assistant waiter; a knowing, saucy imp, who stood in awe of but two living creatures, his master and his father.

"Dey ain't in here, arter all!" he ejaculated, in well-feigned surprise, having made an exploration of all unlikely and impossible hiding-places for the required articles, such as the sideboard, knife-box, and plate-warmer. "Dat's too bad!"

"I saw a pair in the hall, when I came through just now," said Robert, whose instinct it was to help every one, no matter how lowly his station, out of trouble, whatever might be its nature.

"Thank you, sur! I'm obleeged to you!"

He halted, in backing towards the door, as if just struck by an idea.

"If you please, Mars' Robert, would you mind asking Miss Helen if she will have a fire made up in de office? It's cold for her to be a-settin' thar to-night—and damp besides. To be sure, the chimblly has what you may call a 'different deliverer, and does smoke pretty bad for a while arter the fire is kindled—but, ef she likes to set thar, she ought to have one, and I'm 'tirely at hur service—ef you'd be so kind as to say so to hur, sur!"

"I will! Here, Gabriel!"

He tossed the boy a coin, which was caught dexterously, and without advancing to hear the profusion of thanks that ensued upon the receipt of the gift, Robert entered the long, dark hall by which Gabriel had come to the dining-room. This led to a wing of the building which was mostly taken up by store-rooms and closets, and at the farther end by what was termed "the office." Not that any of the Floyds had ever professed to practise law or medicine, unless it had been some obscure younger son, whose very name had passed away from family traditions. No one now upon the earth knew from what usage or circumstance the apartment had derived its name—only, it had always been called "the office" within the memory of this generation, and innovations upon former customs were not

popular in the connection. There were scores of ancient volumes, with yellow pages and worm-eaten bindings, packed into two book-cases on different sides of the room ; in one corner was an antiquated spinnet, its keys dumb or discordant, its gaily ornamented top cracked and defaced ; in another a dusty spinning-wheel, minus a leg, leaned against the wall. There were chairs in various stages of dilapidation—legless, backless, and bottomless ; and a spindle-shanked, rickety table or two ; a general flavour of mustiness and cobwebs, the chilliness of a vault and the choking dryness of a disused garret pervading all.

Anything more ill-suited to be the bower selected by beauty for lovers' tryst could hardly be imagined, yet Robert Lay saw and thought of nothing except the figure that started back from the moon-lighted window, as he unclosed the creaking door. He spoke promptly, to reassure her.

"Nelly ! Darling ! why are you here all alone ?"

No answer ; but there was light enough for him to perceive her further recoil into the darkness behind her ; to note the drooping head and arms crossed upon her breast.

"Are you unhappy ? Is there anything which I can do for you ? Or, had you rather I should not interrupt you at present ?" he pursued, not offering to advance from his position at the entrance.

"No ! no !" she laughed, and came forward to meet him. "This is my old Cave of Melancholy—the grotto of Trophonius ; my chosen resort in my earlier and more haughty days. Oh ! the tears that have watered these dusty boards ! the bursts of angry and pathetic declamation to which these stained walls have lent patient ears ! But you see I can laugh now in reviewing those—my callow days !"

Robert was not deceived by this show of high spirits. He had taken her hand and drawn her to the window, while she was speaking. Her cheeks were flushed, her hand hot in his.

"And the naughty world has dared to use you ill again, has it, although you *are* now a full-fledged bird ?"

"Did I say so ?" she asked, in quick evasion.

"I infer as much, from finding you in the depths of your-sorrowful grotto."

"Oh ! my visit to-night was a whim. Not that I have not had a touch of the blues all day—"

"I have observed this evening, that you were hardly in your usual spirits—a trifle below concert pitch, I should say. Will you not let me share your trouble or annoyance? relieve it, if I can?"

He ventured to steal his arm around her! the love and sympathy depicted in his countenance were plainly to be read by the brightness of the moonbeams, pouring over them at that instant. She did not repel him, albeit she was generally shy of caresses from her betrothed. She even looked up, as his soothing, lovefull accents saluted her ears; then meeting that eloquent gaze, burst into a stormy flood of tears, and buried her face in her hands.

"Robert! Robert! if I could only tell you all?"

"Perhaps that 'all' is not so profound a secret to me as you imagine, dearest?"

He clasped her more firmly, as she would have started from his side.

"Love's eyes are very keen, and mine have discerned much that you, from an overstrained, unreasonableness of honour, would have concealed."

Her sobbing had ceased, but her head was bowed more lowly still, and she trembled violently.

"In this respect, and in this alone, I have been disposed to accuse you of injustice to me, Nelly. When I gave you my love, or, to speak more accurately, when you accepted it—for I cannot remember the time when my heart was not yours!—when you accepted my love I gave you my whole confidence, and entreated that you should be equally unreserved with me. While I cannot fail to admire and appreciate the delicacy that has restrained you upon this point, for it is both a difficult and a delicate matter to bring a charge of unworthiness against one who is so nearly related—"

She threw off his arm; raised a pale, haughty face, whose flashing eyes fairly appalled him.

"You are labouring under a strange misapprehension, Mr. Lay! I have no accusation of any kind, certainly none of unworthiness, to bring against the person of whom you speak. Your information is utterly incorrect, or your imagination has wandered wildly, if you believe the contrary."

"Nelly!" articulated the astonished lover, "listen to me! It is not *my* imagination that wanders now. Surely, the bond which

unites you to him who hopes, in less than two months, to call you his wife, is as strong as that binding you to Colonel Floyd—your guardian, indeed, but merely your uncle-in-law! I ask your forgiveness, if I have erred in supposing that this house was an uncongenial home, from which you have often longed to escape; if I have fancied that Colonel Floyd was, at times, a harsh, and, to one of your disposition, an unwelcome protector. But, while sympathizing with you in the many trials you bear so beautifully, I do not pretend to deny that, out of this bitterness, has sprung some sweetness to me. I have loved to picture to myself how different shall be your daily life when you are all mine, the queen of my home, partner of my fortunes, as you are now in my affections. Again let me entreat your pardon, if I have offended or grieved you by this my first allusion to a subject concerning which you have heretofore avoided speaking. But, my pet, does it not seem preposterous in us, situated as we are, to cherish these foolish, petty reserves?"

"It is I who should sue for your forgiveness. I was petulant, unjust! I did not understand you! Will you pardon me?"

His answer was a fervent kiss upon the hand she extended.

"It is as you have said!" she continued, in the same altered tone—gentle—pleading—almost humble. "This has never been a happy home to me. I will be as frank as you can desire upon this theme; will discard the reserve you deem foolish and childish. My aunt is kind and means well. She could not treat anything unkindly, you know; but although my father was her brother, she loves Lily far better than she does her niece by blood. I try to please and to be dutiful to her; I am sincerely grateful for all she has done for me; but she and Lily assimilate more nearly to one another than she and I ever can."

"I understand!" Robert smiled, a little queerly—a gleam that was not complimentary to Mrs. Floyd's favourite.

"I do not murmur at this," added Helen. "I have never experienced a moment's jealousy of Lily. She is lovely and engaging, and was born to win affection. She used to call me her sister, and seemed to esteem me as such; yet she has changed greatly within the past six months. She does not mean to be unjust; still, she treats me coldly, and will assign no reason for the revolution in her feelings or manner. Colonel Floyd, my uncle, never professed any



regard for me ; in fact, I have seen, from the time I came to live here, that he disliked me. He is more irritable now than ever before—sometimes says things that are very hard to bear. Oh, Robert ! but for you I should be driven to the belief that I have not the power of retaining the love of anyone ! The scanty share of this, Life's best gift, which Providence ever bestowed upon me, seems all to have slipped away. Nobody cares for me now—nobody ! ”

She wrung her hands and moaned much.

It was a moment of the most exquisite pain the listener ever endured. Blest—rich beyond all possibility of spirit-need—in the consciousness of possessing her affection, he could not comprehend this agony of poverty of which she complained. He would fain have hoped to fill her heart, if not so full as she had his, yet, so well as to leave her no cause for such repinings. Repressing the expostulation he felt would be selfish and cruel, he told her anew, in words whose fervour was not diminished by the sadness in which they were uttered, of his devotion, single and entire ; his trust that coming years had in reserve for her, sunshine that should beguile her into forgetfulness of the gloomy Past.

She heard him with calming pulses and more composed mien. Presently, the bowed face was uplifted, and her eyes sought his again—a look that was reverence, admiration—was it love ? So it seemed to his sanguine apprehension, as he laid the unresisting head upon his breast, and bent to the still quivering lips.

“ My own Nelly ! my precious Love ! my *Wife* ! ”

A cloud, crossing the moon's disc, wrapped everything in obscurity for some moments. The room was upon the ground floor, the window-sill low, and, as the moonlight broke forth again and suddenly, there fell upon, or between the lovers, the shadow of a man—a long, dark figure, with a gun in his hand.

Helen started, with a terrified ejaculation.

“ Hush ! ” whispered Robert, smiling. “ You know who it is ? ”

“ Yes—but it was so unexpected ! so like an evil thing ! Come back here, where he cannot see you ! He may look in. ”

“ What if he does ? ” returned the young gentleman, bravely. “ I hope he will be edified by the spectacle ! ”

But he retired into the shade of the interior of the apartment at her reiterated entreaty.

The master of the mansion, for he was the startling apparition, remained motionless and sentry-like, his back towards the window, for perhaps three minutes, when his shadow was joined by another, shorter, stouter, and less erect. This belonged to his only confidential servant, the head man in the field, and sub-manager of the estate,—a negro named Booker, who was sire to the redoubtable Gabriel, and to the rest of the slaves not only a taskmaster, exacting and pitiless, but a veritable tyrant, a meet tool in the hands of his unscrupulous owner. He, too, had his weapon, a thick cowhide, and, after a brief conference, the pair moved on.

“Do you patrol your plantation in person?” questioned Helen, abruptly.

“Neither in person nor by proxy! On the contrary, I have never permitted any patrolling gang to enter or search my servants’ quarters, except upon very rare occasions, when they had a warrant to examine my premises, together with those of others in the neighbourhood, for stolen property.”

“I am very glad! I cannot describe to you the sensations of disgust and dread which I experience, whenever I happen to espy those two upon their nightly round. They go at irregular hours, sometimes as early as nine o’clock, at others not until midnight, that they may take trespassers by surprise. Every person is expected to be in his cabin by ten, and if a visitor be discovered, he is peremptorily ordered off if he has a pass—punished if he has not. You must have heard that Colonel Floyd shot a poor fellow, one of the Reverdy servants, last year?”

“I did! But he caught him thieving, did he not? That is the popular version of the transaction.”

“That was the story set in circulation to palliate the act, for Mr. Reverdy is not a man to submit to wanton injury, as Colonel Floyd well knows. But the facts of the case are just these:—The negro who was shot, a very decent, well-behaved young fellow, was in love with Sally, my maid. For some reason, best known to himself, Colonel Floyd conceived a dislike for him, and forbade his coming upon the plantation, ‘with his master’s permission or without.’ I was aware that they still met clandestinely, in spite of this prohibition, and several times warned Sally of the danger they incurred by so doing. One night they were straying along the edge of the

melon-patch, when Colonel Floyd hailed them by name, and demanded what they were doing there. The girl ran one way, the man another. Unfortunately, he went directly across the field of melons. When midway, he was fired at and severely wounded. Appearances supported the statement of his pursuers—Booker was in attendance upon his master—that he was in the act of purloining the melons, and ‘on the side of his oppressor there was power.’ Poor Sally! it nearly killed her! She is a good girl, and sincerely attached to Thomas, her admirer.”

“We will make up the match again, and give them a grand wedding at Greenfield, when Christmas is over,” was the reply. “Would *you* be very seriously afflicted if some evil-minded or careless hunter were to shoot me in like manner, wing me, as a certain fair damsel of my acquaintance once served poor Aleck?”

“Don’t, please!” she begged, in a tone whose distress touched, while it flattered him.

“I am a selfish dog! inconsiderate and unkind, to permit you to stay in this cold vault of a place so long!” he said, anxiously. “Your hands are like two icicles, and you are positively shivering? There is a fire in the dining-room, and I want to read you Aleck’s last letter. Won’t he be overwhelmed by the pleasant surprise we have in store for him?”

“Do you mean that you have never told him—”

“That we were engaged? Never! It was hard work to keep the delightful secret, but I could not do the subject justice upon paper, and then again I owed him a Roland for the Oliver he gave me, in writing the pretty tale of his German betrothal to Aunt Ruth, and never whispering it to me! He ought to be shot for the trick, the dear old fellow!”

It was at this moment the shower of paper fragments was given to the bitter wind. The brothers each took his last look at the stormy moonlight at the same time.



### CHAPTER III.

**H**ELEN GARDNER sat sewing with her maid, in her chamber upon the following day, when Virginia Shore and Lily burst in upon her quiet. They had just returned from a shopping expedition to the neighbouring hamlet, dignified by the name of a village.

“Guess who has come at last!”

“Whom *do* you think we met at the Post Office!” they cried in concert.

“The Queen of England, or a peer of the realm at the very least, if one may judge from the state into which the encounter has thrown you both!” responded Helen, with provoking coolness.

“Pshaw! nonsense! make a real guess!” insisted Virginia.

“The Great Mogul, or the Emperor of Timbuctoo—possibly, the Lord High Chamberlain of her Majesty, the Empress of Borrio-boola-Gha!” was Helen’s next attempt. “Sally! take these young ladies’ bonnets and shawls, and set chairs for them!”

She went on with her needlework, which was a portion of her trousseau.

“A more interesting personage than any you have yet named!” Lily walked up to her cousin, and slipped her little hand under her chin, that she might better study her expression as the news was communicated: “Alexander the Great!”

“Certainly the most distinguished *lay*-man of this region!” Virginia supplied an additional hint.

If there were suspicious scrutiny in the gaze which Lily would have had convey only the impression of arch mirthfulness, its end

was foiled for that time. Helen calmly released her face from the hold of the pretty hand.

"Indeed! he has arrived unexpectedly! His friends did not look for him until next week, at the earliest. I hope he is in good plight."

"Superb! magnificent! irresistible!" rejoined Virginia, clasping her fingers and rolling up her eyes in tragic-comic earnestness. "Oh, my poor stricken heart!"

"Let Sally unhook your dress, so that the afflicted organ can thump more freely!" recommended Helen. "Or, if the palpitation is very alarming, try a little hartshorn and lavender!"

"Is that what you take when you are thus affected?" questioned the young lady, plaintively.

"Always!" Helen answered, gravely.

"Then, Sally! if hartshorn be the cure of love, bring it on!"

She actually made the amused handmaiden pour out a few drops of the sedative mixture into a glass, and dilute the potion with water; then drank it off, and executed a grimace.

"Faugh! what stuff! the remedy is worse than the disease!"

Lily looked supremely disdainful of all this nonsense.

"How can you act so ridiculously, Virginia? And you have not once thought to deliver your Irresistible's message to Helen!"

The needlewoman's complexion did vary slightly at this, and the swift motion of her hand was less even.

"Message! he sent none by me! It was Mr. Robert Lay, who said that they intended riding over this afternoon."

"I beg your pardon!" said Lily, positively, "but my ears are unfortunately quick, and assuredly heard him begin a sentence to you, *sotto voce*, with, 'And my quondam playfellow, Helen'—I was too honourable to listen any longer."

"Indeed, my dear child, your ears deceived you for once. I have no recollection of any such language, or, if it was used, I said that myself!" denied the rattle. "I was talking about Helen, part of the time, but there was only a single sentence spoken on the subject, I am sure."

"That was what you two were whispering about, at the carriage-door, was it?"

"I shall not tell you!"

Virginia's colour arose suspiciously, although she still laughed. Helen set her teeth and held her peace, while Lily sneered significantly.

"Oh, well! it is none of my business! I introduced the matter because I supposed that Helen would be glad to get the affectionate greeting which I supposed was committed to your trust by her brother-in-law, that is to be. Nelly, dear! we, Virginia and I, have been talking heresy on our way home. We have decided that you did not display your best taste in your selection. The elder and dark-haired brother is unquestionably the handsomer man of the two."

"Tastes differ!" replied Helen. "Yours and mine often do, Lily!"

There was nothing on the surface of this speech to call forth the gasp and wince of surprise or pain with which Lily drew in her breath, yet Helen remarked these, and also the sudden quietness of manner with which she next spoke.

"I am very negligent! I must go and see if I can give mamma" (so she always called Mrs. Floyd) "any assistance in her preparations for dinner. I am growing heartily tired of dining-days."

Helen sewed on in silence when she had gone, and her sedate, almost stern composure was an uncomfortable damper upon Virginia's merry mood.

"Do give me some sewing, Nelly! something that will keep these idle hands out of the mischief which somebody, who must not be mentioned, always finds for such to do."

"I have nothing ready besides what we are doing, thank you!"

"Your dresses are to be made in Baltimore, are they not?"

"Yes."

"That is the only decent and comfortable way of getting up a trousseau—to commit it to the profession."

"It is the least troublesome."

A protracted silence, ended by a desperate effort at renewed liveliness on the part of the chatter-box.

"Dear me! I don't wonder you grow sober and thoughtful and matronly before your time, sitting here, stitching eternally upon your wedding-clothes! The very sight of mine would frighten me out of courage and wits together! If I am ever married, it must be upon half

an hour's engagement. I should change my mind, if I had leisure to reflect seriously upon what was before me. Honour bright, now, Nelly. (Sally! Mrs. Floyd is calling you!) There is nobody but our two selves here now, dear, and I can be the soul of secrecy when I chose—don't you sometimes get a little, just a *tiny* bit off the notion of marrying even so charming and loveable a fellow as Robert Lay, if he does adore you? It must be nice to be adored, though! I wish somebody would help me to a personal experience upon the subject!"

"If it were only a 'notion,' I have no doubt that I should, now and then, waver in my intention," said Helen; "probably reverse it completely."

"You mean, then, that it was something more substantial than a fancy for his sweet smile, his beautiful eyes and matchless whiskers, that induced you to say 'yes' when he popped the question?"

"I do!"

Helen sustained the saucy examination unflinchingly.

"And you really—excuse my impertinence! but I am an humble, sincere, and earnest inquirer after truth, particularly since I have seen the resplendent Alexander—and you really and truly love this man, whom you are to take by the hand, with all your heart, soul, and strength, and are resolved, henceforward, forsaking all others, to cleave to him and him alone; to love, honour, and obey, so long as you both shall live?"

"When the proper time for putting that question arrives, I shall be prepared with an answer."

Another freezing silence.

"Have I offended you? It is only poor, foolish, rattle-pated Ginnie, remember," pleaded the visitor at length. "I am going off to dress for dinner now. I have a new dress which is perfectly heavenly! The effect upon Aleck's heart must be great, but I shall not enjoy it one whit unless you assure me that you are not angry with me."

"Have I ever been out of temper with you?" Helen's iciness thawed as she saw the half-roguish, half-penitent face. "I know what valuation to put on your words, Ginnie. You would never give your worst enemy a sly thrust in the dark, or stab one to the heart under pretence of a friendly jest!"

"Of course I wouldn't be guilty of any such shocking things! And we are quite friends now, aren't we? I'll never try to put you

through Cupid's catechism again so long as my name is Virginia Shore, and yours Helen Gardner. I will wait until you exchange it for Helen Lay. My ! isn't that beautiful? Kiss me, and I am gone !”

Helen locked the door after her.

“ I could not have borne it two minutes longer ! Poor, weak, pitiful fool that I am ! whom straws like these can pierce to the quick ! Oh ! how I hate myself !” She struck hard upon her breast with her clinched hand. “ And he *dared* to send a light message to me ! could speak jestingly of our former intercourse to that heedless, giddy creature ? It was like him ? His behaviour has the merit of consistency, to say no more !”

She took a note from her work-box. Robert had sent it to her that morning, and thereby prepared her to expect the tidings brought by the girls.

“ MY DEAREST HELEN,—Picture, as your affectionate heart will teach you to do, my surprise and happiness at finding Aleck here when I returned home ! I think I have never been happier (excepting once) in all my life than I am at this moment, as I scribble this, and the blessed old fellow sits, smilingly, watching my nervous, wayward fingers—unmanageable through very joy. He is well, and better-looking than ever ; true as steel ; good as gold ! the same noble, generous soul whom we parted with so sadly when our trio was broken two years ago. What do you think of his having divined our secret so far as to provide himself with a wedding present for you before leaving Paris ? So, the surprise *bonbon* I have treasured up against his arrival, is all thrown away. I always knew that his instincts were unusually fine. I suppose you will slyly insinuate that may be I am deficient in the art of keeping a secret. I do not deny it, when the person to be kept in the dark is one I love.

“ I write to notify you that you may expect a visit from us to-day, if agreeable to yourself. We shall probably be with you at dinner-time. Aleck is naturally impatient to see you again ; and when did I fail to avail myself of any and every opportunity of seeking your presence ?

“ In haste, but none the less fondly, your own,

“ R——— ”



She went over it twice ; she had read it many times before, the proud lines of her features hardening at each word ; refolded it, and deliberately thrust it into the fire. Then she unlocked the door, rang up her maid, and began a studied toilette for dinner.

There was other company expected to partake of that repast. The Floyds kept an open house from one year's end to the other, and these impromptu dinner-parties were, at the lowest computation, of semi-weekly occurrence. One or two families from the neighbourhood were bidden on this occasion, as the nominal nucleus of the social gathering ; and to this Lily and Virginia had, in the course of their morning's drive, added several other cavaliers besides the brothers Lay. When Aleck and Robert presented themselves in the parlour, their ears were saluted by the hum of many voices, and they beheld divers knots of talkers scattered about the room. Mrs. Floyd entertained four or five matrons, seated upon a sofa and in rocking-chairs in one corner ; the colonel had his cluster of politicians and fox-hunters upon the hearth, at the far end of the apartment ; Virginia Shore was "carrying on" in her most extravagant style, standing in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a bevy of beaux ; and Lily Calvert—more ethereal than was common, even with her, in her blue silk robe, her sloping shoulders veiled thinly by a tulle cape—had her coterie, at a little distance from her vivacious friend.

Upon none of these personages, individually or collectively, did the eyes of the fresh arrivals rest for more than a second. Robert was quick to observe that Helen stood by the western window, chatting with Tom Shore, and that she was very beautiful, as seen in the rich glow of the sunshine, streaming through the crimson curtain ; and having made his bow to hostess and host, waited impatiently for the subsidence of the buzz of welcome and congratulation that swelled towards and around Aleck. The traveller received his old friends with great apparent heartiness and a subdued show of joviality ; had a cheery word and a hand-grip for the gentlemen, and a pretty speech for each lady, young and old. Virginia Shore began to think, as she marked his progress from one to another of the fair ones, who vied with their fathers and brothers in the warmth of their greetings, that she had acted very foolishly—verdantly, she expressed it to herself—in hoarding up, as something too beautiful and precious to

be told to Lily and Helen, the sugared nothings he had breathed into her willing ear at the carriage-door, that forenoon.

All this time Robert did not approach his betrothed ; made his smile and bow from afar off, the testimonials that he acknowledged and rejoiced in her presence. He wished to present his brother with himself before her. Nor did she stir from her position, or manifest the slightest agitation at their entrance. She looked at Aleck, as politeness advised and curiosity seemed to dictate, when Tom Shore remarked aside upon his tanned cheek and hirsute ornaments ; assented naturally, yet nonchalantly, to that youth's refined asseveration, that "Lay was a blamed handsome fellow, in spite of his dark skin and Turkish beard." This was generous, for Tom thought himself an Adonis, and *his* skin was like milk and roses, his hair fair and curly, his "love of a mouth" tinct as with carmine ; his cleft chin innocent of whiskers, or, sooth to say, any promise of the same. At last, patient waiting had its reward in Robert's bearing off the prize, and the two neared Miss Gardner. She advanced a step—a queen could not have done less—and held out a hand that was neither chill nor tremulous, to salute the wanderer.

"We are glad to see you at home again, Mr. Lay ! You have taken all your friends by surprise. Had you a pleasant voyage ?"

And yet she was standing, her hand in his, upon the spot where she had heard his hasty, passionate farewell ; where he had pressed the pledge-ring upon her finger ! Involuntarily he glanced down. It was not there ? In place of the plain gold circlet there sparkled a diamond hoop—his brother's gift. What else could he have expected ? If she noticed the look—quick as a flash of light—no one else did, nor did other ears detect the faintest shade of sarcasm in his rejoinder.

"Very pleasant, thank you, swift and smooth—as time seems to have flowed for the old acquaintances I meet here to-day. I cannot realize that twice twelve months have passed since I left the homestead and my boyhood's companions—since the evening of our parting, Miss Helen ! By the way, it took place in this identical room, did it not ?"

"I believe it did !" as calmly courteous as himself.

"Here you shed the parting tear,  
To cross the ocean foam,"

said Tom Shore, who, like his sister, was addicted to quotation from latter-day poets, or, more correctly speaking, rhymesters and song-writers.

"Exactly—with the trifling difference that ours was dry-eyed mourning," answered Aleck.

"You cannot take exception to the concluding lines of the verse," said Helen.

" 'Now, I'm once again with those  
Who gladly greet me home.' "

Your 'Home again' is too obviously an occasion of unfeigned and general rejoicing for you to question its heartiness."

"Thank you!" He bowed profoundly. "I do *you* the justice to believe you sincere at all times, and in all that you do!"

At this juncture, Tom Shore—albeit his constitutional infirmity was not an overplus of modesty—was seized by the impression that the part allotted to him by existing circumstances, in this particular locality, was that of second fiddle, and walked off in quest of less distinguished company. Simultaneously with his withdrawal, Robert obeyed the imperious beck of Lily Calvert's fairy forefinger, and, to Helen's consternation and Aleck's chagrin, they found themselves the only occupants of the window recess.

Consternation nor chagrin outlived the shock of the discovery of their situation. Both would have done all in their power, consistent with outward propriety, to avoid the *tête-à-tête*; but, now that it was forced upon them, each experienced an interest in its progress and results, painful, yet not devoid of a certain strange sweetness. They talked of commonplace topics; of neighbourhood changes and foreign travel. The most jealous lover might have heard every word, noted and weighed the import of every intonation and glance, and felt no misgivings as to the standing of the colloquists with regard to one another. The past—as *theirs*—was not referred to in the most remote manner, yet it was not practicable for Aleck to continue the cruelly significant badinage which was, to Robert and young Shore, but pleasant trifling between old friends. It seemed unmanly and irreverent—a thing of which he was ashamed, as he looked at and listened to her; as if, while they talked, the bier, holding the shrouded corpse of his boyish hope and manhood's aim, lay between them.

Whether or not the pride and bitterness passed away, likewise, from Helen's spirit, all trace of either disappeared from her demeanour. She ceased to question and reply with the elaborate show of strained civility that had hailed his approach, and characterized her conversation while others were by. It was no longer easy to meet his eyes with steady, haughty gaze; to fling back retort for innuendo; to repay counterfeit courtesy with lofty indifference. The truth was that neither had, in his or her anticipations of the interview, taken into account the subtle and sure effect of the personal presence; the wondrous magnetism of voice and look and action; the indescribable fascination lingering in each and all of these; every one bringing up its swift train of memories, and each link in the chain reuniting, as by magic, with the rest, to draw their hearts once more together. The awakening, and anguish, and shame, and renewed resolves for future conduct with it, would come by-and-by; for the present, they saw nothing beyond the tumultuous joy of being again with one another, after the dreary blank of absence. When dinner was announced, Aleck offered his arm, which was silently accepted. Robert walked before them in attendance upon Lily. Devoted in appearance to his fair companion, he yet found a favourable opportunity for throwing back a smile to his brother and Helen. Its gleam of affectionate meaning, its guileless trust and hopefulness, were not lost upon them. When they took their seats in the dining-room, Helen's cheek had lost its blush, and her eye its softness, and beyond offering her the ordinary civilities of the occasion, Aleck paid her no attention while they remained at the board.

It was after sunset when the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room. Robert having seen that Helen was not there, bethought himself, as was his wont, of the least admired or least courted person of the company; and finding her in the shape of a shy school-girl, ensconced in the nook between the piano and wall, sat down in front of her, and tried to draw her into conversation. The barrier of bashfulness and nervous timidity was being rapidly undermined by his sedulous tact, when Gabriel wormed his way through the talkative groups, dispersed irregularly about the room, up to the two in the corner.

"Was you de lady what asked for a glass of water, ma'am?" presenting a salver, with a goblet upon it.

"No!" said the girl, in surprise.

"Beg a thousand pardons, ma'am! sorry for de mistake, I'm sure, ma'am!"

He bowed himself backwards—a bit of court etiquette, upon whose acquisition and practice he plumed himself mightily—and steered off in another direction; but not before he had adroitly dropped into Robert Lay's hand a folded paper. Although the latter divined intuitively and through his recollection of precedents the authorship of the wee note, hidden so soon as it fell in the hollow of his palm, and burned with desire to learn its purport, he retained his position some minutes longer, until he could signal Tom Shore to come and occupy it. Tom was dandified and conceited, but he was kind-hearted withal, and, to gratify Robert, would have undergone ordeals yet more trying, if that were possible than expending his time and fascinations upon a girl who was neither pretty, witty, nor rich, nor yet "knowing" enough to appreciate him; "smacking," as he decided, "rather too much of school bread and butter."

Robert read his precious billet by the hall window. It was, as he had supposed, from Helen, and a simple request that he would meet her at "the spring," where she would wait half an hour for his coming. Hastily taking down his overcoat and hat from the row of pegs in the wainscot, he was in the act of putting them on, when he heard through the dining-room door, which was ajar, Lily's voice, sharp with pettishness, yet silvery still.

"Where did you get the note I saw you give Mr. Lay, just now?"

"'Twouldn't be honourable in me fur to tell what I'm ordered not to, Miss Lily!" said Gabriel, respectfully but stoutly.

"Don't answer me in that way, sir!"

It conflicted sorely with Robert's feelings and sense of justice to leave his Eboe ally exposed to the assaults of womanly pique and curiosity; and, not waiting to hear more of the dialogue, he stepped across the hall, making as much bustle as he conveniently could, and tapped at the door.

"Miss Lily!" he called.

"Come in!" said the clear tones, with a perceptible change of key. Gabriel took advantage of the diversion, and vanished, like a

shadow, through another portal. Lily started at sight of her guest's great-coat, and the hat in his hand.

"You are not going yet, surely!"

"Only for a walk with Helen." He smiled, and hesitated in pronouncing the name. "I wanted to ask you—our dear little sister—to contrive that our absence should not provoke the criticism of gossiping tongues, if there are any such instruments of mischief among the good people in the other room. I will do the same for you some day, when you are situated as we now are!"

She made no reply, except a nod of acquiescence—stood looking down into the fire with her great sorrowful eyes, so large and mournful; and there was such an air of desolation expressed in her fragile figure and pale face, that Robert felt impelled to say some comforting or friendly word before leaving her there alone.

"I am afraid that we, your cousin and myself, may appear selfish to your apprehension sometimes, Lily; but it is only your imagination that leads you to believe that there is any real diminution of our regard for you. You must not bear me a grudge because I am happy in the thought of taking her away from you. Our home will always be yours, for she loves you as fondly as ever; and, for myself, I can truly say that you were never dearer to me than you are now, while I have in view the blessed prospect of the closer tie soon to be formed between us."

He spoke caressingly, for he had known Lily from her babyhood, and petted her to this day and hour, as did nearly everybody else.

One of her hands, scarcely larger and quite as soft to the touch as a petal of her name-flower, lay passively within his fraternal grasp; his head was bent towards her in protecting tenderness, that looked lover-like, when the door at the side of the fire-place was pushed back, and in walked Colonel Floyd!

In confusion or alarm, his niece snatched her hand away from Robert, with a faint "Oh!"

"I thought that you were both in the parlour," said the guardian, his dark features gathering additional grimness from his corrugated brow.

Robert's pleasant tones answered the reproof he knew was aimed at Lily.

"So we were three minutes ago, sir! I was on my way out to take an after-dinner stroll, the 'constitutional' one is apt to need after Mrs. Floyd's dinners, Colonel! and hearing Miss Lily's voice, as I passed that door, I stepped in to engage her kind offices in covering or excusing my temporary absence."

"The precaution was needless, Mr. Lay. It is my wish and request that my friends should be free to come and go at pleasure, in my house."

"No one knows that better than I do, sir. Still, my withdrawal from society, such as is collected in the parlour, might subject me to the charge of moroseness, or a want of gallantry. I shall not be gone long. The bracing air will soon clear my brain from the fumes of that last glass of champagne."

He bowed, with his frank, boyish laugh, and went out.

Lily also moved, as if to go to the parlour, but her uncle prevented her.

"Lily!"

"Sir!"

"Is this fine story true, or has that smooth tongued beau-general been making love to you? One girl at a time is enough for most men."

"Love to me, sir!" Her eyes glittered, as polished steel does in the sunlight. "Do you, then, think that I would submit to that insult? for insult it would be from an engaged man!"

"You might do worse, girl! Why did you let him slip through your net in the first instance? You angled badly."

"I never had any hold upon him, sir. If I had——"

Colonel Floyd's smile was one of sinister gratification, as he studied her face and translated the language of the gesture that finished the sentence.

"If you had, you are no true Floyd if you allowed him to stray with impunity. If you possessed your mother's spirit you would not give him up alive. I have watched him and her, too, and I tell you, on the authority of one who is seldom mistaken in his judgment of character and feelings, that he may still be yours, if you care to make the effort to lure him back."

"Uncle! You forget that he is to marry Helen next month!"

"Tut, child! Matches have been broken off at the altar before

now! You have a stout will of your own, and a quick wit—and *he is worth having!*”

She was left alone—the girl so early and so terribly orphaned—left with the fiery Floyd blood, of which her tempter had reminded her, swelling and boiling in her veins, and his strange, artful insinuations working in her mind, revolving in the brain he had truly described as quick and shrewd. She had little respect for her guardian, and few loved him except the wife he daily trampled in the dust; but Lily had confidence in his boasted acquaintance with men and the world's ways—his penetrative discrimination of action and motive. He had evidently divined a secret she had imagined was buried from all mortal ken, in the depths of her own mourning heart. Might it not be that he was equally sagacious in reading those of the betrothed pair?

She roamed up and down through the firelit room, her hands chafing one another, and the colourless cheeks whiter still than before, if that could be, under the strivings and insidious promptings of the passions he had so cunningly aroused. She spoke once, with energy and fire that seemed to threaten the rending of the slight, shaking frame. It was an appeal to Divinity—not the cry of a soul that felt the danger of the impending shipwreck among the billows of lawless affections, “Save! or I perish!” or the lowlier prayer of the tried, yet faithful heart, “Leave me not to temptation!” but a sudden, insane-sounding ejaculation,—

“‘Worth having!’ Oh, Heaven! do I not know that too well already!”







#### CHAPTER IV.

“**T**HE spring” was between three and four hundred yards distant from the mansion-house, at the foot of the hill on which the building was situated; and beyond the arch of rude masonry covering the fountain arose another eminence, thickly wooded and cleft with ravines, the outskirts of the extensive forests attached to the plantation.

The night was cold, but there was no wind stirring, and far up towards the zenith the moon rode in unclouded majesty. The frosted earth and brittle grass crackled under Robert's tread as he sought the trysting place. The walk was a familiar one, and a favourite with him; doubly dear since the scene of four months ago that had hallowed the rustic fount for ever. With the gurgling flow of its waters had been blent the first vows of love he had breathed in the car of her who now sat awaiting him upon the grey stone that had been their resting-place then. She was not alone. Withdrawn to a respectful distance behind her mistress stood a woman, whom Robert recognized with a kindly, “How do you do, Sally?”

Helen rose immediately and took his proffered arm. Until he spoke she had remained quietly seated, her head resting upon her hand, apparently buried in absorbing thought.

“Have I kept you waiting?” he asked. “I was afraid that I should Gabriel may have met with unavoidable delays in delivering your note, fertile in ruses though he is, nor could I get away directly it reached me without attracting attention.”

You came sooner than I expected. You may have thought my

message a singular one, but I wished to talk with you, and I knew that we could not procure the opportunity for uninterrupted conversation anywhere within doors this evening."

"Not in the 'grotto?'" asked Robert, smiling "Do not apologize, I entreat you! Your suggestion—it was too modest to be called a request, much less an appointment—was highly proper, and eminently acceptable. The most starched prude in America could not condemn it, especially as Sally is in attendance," casting a backward glance at the girl, who, with her shawl wrapped about her head, in true Dinah fashion, had seated herself in the shadow of the stone arch.

Helen tried to imitate his mirthful tone.

"You surely know why I brought her along!"

"To keep away the bugaboos until I should make my appearance, I presume."

"To prevent molestation from bugaboos, indeed,—but not of the species which children dread. Time was when I was careless of forms and customs, for I had only myself to consider. Now, as my good aunt will certify, I am growing prudent, very like other people. You and I need no one to play propriety, but since others would advise the attendance of a duenna—a somniferous one is better than none—I bow to the decree. But not to postpone the discussion of the subject which I wished to broach to you, I have heard two pieces of news since dinner that have disquieted me. One was, that your aunt intends leaving your house and taking up her abode at Maple Hill. Is this true?"

Robert fairly whistled with astonishment.

"She does contemplate such a change, but the matter is yet in abeyance; and inasmuch as the proposition originated with Aleck, the thought never entered her mind until last night. It baffles me to guess how the story could have reached you so soon. Why, the busiest tattler of whom we have any record—the renowned little bird of the air—could hardly have borne the tidings in this time!"

"Mrs. Catlin mentioned it as a settled thing to another lady, and in my hearing. She had it directly from Miss Ruth, she stated, having stopped at Greenfield on her way to Bellevue. But, Robert! please dissuade her from the step! It has been a serious and constant fear with me, that I may not contribute so much to your

happiness as you anticipate, for I know my grievous short-comings. Do not add to your disappointment the loss of your aunt—your second mother. Beg her from me to stay with you! You will miss her more than you dream of; you will need her gentle offices, her un-failing consideration for your feelings and comfort, her steady affection! You cannot exist without these. Say to her that I am miserable in the thought of causing any change in her household; that I will never interfere with her plans; that matters shall be conducted according to her wishes, not mine; that I will endeavour to accommodate myself to her just ideas in everything; study to be dutiful—I cannot but be affectionate to her—if she will continue to live with you.”

“My precious girl, what an impulsive creature you are! You plead like a frightened child, who fears to be left alone with me! Am I such an ogre that Aunt Ruth must not abandon you to my tender mercies? Before we go any further, dear Helen,” he continued, dropping his jesting tone, “I must say one thing. Whether Aunt Ruth remains an inmate of my house or not, you, and not she, must be its mistress, its irresponsible controller. She understands this. It is no novel idea to her, and she has the good sense to admit the wisdom of the arrangement. If she goes to Maple Hill, it will not be to avoid the necessity of taking what would be her proper place in my family, in the event of my marriage, but at Aleck’s instance and earnest solicitation. He will be very lonely there without her, he represents, and no man of my acquaintance is less fitted than he to be happy in a veritable bachelor establishment.”

Helen brought out her next sentence with an effort.

“But, in time, he will have no need of her in the capacity of housekeeper or companion, if what we have heard be true.”

“An important ‘if!’ Taking it for granted that he means to install his Fraulein as Mrs. Lay, in the course of a year or less, I question her ability to undertake the charge of an American *ménage*. He has not showed any disposition to speak upon this point since his return, and I would not force his confidence. Aleck is a queer fellow in some respects. The very depth and might of his feelings seem to deprive him of the power to express them fluently. I can divine them! yet, loving one another as we do, there are many reserves on both sides. If he marries a true, loving woman, who can enter

into the peculiarities of his disposition, she may unseal the tide. I hope that his Gretchen, if she be indeed his, may bring him one-half the heart satisfaction, the fulness of joy, that my love has brought me."

There was no "Amen" from the figure at his side. They were rambling along a narrow footpath which wound about the slope of the wooded hill, and her regards were bent upon the ground.

"You will speak to your aunt—tell her what my earnest desire and petition is, however—will you not?" she said, abruptly recurring to the original topic.

"Assuredly, if you still wish it!"

"I do!"

They stopped under a large oak tree, whose far-reaching branches cast fantastic shadows upon the whitened turf of the hill-side. Helen withdrew her hand from Robert's hold, and, folding her arms, leaned against the giant trunk of the forest monarch, and appeared to be lost in the contemplation of the landscape.

"Colonel Floyd has the finest site for a house that can be found on this side of the Potomac," observed Robert. "It crowns that knoll grandly."

"That reminds me that I have another matter on my mind," replied Helen, arousing herself. "I was so fortunate or unfortunate, as the event will decide, as to overhear, awhile ago, a part of a conversation between two ladies, that was not intended for the ears of any member of Colonel Floyd's family."

"It was delicate and kind in them to introduce such matters while partaking of his hospitality!" was Robert's ironical interruption.

"His extravagance and gaming propensities," said Helen, "were unadverted upon in one sentence, for I heard but two. The other imparted the, to me, unpleasing intelligence that he was heavily in your debt, you having, it was said, lent him money at several different times. I trust this is a mistake or a fabrication."

Robert laughed.

"The meddling gossip was partly correct, but I am sorry that you troubled yourself about her story. We should have no secrets from each other, and I do not see why those pertaining to money matters should be an exception to this rule. I have let Colonel Floyd have

a small sum now and then, but not enough to beggar me, should he never return any part of the amount."

"It was very unwise in you," replied Helen, reprovingly. "You should have remembered what reputation he bears among his creditors. They say that he never pays debts that honest men consider sacred and confidential, unless forced to it by the strong arm of the law. He is thoroughly conscious that you will never resort to this means of recovering what you have advanced. Now, answer me frankly; were his applications to you for assistance out of his difficulties made prior to our—our—to the formation of our present relations?"

"What terrible 'relations' they must be, to require that tremendous amount of stammering and circumlocution! I have a wretched memory for dates!"

"I am answered! It is as I have suspected! He has taken a base and unwarrantable, a most indelicate advantage of your attachment to his ward to extort money from you! He is no stranger to your generous and pliant temper! He reckoned shrewdly upon his customer. It is infamous!"

"Gently, gently, Nelly, dear! Do not tilt too ferociously with your windmill before daylight is let in upon it! There was no extortion in the affair. He was 'hard up'—excuse the slang! I was easy in purse, and felt it to be a privilege, not a hardship, to help a neighbour in his embarrassment."

"I comprehend fully! My opinion is unchanged, Robert. I have a favour to ask of you in *my* turn. It is not fair that Colonel Floyd should enjoy a monopoly of this kind of business."

"Make it a hundred, and consider them all granted!"

Helen was not to be beguiled out of her earnestness.

"Never lend Colonel Floyd another dollar! Learn to say 'No!'"

"I will—to everybody excepting a little lady of my acquaintance, who cannot ask an unreasonable thing?" rejoined he, in playful, yet tender gallantry.

She went on, gravely, as before.

"Furthermore—and upon this I have a right to insist, since it more nearly concerns me—if he should propose a marriage-contract to you, refuse positively to accede to its provisions—reject them utterly!"

"Why, my beauty! who has been vexing your brain with legal

lore? Don't you know that every marriage is a contract—civil and religious?"

"I know from your tone, and evasive replies, that there have been intimations, if nothing more definite, made to you already, touching the expediency, the moral righteousness, of securing my property to myself. I know it as well as that upon my twenty-first birthday, months ago, I was entitled to the entire control of all that I am worth; that Colonel Floyd had no further authority over it or my actions; yet I have been repeatedly put off with surly promises of settlement at some future date, and am treated more like an imbecile minor than ever before—know it as perfectly as that I have rightly interpreted the drift of my aunt's frequent and prosy harangues to me, within a couple of months—ill-contrived expositions of her husband's tenets, respecting the manifold benefits arising from contracts of marriage. How I despise the name and the idea!"

"Windmills again!" interposed Robert's gentle raillery.

"Not so! I can tell you the exact terms which Colonel Floyd has sketched to you—commended to your consideration, by appealing to your sense of honour and justice. All that I have inherited from my father is to be settled upon myself; and my late guardian, an incorruptible Spartan, who could not be betrayed into the least violation of my rights! is to be appointed my trustee."

"You are a witch!" exclaimed the amazed listener.

"I am a woman whose training has taught her vigilance and distrust! hard lessons—and hardly learned by one of my age and sex. If all men with whom I have had to deal were like you, I should not have mastered the alphabet as yet! You may think me unfeminine, sordid, calculating, in thus obtruding pecuniary matters upon your consideration. I suppose that most women leave these arrangements to parents, guardians, and friends. I am an orphan, I have no near relations; no friends, who can aid me, excepting yourself; I had better never have had a guardian. You have invited and urged my confidence, and you see how eagerly I take you at your word!" She broke off her rapid, passionate speech to say, with an attempt at gaiety, "Do you feel as poor Tarpeia did, when she asked for bracelets and got a shower of shields instead?"

Robert was embarrassed. "Your confidence can never be burdensome!" he answered, sincerely. "But, Nell, darling! there was

nothing preposterous in Colonel Floyd's plan of settlement. The most affectionate fathers propose the like, continually. I rather glory in the chance thus afforded me of showing that my love for you is purely disinterested. You will not discredit my declaration, that, until your guardian made reference to your fortune, the thought of it had never crossed my brain in connection with my attachment to yourself. Whatever is yours, now, shall remain your own. I cheerfully relinquish all claim that the law would give me upon it, with one proviso—all that I possess must be added to it."

"I believe in your sincerity, but not in the word of any other man alive. I am gratefully alive to the generosity, which the world would deem unsafe and romantic. But, Robert! in this one thing you must let me have my own way. I have reasons, weighty and sufficient, for pressing my request. I will have no deeds, no settlements! They will not be valid without my consent, and that shall never be given!"

This was a strange conversation for a moonlight tryst between lovers, and she was an uncommon type of a betrothed maiden: her every resolute lineament discernible by the white moonbeams; arms sternly crossed, and feet planted hard against the gnarled roots of the oak, apparently as impassive and immovable to expostulation as the tree itself.

Some minutes of troubled reflection passed before either spoke again. Then Robert resumed the discourse.

"I cannot disregard your wishes in this matter, Helen, however they may war with my inclination and judgment; for, as you say, you are the person who will be most nearly affected by the disposition of your property. I *did* tell your guardian that I acquiesced heartily in his views, and would shape my course accordingly, and he may misinterpret my altered purpose; but let that pass! So long as you and I are agreed, and understand one another, what matter the opinions of others!"

"I thank you for the sacrifice you make to please me; for, paradoxical as it would be to many—to most vulgar minds—the acceptance of wealth with your bride, in these circumstances, is a sacrifice, and no light one to you. I take it upon myself to guarantee that Colonel Floyd shall learn to whose influence your change of intention

is attributable—upon whom he is to charge the frustration of his holy design. What is it, Sally ? ”

Engrossed in their talk, the young couple had not thought of the girl—had not seen that for some time past her motions had been indicative of extreme restlessness. Her crouching figure had become erect ; the shawl dropped from her ears to her shoulders ; her head moved uneasily from side to side, as if she were watching or listening intently. When Helen addressed her, she had arisen from her seat by the spring, and approached within a few feet of her mistress and her lover.

“ I’m thinking you’ll be missed at the house, Miss Helen ! I’m sure I’ve heard Gabriel calling me two or three times—and—and—it’s getting colder, seems to me.”

Helen eyed her more attentively.

“ It is too bad to have kept you sitting there all this while, my poor girl ! We have been walking, and have not felt uncomfortable ; but your teeth are absolutely chattering ! ”

“ I reckon I must ha’ been asleep ! ” rejoined Sally, with a foolish, ashamed laugh. “ I didn’t know we’d been out long.”

“ I think it very likely ! ” said Helen, smiling, as did Robert, in recollection of the “ somniferous duenna.” “ Run on, now, and get yourself in a glow. We will follow.”

“ As they were ascending the hill upon the other side of the spring-stream, she subjoined an explanation of the request she had urged with regard to her fortune.

“ I was put upon my guard against Colonel Floyd’s probable machinations, by a story told me by my cousin, Miss Rogers, when she paid us a visit in October. She was an intimate friend of Lily’s mother, and having taken quite a fancy to my society, confided to me certain incidents of the family history, which I had never heard until then. Among others, she mentioned that Colonel Floyd, as his father’s executor and sister’s guardian, had her share of the estate secured to herself prior to her marriage with Mr. Calvert, and, as seemed natural and proper to most people, assumed the trusteeship of the same. Either Mr. Calvert resented this as an imputation upon his honour, or an implication of his inability to manage his wife’s property, for, shortly after the wedding-day, a coolness grew up between the brothers-in-law, which greatly distressed Mrs. Calvert.



There were serious threats made by her husband of a law-suit to recover that which, he alleged in Miss Rogers's hearing, had been dishonestly abstracted by Colonel Floyd from his sister's portion; proceedings which were suspended by his own tragic death. It is always best to avoid litigation by having these questions settled beforehand."

"What a business head you have!" replied Robert, much amused. "I had not supposed that you knew how many cents make a dollar. Very few of the Floyds are endowed with arithmetical talents. Your uncle, for example, is utterly ignorant of the value of the prime idol of the Yankee nation."

"He understands the rule of subtraction, as your pockets can attest. You are mistaken as to his regard for money. He is an odd compound of extravagance and covetousness."

At the yard-gate she stopped.

"Do not judge me harshly for to-night's talk!" she said, almost sadly. "I suppose that I must appear to you woefully common-place and practical; censorious in judgment and rigorous in action, for you are charitable and lenient to a proverb. But I have only your good at heart; desire to do that which will be best for us both. I do endeavour conscientiously to study your interests, Robert!"

He made some comforting response, and there the subject rested.

He was not, however, so blindly in love, that the substance, no less than the tone of this last sentence, did not fall gratefully upon his sensitive ear. It was, of course, pleasant, or ought to have been, to know that she looked upon their interests as identical; to see that her manner of speaking of these was characterized by the clear-sighted zeal and prudence of the wife, rather than the bewitching hesitancy of the blushing bride. Yet, in his heart, he felt a lack of something, a deficiency that was at once indefinable and painful. Her bearing was not too free—that could never happen; still, a trifling diffidence, a dash of coyness, would have imparted to it an additional charm. The fruit, ripe, rich, and round, was his, and he was proud and thankful in its possession; but he could have wished that the downy velvet, shading and softening its bloom, had not been so carefully and thoroughly rubbed off before the treasure was given. He could not resist a ridiculous preference for the "Loves of the

Angels," as a lover's text-book, above ledger or bank-account, let them be never so accurately balanced, and largely in his favour.

Above all, that word, "conscientiously," offended his spiritual nervous organization. Regard unmeasured, because immeasurable,—Solicitude,—loving and anxious-eyed Aphrodite, born out of the waves of this boundless love ;—these would have been to him as the waters of the river of Life and the fruit that grows thereby. But he did not want to be loved "conscientiously." He did not care to be informed that there was, on her side, a "conscientious endeavour" to think of and to do whatever would conduce to his happiness.

Moreover, but this was a secondary and very inferior consideration, he could not divest himself of a disagreeable expectation of an unpleasant, if not a violent scene with Colonel Floyd, when they came to the question of the final settlement ; feared lest the retraction of his partial pledge that all should be done in consonance with the guardian's desire, would place him, the bridegroom, in a false and humiliating position.

Keeping these misgivings and his dissatisfaction to himself, he parted from Helen in the hall, with the fond, gentle smile she alone of all women ever had from him, and repaired to the drawing-room, whence had proceeded the sounds of music and laughter the outdoor promenaders had heard ere they reached the house.

A lady, elderly, and who had never been pretty, a governess in one of the aristocratic families there represented, was at the piano, playing a lively waltz ; and six or eight couples were whirling around the room, in the exultant swing of that entrancing dance. Making a wide circuit to avoid collisions, Robert succeeded in stationing himself by the side of the musician. The piece she was playing was an unfamiliar one to her, and, dexterous and true as were her fingers, she dared not remove her eyes from the sheet. There was no need for her to see his features to assure herself who turned the leaves with a *volte subito* movement, bespeaking an intelligent eye and a hand trained to the like gallant offices. She knew who had won for himself the appellation of "the wall-flowers' friend," and shunned not to maintain his right to the title by rendering attentions as graceful and assiduous to the neglected children of beauty and fortune, as to the most pampered darlings of both. Poor Miss Carter's lank, starched figure and dyed silk dress covered a heart

slightly indurated and withered by twenty years' thankless drudgery in her present profession; but there were hidden away there, in shady, jealously-screened recesses, kept green by the dews and occasional freshets of sentiment and memory, stray blossoms and modest mosses of romance and feeling, whose existence would have been scoffed at by the patrons and acquaintances of the "old maid teacher." And never did these bits of verdure and bloom quiver with more vitality than beneath the sunshine of Robert Lay's smile. She was not in love with him; she never deluded herself with the chimera that a single thought of her visited him when she was out of his sight; but in her mental, or rather heart portrait-gallery—how scantily furnished, it would have given *you* a heart-ache to see!—he was enshrined, a stainless hero.

He offered her a glass of water when the tiresome round of variations was at an end, and advised that she should rest her strained fingers for a time. But no! the dancers were ready to begin again, and so must she be also, or give offence. Automata and ill-paid governesses are not expected to complain of fatigue in the service of their masters.

"At least, play something that you know," said Robert. "That will be less exhausting to the head, only finger-work! You can talk then!"

With himself, he meant, for every other available masculine specimen of humanity had a partner. He hardly merited all the credit for self-denial she inwardly heaped upon him, as his pleasant sayings enlivened the monotony of her occupation, for it cost him little trouble to keep aloof from the dancers, so long as Helen did not appear. He did not witness her entrance. The first intimation he had of her presence was the sight of her at Miss Carter's back, when this set of waltzes was likewise concluded.

"You should not have been appointed to this work to-night, Miss Carter!" she said. "You are not well enough. Does your head ache very badly now?"

"Thank you! it is about the same."

With a gesture and three words, Helen swept her from the piano-stool and established herself upon it; shook her head in smiling wilfulness in response to the grateful lady's remonstrances, and drowned their continuation in a pealing march. Robert conducted

Miss Carter to an easy-chair : found a fan and a bottle of sal-volatile for her, and went back to the instrument.

The pale, weary governess watched the pair with deep and affectionate interest. They were so young and noble ; so admirably adapted each to the other, in virtues, manner, and disposition, and their mutual attachment so beautiful to behold, it was not marvellous that the romance into which she wove their united lives had not, in its bright texture, one sable thread. If the sigh which heaved her bosom was an inaudible and hopeless lament over her barren life and departed youth, it was untainted by envy of their different and more blessed lot. Presently Helen glanced up at her betrothed, and said something, briefly and positively. He made reply, seemingly, by an interrogation, and upon receipt of her answer turned away, and joined himself to the band of revellers. He went directly up to Lily Calvert, offered his hand, which was smilingly accepted, and they took their position in a cotillion that was just forming.

The music flowed out in a bolder, quicker measure, and light feet beat time over the floor. Still the silent, unnoticed governess kept watch upon the now lonely performer—free now, moreover, to indulge at will in the enchanting maiden visions that attend—brilliant-winged and willing sprites—upon the meditations of the “young, loving, and beloved.” Yet Miss Carter saw the fine, mobile features subside into pensiveness ; then, fixed sadness ; the eye settle into melancholy steadiness—a sort of introverted look which told plainly enough that the source of her grief was not far away, nor beyond herself. While the spectator was taxing the meagre stores of her experimental knowledge of Love’s mysteries for a solution of this enigma, Aleck Lay drew near, deputed by his partner to convey some message to the dreaming pianist. A red tide rushed over Helen’s face as he spoke to her ; she started ; lost time, skill, and tune, her hands crashing heavily down upon the keys ; and a harsh, loud discord from the thrilling wires brought the dance to an untimely pause.

“What is the matter ?” “Go on !” cried a chorus of voices.

“It was my fault !” Aleck’s sonorous tones quelled the Babel of inquiry. “I interrupted her and did all the mischief. I ask a million pardons !” he pursued laughingly, to the drooping and abashed musician. “It was thoughtless and awkward in me to accost

you so abruptly, when I might have seen that you were intent upon your music. It shall be a wholesome lesson to me for the future. I was about to ask you to play a little faster—a very little, if you please.”

An irrepressible impulse of gratitude made her lift her eyes to his, and he saw that they were full of tears. This might be the effect of nervous agitation merely, but the sight sent him back to his place with a madly throbbing heart. Helen struggled valiantly with the rising softness, superinduced by a passing vision of the olden days, when he interposed to ward off every annoyance from her; met, with scathing retort, each sarcastic or unfriendly retort that had her for its object. For the rest of the evening they kept far apart—did not exchange another look or word. “A wholesome lesson for the future!” They would do well to remember and profit by the warning!

Helen refused to dance at all that night!—she “preferred to play for the entertainment of the rest;” and when she would not let him hover near her, Robert Lay’s most frequent companion was Lily Calvert. She was very pretty and charming; so winning in her childlike, confiding ways; so kind and amiable with him, and apparently so gratified by his attentions, that he could not resist the temptation presented by all these, and quite forgot his duty to the wallflowers in waiting upon a belle. She was really a sweet girl, he reflected, despite some unimportant foibles; and a warm-hearted friend of his, who would make the dearest little sister imaginable, one of these days, when she and Helen understood one another again.

Aleck danced, flirted, and flattered, with a reckless grace no one else could emulate; was the life, as he was the lion of the company. Half the girls in the room went home in love with him; two-thirds of the beaux wished devoutly that he had never quitted the “Faderland” until he was ready to bring a wife to the western continent with him.

At twelve o’clock, the last carriage, with its *cortège* of gallant outriders, left the door of the hospitable abode, and Helen, wearied and dispirited, sought her chamber. The faithful Sally was in wakeful attendance, and, disobedient to her mistress’s recommendation, that she should betake herself to bed without further delay, began, with alert hands, the task of disrobing her. It may have been

that fatigue and dissipation had rendered Helen indolent, or that, in her depressed state of feeling, the society of this attached dependent was more tolerable than solitude and her own musings; for she did not repeat the order; submitted languidly to her maid's pleasure.

"Miss Helen!" she said, as she kneeled to untie her slipper-string, "I hope you did not think it *unproper* in me to hurry you home from the spring to-night. I deceived you about the reason, then. I didn't like to tell you there, for fear you might be frightened, and Mars' Robert get angry, and go to search into the matter, and so get you both into trouble; so I made the excuse I did, to start you up to the house."

"What are you talking about, Sally?" asked Helen, somewhat sharply; "you have been dreaming, and are not quite awake yet, I believe."

"I'm broad awake, ma'am, and so I was then, for all I had to pretend to be sleepy and cold, to hinder you from mistrusting the truth. And I saw him, Miss Helen, as plain as I do you, this minute! I wouldn't move till I was sure."

"Saw him! Saw whom? Why do you tell your story in such a queer, blundering way? Go on!" urged her mistress, as the girl bent lower over the foot resting upon her knee, and tugged and picked at the hard knot she had made in the string.

"The man behind the tree, ma'am! the big oak you was leaning against."

"Nonsense! you mistook the shadow of the limbs for a man! How could any one be there, and I not hear him move or breathe? How could he get there without making any noise?"

"Tree shadows don't move of a still night, as this one did," persisted the girl. "As to how he got there, I can't say, nor how long he'd been standing close up against the trunk of the tree when I first noticed him. I didn't see him until he poked out his head, this way, as if to hear better what you two were saying."

"Pshaw! why should he care to hear? why stay there, if he could get away?"

"That isn't for me to say, ma'am. I only know that I saw him, and that he behaved just as I've told you."

Helen pondered for a moment upon this strange tale. The maid was unusually sensible and discreet for one in her station, and not

superstitious or cowardly. Her mistress did not question that she really believed all that she had said; but the more she thought of it the more unlikely it appeared that Robert and herself had been dogged by so bold an eavesdropper, or that any chance vagrant of the forest could have remained for any length of time in the position Sally had described, without being discovered.

"Could you see who he was? or whether he was white or coloured?" she inquired.

"He kept well in the shade, ma'am, and I wasn't very near, you know. Maybe he was a runaway. There's a good many 'out,' I hear, more than common for this season of the year," returned the girl, still averting her face, and putting away the slippers in a drawer.

"Perhaps it was Lem!" exclaimed Helen "Poor fellow! he need not have been afraid of us! We would never have betrayed him."

This was a field-hand of Colonel Floyd's, who had run away six weeks before, goaded to desperation by the brutal oppression of the driver, Booker, whose authority was invariably supported by the master. Lem had married Sally's sister, as Helen now considered, and the probabilities were manifestly in favour of the supposition that he was lurking about the plantation, in the hope of seeing his wife. Sally was not certain that she recognized him, yet that she had some misgivings on the subject was clear. She might feel it to be her duty to put her mistress upon her guard against a repetition of the nocturnal stroll, while she was cautious not to commit her brother-in-law. Acting upon this hypothesis, which she imagined was fully sustained by Sally's silence after Lem was named, Helen forbore to prosecute her inquiries, and her thoughts strayed of themselves back to the more pressing cares and disquietudes that weighed heavily upon her young spirit.

In ten minutes after the servant's story was concluded, her auditor had forgotten the runaway and his woes.





## CHAPTER V.

**A** WHOLESOME lesson for the future!" Aleck Lay had said, and he conned it to such profit, that during the month immediately succeeding his arrival at home, he paid but two visits at Colonel Floyd's, and they were made in decorous compliance with special invitations. He spent most of each day, and often stayed over night, at his plantation of Maple Hill, a fine old place, which had come into the family through the female line; having been bequeathed, at his grandfather's death, to his mother. Active and judicious preparations were being made there now, for the reception of his aunt and himself. "He went to as much pains and expense in fitting it up, as if he were expecting to take thither a beautiful wife, and not an old maid sobersides like herself," Miss Ruth affected to complain, while, inwardly, she was happy and proud that he did so. The paternal mansion, Greenfield, was meanwhile in a state of disorder unparalleled in the previous annals of Miss Massie's reign. Cleaning, repairing, painting, and refurnishing were all going forward at once, under the superintendence of that painstaking housewife. Mrs. Robert Lay should find every apartment in every story, every closet and stair, even the "cuddy-holes" in the garret, irreproachable, if she, the indefatigable present incumbent, perished in the laudable attempt to attain this end. She naturally believed that Robert's love-making was prosecuted as diligently, and that its results were likely to prove as satisfactory to all concerned as she hoped those of her labours would be; justly considering the sentimental, in metaphysical jargon, the "subjective" branch of the nuptial arrangements as quite out of her province.



Mrs. Floyd pursued a similar line of thought and action, as she overlooked seamstresses, laundresses, and chamber-maids; set aside a goodly reserve of her finest sweetmeats, and oldest pickles and liquors; bespoke eggs, far and near, to be delivered a week before Christmas at Belleview; tested the golden rolls of butter packed away for the "occasion;" inspected her poultry-yards, and, like the celebrated William O'Trimmer of the nursery rhyme,

"Gathered her hens,  
And put them in pens,"

to be fattened against the great day. She had private personal trials, in addition to household cares, and the two classes of perplexities thoroughly engrossed every faculty of a mind which was none too capacious at its best estate.

Never, in the whole course of her wedded life, had she beheld her lord in a worse humour than now held complete possession of him. His household words were one perpetual growl, not loud but deep; and their connubial confabulations, which always partook more of the nature of monologues from him, than a reciprocation of ideas and feelings, were uniformly so stormy now, that she trembled in heart and body at the anticipation of them. When, with simple and wifely guile, she tried to divert him from his sombre brooding over his grievances, unknown as yet to her, by small domestic details, and deferentially begged his opinion upon the momentous topic of invitations, and the numberless etcetera pertaining to the grand wedding—for no Floyd was ever married without a large and magnificent party—he swore at her, at the guests, and the supper; as Gabriel reported in the kitchen, "cussed upstairs and down, and all round the lot;" reserving his choicest imprecations for the unconscious bridal pair, whom he anathematized as "a brace of the most ungrateful and unmannerly villains, the most barefaced cheats, that ever conspired to effect a man's ruin!"

"But how, dear?" mildly questioned his spouse, after one of these philippics. "Helen has her fits of temper, I know, but she is much quieter than I ever saw her before. Yet it must be confessed that, even now, she does get awfully stubborn about some things. Now, for instance, I've been scolding her to-day about a senseless notion she has taken. You know that Alexander Lay brought over for her a superb set of pearls, for a wedding present, and sent them to her by

Robert, soon after he got home. She has a pearl-coloured satin, trimmed with lace, among her new things, her 'second-day's dress,' and anybody, with half an eye, can see that it was made to go with these—"

"Confound your satin and pearls! The twaddle of you women is enough to drive one to distraction!" roared the colonel, kicking over a stand that opposed him in his heavy tramp about the floor.

"Yes, dear? I am sorry!" Meek Mrs. Floyd let fall a shivering tear upon her stitching.

Her husband muttered a dozen or so of hotter oaths before he dropped again into his arm-chair. When he did sit down, it was with a force that made the windows rattle. Then, picking up the tongs, he poked the fire furiously.

Mrs. Floyd mustered a faint heart of grace to endeavour to repair her mistake.

"What I wanted to say was this, my love; Robert Lay always seemed to me to be a most amiable, obliging young man. This is his reputation all through the neighbourhood, and has been ever since he was a boy. I supposed that he would do pretty much whatever you asked him to—he is so ready, generally, to grant favours to his friends. Hasn't he behaved handsomely about the settlement, or whatever you call it? You told me you thought he would."

"So handsomely that he has backed out of everything that he promised to do, Mrs. Floyd! He has lied like a dog, madam! He is obliging enough to give me to understand that he will grab every dollar of your brother's estate upon the wedding-day you are preparing for—if he can! That's your amiable, popular saint, madam!"

Another volley of oaths, accompanied by a shower of coals upon the hearth, and sparks up the chimney.

"You don't say so! After all the advice I've tried to impress upon Helen, about letting you manage her property! I should think she might have had some little confidence in my judgment, and tried to persuade him to act differently! I declare I am quite hurt by such disrespect and ingratitude!"

"It's her work! I'll take my oath of that—the brazen minx! She can twist him around her finger, if she likes."

"Well! well! well!" ruminated the matron, and returned to her former plaint; "I can't tell when I've been so much hurt!"

"Hurt, madam! You'll begin to know what has hurt you, when you are turned out of house and home; your last stick of furniture gone; your very clothes sold from off your back, in order that your affectionate niece may flaunt in her husband's mansion in her satin and pearls!"

"Good gracious, colonel!" The lady twitched back her skirts briskly, to avoid the stream of fiery embers that bounced from under the poker in her direction, at the conclusion of this comforting prophecy. "It can't be so bad as *that*, I'm sure!"

"You are sure, are you? Much you know about it! It is an easy thing for a man with an extravagant family like mine, hung like a mill-stone about his neck, to hand over some fifty thousand dollars worth of property, and, maybe, a matter of five thousand in ready money, upon a month's notice, is it? I would be obliged to you if you will inform me where it is to come from!"

"Why, I don't know anything about business, dear."

"You need not trouble yourself to tell me what is self-evident madam."

"But I supposed that Helen's fortune was put away safe somewhere, against she came of age—in the bank, or—"

"Or tied up in a stocking-foot, or carried loose in my breeches pocket!" interrupted her husband, with an ugly sneer. "That is as much sense as you have about anything outside of your dirty kitchen."

He got up, still snarling, put on a shaggy great-coat, took his gun from a closet, and made ready for his nightly patrol.

"And see here, my lady, keep your tongue inside of your teeth when you think of what I have been fool enough to say to-night, or it may be the worse for you!"

Mrs. Floyd gave a weak sniff of wounded sensibility when the door banged to after her lawful protector and loving liege, then fell to work upon a mental calculation of the number and variety of the loaves of cake, whose manufacture she was to begin the following week.

One used to ebullitions of temper akin to that she had just witnessed, seasoned by years of endurance to the peltings and reverberant peals of such thunder-storms as were any hour liable to break upon her head—was not apt to remark or inquire into the cause of lesser variations in the family barometer. If Helen grew graver each

day, and was often moodily taciturn for hours together ; if Lily were fretful, restless, and capriciously gay by turns, without any visible reason for these humours, the good aunt winked at these fluctuations of temper and spirits, and, when winking did not suffice to shut out the unseemly exhibitions, closed fast eyes and ears, and minded her own business. She was not, therefore, the person who could have been expected to discern other signs of the times—such as affected her ease and comfort less than the behaviour of her husband and adopted daughter towards her personally. She never bethought herself that Robert Lay's handsome, sunshiny face was at times worn and haggard, and his manner oddly *distract* ; that, while he never failed to follow Helen's every movement with his eyes, and sought out occasions of divining her wishes and forestalling their expression by immediately gratifying them, he as frequently had long, confidential talks with Lily as with her, and treated the younger cousin with a warmth of familiarity he had not manifested formerly.

Nor did Helen's quicker vision appear to discover this change in her lover's bearing, or imagine that there was peril in his increasing intimacy with Lily. Whether she had other food for thought, so much more important in her estimation, or was incapacitated from feeling jealousy through perfection of confidence, or, what was surely very unlikely, a calm indifference, was not to be learned from her demeanour. Certain it was that she pursued the avocations so replete with stirring interest to most women with a mechanical fidelity, a diligent drudgery, that looked more like a conscientious performance of allotted duty than desire ; more like an abstraction of ideas and absence of feeling than loving zeal. Occasionally she aroused her torpid conscience to the examination of the contrariety of emotions that alternately depressed and agitated her, questioned herself sharply, and censured unsparingly. It might be an indication of a noble trust in Robert's truth and affection that she did not object to see him sit, for an hour at a time, beside Lily's piano, or promenade with her on the lawn for the same period, both talking earnestly and continuously, as friends whose interest in one absorbing theme is a bond of union between their hearts. But did she sin when she wondered what was the source of the relief she experienced in the discovery that, while his kindness to herself remained unabated, he

was yet less demonstrative ; made fewer demands upon her time and love than of yore ; let her alone when she was inclined to indulge in pensive reverie, instead of trying by cheerful arts and tender wiles to dispel the cloud ? She had outlived her age of romance, she was in the habit of saying, and perhaps it was better that he should also learn to look at life's prosaic side—to view feelings, as well as facts, as they were, without the dangerous and deceptive glamour cast about them by a loving idolatry. They would be happier for the disillusion when their lots were united.

She did not palliate the folly and crime of the unutterable sadness that would, combat it as she might, steal over her in the contemplation of this prospect. Was she not going, of her free will, to marry a man who had loved her from her childhood in spite of her faults, her many frailties and foibles of disposition and errors of conduct ? who loved her purely and wholly, as few other women were ever esteemed ? Was he not the non-such of his sex, in his spotless life, his engaging deportment, perfect temper, and singleness of purpose ? She was a fortunate, a happy woman, and, if ungrateful as fortunate, unreasonable as happy, she might blame herself and no one else. What if she had, in childish folly, once hearkened and thrilled to another's vows, as she had never done to Robert's manly fervour of protestation ? What if, for many months, she had nursed a beautiful shadow of bliss, in the belief that this other was hers—hers only and for ever—as she was keeping herself for him ? That was a weary, weary time ago ! It seemed as if years of wretchedness had gone over her head since the summer evening—but one month prior to her betrothal—when she had heaved, torn with desperate strength, the great stone by the spring away from its bed, and buried in the moist black mould the ring she had worn, in credulous faith, for a year and a half—worn hopefully, joyously, proudly ! then rolled back the rock to its place—a tomb that hid a grave !

These trifles belonged to the girl's history ; as a girl she had judged falsely of their nature, and consequently overrated their value. She had grown into a woman now, rational, strong, resolute ! Was she resentful and despairing as well ? It might be, for she had no memory of a mother's gentle rectitude of conscience and action ; a father's wise counsels. A wild, undisciplined childhood had not laid the kind of foundation from which would spring, in spontaneous

growth, moderation of judgment and dispassionate conduct at the age of maturity. She knew her temperament, and what were her besetting sins; and she firmly believed that Robert Lay, of all others, was best acquainted with these, and that his influence would exert the most salutary effect in restraining whatever was objectionable and fostering the few germs of good. He had said that she only had the power of making him happy; that Life would be bare and joyless if he were deprived of the hope of winning her; and with tender sympathy, born more of her own intense suffering, her aching, bleeding heart, than out of the sisterly regard she had ever felt for him, she listened, and promised to be his wife.

"There's many a heart caught in the rebound!" says a time-honoured maxim we see daily exemplified in the drama of Life. With regard to the quality and volume of this reflex tide of affection the oracle is mute.

I heard once of a simple, true-hearted girl, a novice in the world and its ways, who was cruelly deserted by the man she had loved and trusted for years. She "bore it wonderfully," said curious lookers-on. Some went so far as to express a doubt whether her attachment had ever been so strong as was generally supposed. Cheerfully and quietly—none guessed how heroically—she went through her round of duties; neither in her home, nor in society, ever yielding, for an instant, to visible depression of spirits. Two or three years had elapsed since the event that had changed the whole tenor of her inner life; the recreant lover had wedded another, and it was considered that she had, in common phrase, "quite gotten over her trouble," when she was addressed by another suitor, a noble fellow, who could appreciate aright her rare excellence, and was, in himself, entirely worthy of her love and respect. She was greatly moved as the tale proceeded, and, when he paused for her answer, hid her face and wept abundantly. Encouraged by this evidence of softness, the wooer pressed his suit yet more warmly.

"Please do not," she sobbed, putting both her hands into his, and looking up at him with an expression of grieving pity. "Do not go on, or I shall promise that which will render us both miserable for life. I know how hard it is to endure the pain of wounded affection. Do not make me too sorry for you!"

Had the nature of Helen's former relations to Aleck Lay been

such as could be avowed, and Robert not his brother, she would have made a like answer to his confession of love.

It wanted just three weeks to the wedding-day, and the brothers had accompanied the Floyds home from morning service in the church, to partake of their Sunday dinner. Aleck had joined the party sadly against his will ; but Lily had seconded her aunt's invitation so pressingly, declaring that she believed he had some secret and cogent reason for his dislike of Belleview or its inmates ; that the whole county had observed his neglect of his old friends, and that divers queer rumours were in circulation explanatory of his behaviour—that he complied, to avoid discussion and check scandal. Lily had a meaning accent and look, moreover, while she delivered this lively tirade, that piqued and puzzled him. Had such a thing been possible, he would have felt assured that she was no stranger to the true cause of his consistent avoidance of Helen.

He was not an admirer or friend of Miss Calvert. When a boy, he had mortally offended her by pronouncing her "a whey-faced witch," which observation, by means of some kind tongue, reached her ears. The feud was further increased by his invariable championship of Helen, in the petty quarrels between the girls. Lily professed to like him at this date. It had even been slyly and gratuitously suggested to him, by disinterested young ladies and prudent mammas, that he, the elder and richer brother, was regarded by the Floyd connection as a *bon parti*, and probable suitor of the colonel's younger ward, now that the other was "out of the market." This benevolent warning he received with profound carelessness, and did not trouble himself to controvert the theory. It was not fear of these tattlers that kept him away from the home of the elfin beauty. Yet it might be expedient to throw them yet farther off the right scent, besides showing his contempt for their impertinent gossip, by riding fearlessly by Robert's side, behind the Floyd carriage, when it rolled away from the church door on this bright day, and his officious friends were looking on, in rows and groups, awaiting the arrival of their respective vehicles.

For a wonder, the Lays were the only persons present besides the family at dinner, and all found the repast a dull and cheerless ceremony, although the cookery did ample credit to Mrs. Floyd's kitchen. The poor lady's eyes were red and watery. She had a headache and

catarrh, she said, but the initiated members of the company, and this included the entire number, recollecting that she had returned from church in her usual spirits and bodily condition, were not slow in assigning a more plausible reason for these signs of discomfort, in viewing the knit brows and hearing the gruff tones of her sovereign master. He carved savagely, and wasted as few decent words upon his guests as he could, taking no share whatever in the conversation that Lily, Robert, and Aleck tried to keep up, to cover his surliness and Mrs. Floyd's tremour. He broke a goblet, in pushing it roughly against the dish before him; swore audibly at the quaking servants; and finally ordered his second son from the table in a voice of thunder, for spilling water on the cloth.

The colonel seldom went to church except in summer-time, when he could pass the hours of service out of doors, under the trees shading the sacred edifice, talking politics with neighbours as graceless as himself. He had spent the forenoon of this Sabbath in examining his account-books—"business papers," his wife styled them, in a lame apology she offered in the drawing-room for his "being out of sorts;" he having finished the meal he had succeeded in spoiling for every one else, and stalked off up to his chamber for his Sunday afternoon nap.

"It always gives him the blues to look over these tiresome papers!" she sighed, while she tried to smile at the absurdity of allowing such trifles to mar one's happiness. "I often wish there were no money matters in the world. I don't pretend to understand them myself!"

"Few ladies do!" said Aleck. "They are among the ills of life which are confined almost exclusively to us unhappy men."

Helen met Robert's eye with a forced smile, which was returned by one yet more mirthless.

"Can he be so unjust, after all my frankness, as to imagine me mercenary?" she thought, indignantly.

His uncomfortable cogitations were, in reality, dwelling upon the strong likelihood that the "business papers" which had stirred up the colonel's bile appertained to the records of his stewardship over his niece's estate, and the certainty, if this were so, that there were vexatious trials of patience in store for himself, when he and the guardian came to the dreaded final settlement.

The diversion was not unwelcome when Lily called him into her



greenhouse, to inspect a plant he had sent her some time before. It was drooping and yellow, from some cause, whose discovery was beyond the reach of her horticultural acumen. Robert was a zealous and accomplished amateur florist, and his decision, after a minute examination of the flower, and inquiry into the course she had pursued towards it, was, that she was killing it with kindness.

"You pet it too much; water it too abundantly; and dress the earth about the roots too often. Plants require rest, like animals. This needs a little wholesome neglect; a judicious letting alone, with plenty of sunshine. That will bring it around, if it is not too far gone."

Lily bent over the fading favourite in silence, until the large drops gathered in her eyes, and one fell upon the plant.

"My dear child!" ejaculated Robert, in surprise, "I will procure a dozen more of the same kind for you, if you want them, sooner than you should shed a single tear; and this may revive yet!"

"I am *not* a child!" said she, passionately, "although everybody sees fit to treat me like one! And it is not the flower, for the flower's sake, that I grieve over! I was just thinking how everything that I love best is taken from me. I did care for that geranium, because you gave it to me, and I have always believed that you were one of the very, very few who really liked me!"

She plucked a rose and rent it apart, petal by petal, her lip pouting and trembling; the tears yet hanging, like pearly dew, upon the gold fringe of her eyelids. She looked perilously pretty, Robert acknowledged, in his conscious innocence of everything except brotherly kindness, and his great, tender heart yearned at the sight and confession of her artless distress. What a guileless babe she was! How sinless and free her attachment for her early playmate!

"And you thought right, Lily! There are not many people whom I like better than I do you—as I have often told you."

"Only a couple of dozen or so!" returned the beauty, petulantly.

Robert was obliged to laugh.

"Hardly a single couple, I can assure you! You know who comes first upon the list, and would not dispute her right. Then there is Aleck! He is the only brother I have in the world."

"And Miss Ruth is your only aunt; and mamma is Helen's father's only sister, so she ought to come next; and Mam' Becky is

your only mammy, and Hero is your best horse, and Dash your best dog—and they all take precedence of a nobody like me, who has no claim upon you!” cried Lily, snatching at another rose, and bringing it away, stem and all. “I don’t thank you, or anybody else for a seventh, or even a third rate place in his regard. Thank goodness! if I am insignificant, I have too much pride for *that!*”

“Don’t try to pick a quarrel with me, little sister! I have enough sources of disquiet without this one—disquiet which your sweet sympathy has done much to alleviate. You wrong me by affecting to misunderstand my meaning. You know the sincerity of my attachment for you, Lily!”

“Forgive me!”

Her head fell upon his arm. Whether he would have released himself from this position, or awaited the recovery of her composure, was not to be seen.

“A letter for you, Miss Lily!” said Aleck’s voice behind them. His face was stern—his eye and accent penetrating. “Your aunt was going to bring it in to you, and I took charge of it to spare her the trouble.”

He bowed and withdrew, before either of the twain, whom his abrupt address had started, could find breath or words for a reply.

He was not surprised, on returning to the parlour, to perceive that it was deserted. The stiff and laboured dialogue carried on by himself and Helen, after they were left together by the floral connoisseurs, was so difficult and painful to both the participants, that he had seized upon the circumstance of Mrs. Floyd’s entrance with a note for Lily as an opportune pretext for ending the miserable pretence. Helen understood his eager politeness to her aunt, and contributed her share towards their mutual relief by leaving the coast clear before he reappeared. There was a dark flush of passion upon Aleck’s brow as he strode over to the window, and his mouth worked convulsively under his heavy moustache while he remained there, looking out upon the wintry landscape, blasted and sere, like his own hopes. He was displeased with Robert—more than displeased with the miniature siren, whose enticements were operating upon the senses of her cousin’s affianced husband.

“He can love twenty women—I but one! If *she* were mine, I would have shrunk with loathing from the touch of that little

serpent! Instead of enduring her subtlety and fond twinnings about me, would have cast her from me as a hateful thing! How different was the scene transpiring in here! Have I, then, more regard for his rights and honour than he has himself?"

It was a hasty and unjust aspersion of his brother's fidelity and delicacy of affection for his betrothed; but his wrath glowed yet more hotly as he reviewed, in detail, the illustration of rigid self-control, amounting to coldness, his manner to Helen had afforded; his absolute reticence of even friendly warmth towards the woman he nevertheless adored; the extreme circumspection he exercised over each glance and word, lest Robert's bride should chance to read in any of these that which it would be dishonourable in him, who was soon to be her brother, to show; and contrasted this line of conduct and principle with Robert's passive, if not fond reception of blandishments, such as he had interrupted.

He was too angry to look around when Lily's clear voice was heard at the door connecting conservatory and parlour.

"Helen! Helen! Why, Mr. Lay, I thought she was entertaining you all this time!"

"You were mistaken, you see?" he answered, curtly.

"Don't you know where she has gone!"

"I do not!"

"Then I must hunt her up! It was very uncivil in her to leave you here all alone. I shall scold her well for it!"

Away she ran, singing in her bird-like tones as if she had never shed a tear in her life. Robert, who had come in with her, silently took a seat by the fire.

Without having the remotest conception of the hidden reasons that exasperated into deep displeasure Aleck's righteous disapproval of the supposed flirtation, the younger brother yet felt that he had placed himself, or been placed by another, in a false light in his mentor's eyes. Unwilling to make a serious affair of an occurrence so trivial, or to impute forwardness and levity of deportment to Lily, he was nearly as reluctant to sustain in his own proper person the weight of the blame Aleck ascribed to one or both of them. That he did blame somebody for what he had seen, Robert did not need his present behaviour to convince him. He knew his ideas of a lover's honour—his delicate fastidiousness upon some points relative

to this—scruples for which none save those who were most intimately acquainted with him ever gave him credit. Gay rattle and reckless flirt as he was generally esteemed, his chivalrous respect for true womanhood amounted to reverence; his recognition of innate purity was instinctive. Had he been betrothed, he would have expected—not exacted—a whole-hearted devotion, not of the affections merely, but of the mind. If he scorned to exercise the slightest espionage upon the movement of his *fiancée* or wife, left her, as free as air, to obey the bent of her inclinations, it would be because he believed, with a faith more powerful than the convictions produced by sight, that she was as pure as the freshest air ever breathed from Heaven; that she was *his*—heart, body, and imagination, incapable of cherishing a thought she would not impart to him; and he would, have given as much as he asked. His teasing talk with his aunt about the fabulous Gretchen, and his fine compliments to heedless butterflies like Virginia Shore, were the veriest lip-play, and every one who knew him understood the badinage and flattery. No girl could accuse him of more culpable trifling, of the most distant approach to unwarrantable familiarity in language or touch.

Robert was conscious that he was sinless in respect to that whereof he feared his brother held him to be guilty; yet, he said to himself, that he wished, since Lily's unguarded because artless action was destined to have another spectator besides himself, that it had been Helen, and not Aleck. She would have judged of the case more charitably, approximated the truth more nearly. But something must be said to undeceive the real judge, and there was no time to be lost.

"Aleck—old boy!" He passed his arm over his brother's shoulder, who stood like a statue of ice under the embrace. "Are you thinking hardly of me?—blaming me for the little scene you happened to behold just now?"

"You are master of your own conscience and actions," rejoined the other, freezingly. "I do not presume to sit in condemnation upon either."

"I require no stronger evidence that you have arraigned me already—condemned me unheard," Robert said, in a hurt tone. "You should know me better, Aleck! If you had heard the rest of the conversation you would be more lenient. I wish you had!"

He waited for a response, but none came.

"It was the simplest, most innocent of gallant farces, Al!" Robert resumed, in a lighter tone.

"When a pretty woman shows her rings,  
What can a fellow do?"

That is an analogous quandary to the one in which you saw me—for which you are inclined to have me hanged, drawn, and quartered."

"The question is," said Aleck, turning to face his brother, and speaking slowly, with no softening of his severity, "the question is, whether a man, situated as you are, has a right, or ought to have the disposition, to think of the beauty of any other woman?"

"Pshaw!" replied the other, still determined to turn the affair into a jest, "that dogma belongs to a former generation; the Grandisonian race of swains and shepherdeses; the age that painted Cupid blind."

"That is very possible. My ideas upon this subject are decidedly antiquated, I admit; somewhat deficient, moreover, in tolerance of this 'dear passion for many' that modern lovers find so delightful!" answered Aleck, crossing to the fireplace, and throwing himself upon the sofa.

Nothing further passed between them for that time. Even Robert's sweet temper was ruffled by the unmerited sneer. Their disputes were of such rare occurrence that reconciliation was an awkward undertaking, if either were disposed to attempt it.

"Excuse me for leaving you," cried Lily, floating into the room—her airy motion could hardly be called walking—"but Nelly and I have been arranging a frolic for this evening. Won't you, gentlemen, aid and abet us?"

"The better the day the better the deed?" said Robert, playfully interrogative.

He would not allow Aleck's unjust imaginings to influence his demeanour to this unsophisticated, warm-hearted child.

"Yes—but this is really and truly a Sunday frolic. Mr. Sheppard, the new circuit-rider, is to preach to the servants at Mr. Shore's to-night, and Ginnie has written to say that we must all come. She knows you came home with us to dinner, so she will expect both or

you, certainly. I dearly enjoy those coloured meetings—don't you, Mr. Robert?"

"That depends upon their hue. I have found them very blue, and a dingy indigo at that, sometimes—taking blueness and dulness as synonyms."

"Oh! you know what I meant! Why will you be provoking? Mr. Lay, I wish you would take him in hand, and teach him how to behave as you do."

Aleck did not raise his eyes from his book, He would not be a party to this deceitful trifling. Lily gave him a stare of inquiry, and returned to the more complaisant Robert.

"They say this Mr. Sheppard is a stirring speaker, a thorough going revivalist; and the ride home by moonlight will be splendid!"





## CHAPTER VI.



**SEVEN** o'clock found the quartette from Belleview in the revivalist's audience, at one end of Mr. Shore's long dining-hall.

The white population of the neighbourhood was principally made up of Episcopalians, with a slight sprinkling of Roman Catholics; but Mr. Shore wedded for his second wife a devout Methodist, whose example and precept had wrought great, and, it was hoped by the reformer, radical changes in the religious habits of the slaves upon her own and certain of the surrounding plantations. The clergymen of her denomination, whose itinerant habits brought them within range of communication with her, were urgently invited to visit at, and most hospitably entertained in, her house; encouraged to establish meetings for public and social worship among the negroes, innovations which were not opposed, but rather forwarded, by her indulgent, irreligious husband. The gathering on this occasion was made up, for the most part, of coloured people, a goodly assembly in number, seated in close rows upon benches manufactured for such purposes by Mrs. Shore's orders. The room was narrow in proportion to its length, and had a fire-place at each end. Around the upper one of these were ranged chairs, for the accommodation of the family and neighbours. There were about thirty in all; and while the younger portion of the company had undoubtedly been attracted thither by the consideration that had moved Lily's inclination to attend—namely, the love of a frolic, let the day be what it might—they behaved with due decorum, preserved the semblance of respectful attention. It would

not have been safe to act otherwise under Mrs. Shore's watchful eyes.

Mr. Sheppard was suffering from hoarseness, having already delivered two sermons and conducted a class-meeting that day, besides riding twenty miles on horseback. He therefore the more gladly committed the preliminary and closing exercises of singing and prayer to those of the congregation who were able and willing to lighten his labours by taking their part in the same. Mrs. Shore joined in the familiar choruses, endeared to her by so many early and sacred associations, and her husband, to gratify her, added his assistance, which was, to say the least, of doubtful value, since his voice was cracked, and he knew neither tune nor words. But the best feature of this portion of the service was the grand, rich tones of the negroes, surging in thunder-peals of exultation, or sweetly plaintive in the pathetic strains of penitential lamentation.

"Did you hear anything finer than that in Germany, in the fatherland of sacred music?" whispered Helen to Aleck, who sat a little to her right, behind her.

"Nothing that sounded so delightful to my ears!" was his response. "It is like the music of Carryl and the memory of departed joys, pleasant and mournful to the soul."

He had leaned over, his hand resting upon the back of her chair, to hear and to answer her, and in the self-forgetfulness of the moment, both had looked and spoken naturally, with the cordial ease that had once signalized them in their bearing, the one to the other.

As Aleck resumed his former position, he caught sight of Lily's face; saw that she was on the alert to hear what was passing; met a covert side glance, which was quickly withdrawn; and his blood boiled anew. His distrust of the girl was becoming intense and irrational, and in exact ratio with its increase was augmented his loving compassion for Helen, whom, he honestly believed, her cousin was endeavouring to supplant in her lover's regard.

"Can it be that she sees nothing to excite her jealousy?" he speculated, and while the sermon engrossed the attention of the crowd at large, his watch upon her was keen but furtive.

She sat quietly; a casual observer would have supposed that her thoughts were, with her external organs of vision, fastened upon the speaker; but Aleck divined, or imagined that he did, that this



immobility of feature betokened anything but interest in the orator's impassioned appeals and vivid descriptions; that she found other and more prolific material for reflection in her own thoughts. There was nothing to awaken surprise in this abstraction in one who was to become a bride in less than one short month from that night; but it was remarkable that he did not succeed, in the course of that hour of close scrutiny, in detecting one stolen look at Robert, who was in full view, and whose eyes repeatedly wandered to her statuesque face.

"Perhaps love has taught her to practise concealment, a prudent vigilance over look, no less than word and action!" mused the spy. "Yet I should not have expected it!"

While revolving these trifles lighter than air in his mind, and more ill at ease on account of his restless meditations than he was himself aware of, he omitted to pay the requisite degree of attention to the passage of other events; was so lost to the consciousness of where he was, and what was the nature of the services, that he sprang to his feet, in uncontrollable bewilderment, when the sable congregation fell simultaneously, and not very noiselessly, upon their knees, at the invitation to prayer. Lily laughed, audibly to his sensitive ear, although she tried to smother the demonstration with her pocket-handkerchief; and Mr. Alexander Lay, self-contained man of the world as he was, sinking again to his seat with a tingling sensation about his bronzed cheeks, mentally and fervently devoted her to the infernal gods.

His confusion had time to abate during the prayer. The instrument, in his own phrase, "the humble tool," selected to convey the petitions of the assembly, was a servant belonging to Aleck himself, one of the field-hands upon the Maple Hill farm, a pompous, pragmatical Boanerges, distinguished above his fellows by his "wonderful gift of speech." He gave this talent full play now, beginning with constrained moderation and deliberate utterance, and gradually waxing louder and warmer, incited to greater vehemence by the groans of assent from his brethren, until the gusts of sound escaping from his surcharged lungs, presumed to represent equal vigour of heart, threatened to bring the ceiling down upon his head and those of the audience; as if, Samson-like, he meant to involve them with himself in one common ruin. He was "a mighty man in the Scrip-

tures," said his admirers; and the majority of those of his own caste heard, with a glow of pride in their representative but inadequately expressed by long-drawn "Amens," and sepulchral "Ahs!" his mention of the preacher to whose exhortations they had been called to listen on that occasion.

"Be pleased to pour out Thy plenteousest blessing's 'pon de great and notable man of de Lord who has spoken to us dis blessed arternoon, from de rivers to de ends of de earth. Strengthen him in his weakly body and diminished mind; bless him abroad and in his home, from de rivers to de ends of de earth. Grant him in Thy musifful and undesarved kindness a superabundance of souls as de purchase of his hire."

When service was over, as the negroes were filing out of the doors upon the right and left of the room, and Boanerges swaggered past the patrician group, bowing graciously, his master sternly bade him "Stop?"

"Sar!" said the amazed orator.

"I want to know what you meant by insulting a minister of the gospel to his face?" said Aleck, authoritatively.

"*Me, marster?*"

"Yes, *you!* Do you not know, you rascal, that you have actually declared here, in the hearing of us all, that Mr. Sheppard's mind was failing?"

The negro gaped in dumb and sheepish astonishment.

Aleck, like many other and better men, now that he had found an object upon which he might justly vent some of his pent-up wrath was disposed to deal more unmercifully with the offender against sense and decorum than he would have felt in a moment of less irritation.

"All that I have to say to you is this, my fine fellow," he pursued. "If I ever hear of your making a prayer in public again, before you have learned to perceive that most of what you say is outrageous profanity, I will have you transported to the South, as sure as your name is Petronius. While you belong to me you shall not be guilty of such scandalous impertinence in the name of Heaven, that is, if I can hinder it. You can go!"

"Really, Mr. Lay," Mrs. Shore recovered herself sufficiently to say, when the man had sought a refuge for his "diminished" head

outside the door; "you were unnecessarily severe upon the poor fellow. We all understood what it was that he intended to say, and he is a person of great influence among our coloured people, a leader of a class-meeting, and high authority in all religious matters."

"So much the more reason for putting a stop to such balderdash, madam! I must apologize to you, sir," addressing himself courteously to Mr. Sheppard, "for the seeming disrespect of his language with regard to you. I will see that the like does not occur again."

"The poor ignorant slave needs no apology to be made for him," answered the minister's solemn tones, doubly hoarse and deep by reason of his cold. "I would rather hope that his master will make amends to him, for the mortification he has sustained on account of his desire to perform his duty in a becoming manner."

"Our ideas of becomingness differ," said Aleck, with admirable temper. "I call such vile and ridiculous garbling of Scripture sacrilege; consider its effect pernicious in the extreme upon the minds of his simple and superstitious followers."

"It may be made, nevertheless, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon, even in unpractised and weak hands, my young friend. There is One, who is not limited by circumstances; who deigns to make use of feeble instruments in the accomplishment of His work. In this land the use of the Scriptures and the quotation of the same are allowable to all."

Aleck smiled. "It is dangerous to meddle with edged tools!" he rejoined, turning away to end a profitless discussion.

"So the world said!" cried Lily.

Tom and Virginia Shore, like a couple of giddy pates, burst into a fit of laughter.

"We must tell Mr. Lay that pretty story some day," said the latter, merrily. "It was too funny!"

"I have the original document at home. He shall see it this very night if he wishes to consult the Fates," replied Lily. "It was the strangest coincidence I ever heard of, and its happening upon the day of your return was not the least wonderful part of it."

"Don't look so disconcerted, Nelly," said Virginia, teasingly. "If one portion of the narrative is likely to be fulfilled, it does not follow that the rest is not a false prophecy."

Aleck looked from one to another, in real curiosity and well-assumed indifference.

"You deal in mysteries!" he said.

"In nonsense, I should say, and very witless fun it is, according to my perception of humour," returned Helen. "Lily! it is time we were gone. The carriage is ready, and we ought not to keep the horses standing in the cold."

"Wait!" Lily was fumbling in her pocket. "This is the dress I wore that evening, and I recollect putting that paper into an envelope, that I might preserve it as a curiosity. Here it is, I declare! Isn't that splendid?"

"Read it! read it!" was the popular acclaim.

"It is Sunday, remember!" cautioned Mrs. Shore.

"Lily!" said Helen, in distressed expostulation. "This is not kind."

"Why, what a serious matter you would make of it!" replied her cousin. "Of course, we all understand that it is a pack of foolish fiction, from beginning to end. You see, my friends, we were playing 'Consequences,' and this is what was written upon one of the papers. I shall give it *verbatim et literatim*. You didn't suppose that I knew that much Latin, did you? Ahem! 'The witty and accomplished Miss Helen Gardner,—watch her, Mr. Shore! don't let her snatch it!—' and the learned and cynical Mr. Alexander Lay, met behind a turkey-blind—"

"Fire!" rang out Aleck's trumpet tones in her ear. "Look behind you, Miss Lily."

She gave a jump and a scream, catching hold of her skirts at the same moment.

"Mercy upon us! Where is it?"

"In the fireplace!" returned Aleck, provokingly. "Where else should it be?"

There was a roar of laughter, and Lily's pout was one of real chagrin when she discovered that the paper was gone. Whether it had escaped from her fingers in her fright, and been drawn by the current of heated air into the mouth of the chimney, or been abstracted by some clever trick of legerdemain, she could not determine, and no one could or would tell her.

She shook her curls in pretty viciousness at Helen and Aleck.

"I will be even with you two conspirators yet! see if I am not!"

"I do not question your skill in plotting and counterplotting," responded Aleck. "If practice makes perfect, you should be an adept in cunning manoeuvre."

Belleview was about five miles distant from Mr. Shore's, and when half the distance was traversed, our party of four had the highway all to themselves; the little cavalcade of horsemen and vehicles that had started from the house with them having dropped off, a few at a time, at branch and cross-roads leading to their respective homes. The waning moon arose while they were still on their way, casting long shadows from hill and tree upon the light covering of snow that enwrapped the untrodden fields, showing the muddy road like a black serpentine river, winding between high banks and extended lines of fences, and giving to the landscape an aspect of melancholy ghostliness. The sickly rays broke fitfully across Lily's face, white as a phantom's, with unsteady, gleaming eyes, and Helen's, nearly as unearthly in its sad fixedness of thought. It was not a social cortège. The girls leaned, fatigued or out of spirits, against the cushions of the back seat in the carriage, and their cavaliers rode silently in the rear or beside the vehicle.

"What a doleful hour and scene!" complained Lily, at last. "If one of you gentlemen does not summon up gallantry enough to say something pretty, witty, or interesting, I shall expire with the blues. One would think that 'Brother Sheppard' had frightened all the fun out of us. Mr. Robert! are you asleep?"

Thus challenged, the individual accosted rode up to the window.

"Not drowsy, only accommodating myself to the prevalent taste for moonlight meditation; ha!"

They were upon a bridge or causeway of primitive construction, consisting of a few rails laid upon trestles, spanning a rill that crossed the road. One of these slipped, or broke under the foot of Robert's horse, and his leg went through the aperture, up to the knee, so violently and suddenly as to throw the rider quite over his head upon the half-frozen ground. A shriek of anguish broke from Lily, so wild and piercing that it chilled Aleck's blood, as a maniac's scream would have done. Quickly as he alighted, she reached the earth as soon, and when he lifted the head of the insensible man to his knee,

she was up on the other side, one hand passed under Robert's neck, while the other put back the hair from his brow.

"Robert! Robert! if you love me, speak to me, my darling. Don't you know me, your own Lily!" she called, in her frenzy.

"Is he seriously hurt?" demanded Helen, in accents that, full of feeling, were yet calm in comparison with her cousin's ravings.

She assisted Aleck to loosen his cravat and collar, and chafed his temples and hands.

"He lives!" screamed Lily, rapturously, as a sigh fluttered through the pale lips, followed by a groan.

"Where am I?" asked Robert, struggling to sit upright, holding his head between his palms, as to steady the giddy brain.

Aleck checked Lily's incoherent ejaculations of joy and explanation.

"Be still, Miss Calvert—if you please! You have had an awkward fall from your horse, Robert, and been slightly stunned. That is all! Can you stand?"

"Simon! Simon!" called Lily to the coachman, who had addressed himself to the work of extricating the unlucky horse and was now examining into the nature of his injuries, "come, help lift Mr. Lay into the carriage!"

"Do not make him more ridiculous than you have already done, Miss Calvert!" retorted Aleck, sharply. "He is not a sick baby, or a fine lady, but a man, in size and age at least! Well, Robert! is your head strong enough for the saddle? You have had many a harder fall before now, and hunted all day after it. I trust you have not degenerated."

Robert's rallying senses were acute enough to enable him to comprehend intonations as well as words, and a feeling of shame came over him at what sounded like unfeeling sarcasm.

"I am quite well, entirely recovered!" straightening himself and speaking cheerfully, "I never did a more awkward thing in my life! You used the right word in speaking of it, Aleck. How is he, Simon? not lamed, I hope."

"It's a blessed wonder he ain't, sir, for his hoof was rammed tight in de hole, but he is all safe and right 'parently."

"It is not right for you to exert yourself beyond your strength,"

remarked Helen, with the gentle kindness of a sister, as the horse was led up, and Robert laid his hand on the pommel.

Aleck softened on the instant.

"I can easily lead your horse home, if you think that you will suffer any inconvenience from the too violent exercise of riding. You will certainly be more comfortable in the carriage. A little prudence may save you trouble hereafter."

"Thank you!" replied his brother, proudly, somewhat stiffly. "As you say, I am a man, who has had many worse falls in the course of my lifetime. It is cold for you ladies to be standing here. Allow me to see you to the carriage. I am more uneasy on your account than my own."

When they were shut in, he mounted, rejecting Aleck's offer of assistance silently, as it was tendered, and gathering up his reins, gave the signal for starting.

One would hardly have anticipated that the sequel of an adventure, replete with danger to one of the actors, and which had drawn largely upon the sympathy of the others would be general distrust and acrimony of feeling, or that the silence that resumed its reign over the party would be the expression of grief in some, shame and disappointment in others. Robert's emotions were a mixture of all these. An expert in many accomplishments, famed for his agility and daring, he was mortified at his downfall, and grieved, no less than ashamed, at the ridiculous light in which Aleck had set his misfortune. Having been partially insensible for the first few minutes after the accident, he had understood Lily's lamentations very imperfectly; was doubtful whether he had not dreamed of her distressed accents and tender adjuration. He was consequently greatly at a loss what reason to assign for Aleck's cold contempt. Helen's composure had struck him as unnatural, and piqued him unaccountably. There were limits even to his loving charity.

"If I judged from the manner of the two, I should decide that Lily loved me best," he meditated, in his vexation. "Presence of mind in such exigencies may be a very useful virtue—highly commendable and heroic—but, to my taste, there are others more lovely."

Lily was in tears all the rest of the way. She had betrayed her secret to the last persons in creation whom she would have had penetrate it, Helen and Aleck; her imprudence and lack of self-control

had frustrated her cherished plans by premature development. Aleck would assuredly consider it incumbent upon him to impart the discovery he had made to his brother—unless—unless—she said, with trembling hope—Aleck himself reciprocated the sentiment she fancied Helen entertained for him. This was but a transient ray of comfort; for, upon examination, the supposition appeared chimerical and preposterous. Why, if she nursed a preference for the absentee, had Helen engaged herself to Robert? That she might, and would have accepted him, or any eligible suitor, in a moment of pique or despair, the little schemer could readily have imagined: but what provocation had there been for either feeling?

It was a tangled skein—an invisible web, whose mazes each of the four felt knotted about him or her, and still was powerless to break. The young men saw their fair companions to their guardian's door, and bade them "good-night" upon the porch. Lily said nothing; Aleck only the briefest and most coldly polite formula of parting; Helen's voice was sweet and steady in speaking to Robert.

"Must you go home? Do you feel no uneasiness from your fall?"

"None whatever; and I cannot stay—thank you!"

"Then, at least, come in for a moment, and let me get you a glass of wine, to prevent a return of faintness."

"You are very kind, but there is no danger. Good night!"

He pressed her hand, and perhaps Lily's likewise, but held neither longer than was demanded by politeness, and the brothers returned together to their horses.

They rode on for more than a mile, side by side, before either spoke.

"Is your head at all affected by the shock you sustained? Were you bruised, do you think?" then queried Aleck, kindly.

"I am unhurt *in body*—I am obliged to you!"

The last rejoinder was indicative, Aleck knew, of wounded feeling—not temper.

"I am sorry that you have sustained injury of any kind," he said. "Who inflicted it, may I ask?"

"Yourself more than any one else. I cannot be sullen with you, Aleck. Your conduct towards me, this day, is inexplicable to my mind. If you have any just grounds of complaint against me, speak it out, and give me a chance to clear myself. At any rate, I request you, as one gentleman has a right to ask of another, to refrain, in



future, from insulting me in the presence of others—particularly when those others are ladies.”

Here was an opportunity for full confession, yet Aleck discovered that he was unable to avail himself of it. So much of his overwrought disapprobation of what he had seen that day had its origin in feelings he could not disclose, that it was a difficult undertaking to make out an indictment against the offenders. Hampered by this conviction, his tone was an unfortunate contrast to Robert's, and jarred sorely upon the listener's heart.

“We can hardly hope to agree upon this topic, Robert. Our views respecting the expediency, not to say the morality, of certain practices, are radically different, I fear. Not that I believe that you would wantonly indulge a dishonourable thought, much less commit a dishonourable deed; yet there is a looseness of principle and conduct in these matters whose harshest name in the vocabulary of society is ‘levity,’ or ‘flirtation,’ that often works consequences as disastrous as deliberate villany.”

“‘Dishonour’ and ‘villany’ are words hard to be borne, even when the speaker is a brother. Please remember that!” said Robert, moving restlessly in the saddle. “In Heaven's name, man, say plainly what I have done, and let there be an end of innuendoes! My patience is worn threadbare.”

“I have no objection to plainness of speech. Unless I am greatly mistaken, you have won the love of two women, while you are bound by every law of honour and feeling to hold faith to one alone,” said Aleck, bluntly.

“I am not responsible for your visionary conclusions,” returned the other, struggling with his rising choler. “What proof have you to substantiate this extraordinary charge?”

“The evidence of my eyes and ears in the scene of this morning, and in the remarkable one of to-night. Lily Calvert would have thrown herself upon your bosom if I had not pushed her back by main force. She called you by name in a tone of passionate devotion, such as a beloved wife only has the right to employ, and entreated you to speak to her—‘to your own Lily—if you loved her!’ One of two inferences is inevitable. She is either a criminally fond and foolish woman—false alike to her cousin and every instinct of feminine modesty—or you have trifled with her affections.”

"I reject the alternatives you lay down so arbitrarily. Lily is innocent and pure minded. She is not to be judged as you would other girls."

"It seems not, indeed!" interrupted Aleck.

"She is not! She is a simple-hearted, affectionate child, whose very ignorance of evil makes her confiding and fearless. She has been accustomed to petting and indulgence from her infancy, and her sad history, her early orphanage, should commend her to the love of every feeling heart—the protection of every true man."

"I do not know that she is entitled to a more bountiful share of these than is her cousin. She has no recollection of her bereavement, and Mrs. Floyd is shamelessly partial to her. She has never felt the need of any other mother."

"We will not introduce Miss Gardner's name in this connection, if you please," said Robert, haughtily. "If that lady has any cause of dissatisfaction to allege against me, I hold myself in readiness to hear and answer it when she shall bring it forward in person. I will have no go-between in this matter!

"You wrong her by the insinuation that she would stoop to employ a 'go-between,' were her wrongs ever so great!" Aleck schooled himself to reply quietly, but forcibly. "Wrong her more foully than you do me by applying the base title to me! I am neither her confidant nor champion. I deemed it my duty, when you inquired the reason of my altered bearing, to utter a fraternal warning. I have done so in sincerity, with a single desire for your happiness and reputation. From this time henceforth, since you desire it, let the subject be untouched by either of us in our daily intercourse. It is devoid of charms to me, and, it would seem, obnoxious to you."

"Agreed!" returned Robert, spurring on his horse. "I am willing to abide by the results of my actions in this, as in everything else!"

For the first time in their lives the brothers separated that night with a cold nod and lips locked in stern displeasure; lay down to rest heart-sore at thought of their alienation; yet each smarting under a sense of injustice and indignity received from the other; each stubborn in his own opinion, and unrepentant of his own hasty words and irrational anger.



## CHAPTER VII.

**H**ELEN had her explanation scene with Robert also, as he had foreseen; but it was conducted in a spirit totally diverse from the unsatisfactory and intemperate conversation he had held with Aleck.

She had had many misgivings since that memorable Sabbath night, she frankly avowed—misgivings excited by Lily's agitation and singular language.

"I have doubted whether, after all, we had not acted unwisely in entering into this engagement, Robert; whether you may not have mistaken your feelings for me," she said, raising a clear searching eye to his. "If this is so—if this marriage will bring sorrow to Lily and yourself, I entreat you to tell me the truth now, while there is still room for retreat. You shall never be blamed, your character suffer no tarnish from the annulment of our contract. If you love her, if you would address her, were you not bound by your promise to me, trust me with your secret, and all shall be as you wish. I have feared, among other things, that you and I were not so well adapted to one another as you suppose."

"I am not worthy of you, Helen, yet I love you, you alone! The day in which you forbid me to hope for a return of that love, and the gift of your hand, will be to me the darkest of my life. I regard Lily as I would your younger sister, if you had one, and I honestly believe that her affection for me is of a like nature. She is addicted to the use of extravagant expressions, as you know, and has as little command of her feelings as the merest child. I am her elder brother, her counsellor and friend. She would shrink at the mention of any nearer relation. So much to exculpate her from **As to yourself—"**

He stopped, and a sad, wistful gaze attested the change that had come over his fervent spirit.

Helen sustained the scrutiny without faltering or blushing.

"What of me?" she asked.

"Will you imitate my candour? Is your love for me the same, in quality and degree, that it was when you first pledged yourself to become my wife? I, too, have had my fears; fancies of your growing coldness; imaginations that my society was becoming irksome to you. Helen! my only love! my almost bride! if you knew the anguish such thoughts bring to a heart that is bound up in you, that cannot live, except in the sunshine of your smile and presence, you would not chide me for being jealous sometimes."

"Jealous!" Helen's head was uplifted in regal pride. "Of whom have you the shadow of a right to be jealous? What room has my conduct afforded for the birth of such a passion on your part?"

"None! I own with shame that my uneasiness had no foundation of that kind. Yet I find myself eyeing with jealous apprehension every man that approaches you—my own brother not excepted. Do not despise me, Helen!"

She withdrew from the arm he would have cast about her; her face was averted, her breath came thick and fast. Supposing that he had offended her, Robert implored her forgiveness; declared the complete restoration of his confidence; engaged that it should never again be interrupted.

"Only do not take your love from me!"

"My love!" she repeated, in a strange, far-off tone, as if communing with some phantom of the past; "you do not know for how poor a gift you sue!"

He eagerly asseverated that it was to him the highest of earthly prizes; that it alone could content a heart that had never for a moment turned to any other than herself.

"I have tried you sadly of late, dearest; have not seemed like myself to you, or to anyone else," he continued, penitently. "But I have been on the rack many, many times. I blush to confess it! I do not deserve your esteem or affection."

"There!" With a bright smile she put her hand before his lips. "We will have no more self-criminations; no more cross-examinations of one another! No more unavailing sighs over the never-to-be-re-

called past! When I plighted my faith to you, we said, solemnly, 'until Death shall part us!' I have meant from that hour to this to keep the vow, and I must believe you when you assert that you have never desired to violate it. A vow is a fearful thing!" She turned paler and shuddered slightly. "An awful thing! and ours was not a light one, or lightly spoken. Mine shall stand until you say to me, of your own accord, 'I wish to be free!' or, as we said that day, the day of our betrothal, 'until Death itself part us!'"

Ere the last word quite left her tongue, the shaded lamp upon the table behind them burst with a report that sounded terrifically loud in the quiet room, and the inflammable fluid that fed the wick flew in lurid jets over the floor, the furniture, their clothing, over everything within a radius of eight or ten feet. The explosion, and the scream Helen could not repress, alarmed the whole household—were distinctly heard at the negroes' dwellings in the yard. In half a minute the apartment was filled with a frightened, questioning throng. The fire had caught Helen's dress in several places, which were extinguished by Robert before the flame could spread; the surface of the mahogany stand was blistered by the blazing stream, and there were scattered here and there, scorched and smoking patches upon the carpet and wall-paper.

When Helen recalled her senses with sufficient clearness to take note of surrounding objects, several servants were upon their knees, picking up bits of broken glass; Mrs. Floyd was sobbing hysterically upon the sofa; Lily standing by, laughing violently; and the colonel was cuffing Gabriel to and fro like a rubber ball, for his carelessness in having left the top of the lamp unscrewed when he filled it; "else how could the fire have touched the camphene?"

"Deed, marster, and I screwed it on tight as tight could be, sur, 'fore ever I lighted it, and sot it on de table thar', keerful!" blubbered the boy.

"No amount of care can prevent accidents of this nature, colonel!" ventured Robert, in respectful corroboration of Gabriel's self-vindication. "Camphene is a dangerous invention, neither a decent servant nor a merciful master."

"Not another drop shall ever be burned in this house while I am alive! I'm determined on that!" sobbed Mrs. Floyd. "It is hateful stuff, and I've always said so, for all it gives a good light!"

"You will burn it until doomsday, madam, if you live so long!" was the civil response of her husband; and giving Gabriel a parting kick, responded to by a dismal howl, he recommended all present to go about their business, and himself set the example.

Helen acceded to her aunt's proposition that they should adjourn to the parlour—the accident had occurred in the dining-room—but stepped back after she had reached the hall, to look for a handkerchief she had lost. Two negro women were still searching for fragments of glass under the table.

"De wust sign dat could 'a happened!" Helen heard one mutter to the other. "Death and partin', sure!"

"Dat's so!" assented her crony. "And it couldn't mean nobody but one 'o dem—for wasn't dey a-settin' close by it? Ah, well! poor young things! if so be—"

The other touched her to be silent, perceiving the young lady's presence, and Helen pretended not to have listened to their prognostications. Nevertheless, her nerves were sadly discomposed, and although devoid of superstitious dreads, she could not help thinking of the odd coincidence between the servant's prophecy and her own words, interrupted in their utterance by the startling incident. So hard was it to shake the impression from her mind, that she related the circumstance to Robert, when he was about leaving her that night.

His spirits had risen rapidly since the conversation in the former part of the evening; he had never been more tender in manner, more hopeful in picturing their future, and his answer to her story was a hearty laugh.

"You regard this shabby trick of that detestable camphene as an omen, do you? 'Death and parting, sure,' as Nancy says? Breaking glass signifies fractured vows; and what is the significance of the fiery baptism, of which you had the largest share?"

"A blazing temper, perhaps!" said Helen, saucily. "Take care!"

"Then your uncle is predestined to enact a volcano, and not you! What has gone wrong with him lately? He has not spoken a pleasant word in my hearing for a month and more."

Helen shook her head. "He is angry with you—more incensed at me, because we will not be puppets in his hands. We shall soon

be independent of his humours, so we will not be miserable about them now."

"Why do you sigh? Is the anticipation of liberty so dreadful? For myself, I have not been so buoyant and light-hearted for weeks and weeks, if I ever was before. I had hoped that you felt the same."

"I am happier. There is always a sure peace in the consciousness of having done right."

Whence, then, the large slow drops that followed one another down her cheeks, when she went back to the parlour, after bidding him "good-bye?" The rest of the family had retired long before, and she sat down on the rug and looked at the two chairs standing so close together in front of the fire. Whence came the sense of desolation that crept over her, in the recollection that her fate was now doubly sealed? that no mortal power could prevent the consummation of the engagement she had that evening ratified? Had she secretly expected—guiltily hoped for—a different sequel to the momentous interview?

"I have done my duty—kept my word to myself and to him. I only told the truth when I reiterated the assurance of my attachment. I love him as much, and in the same way, that I did when we were first betrothed. I have counted the cost, and I will abide by my decision. After a while I shall conquer this foolish weakness. Then we shall be happy together—quite happy!"

And at this comforting assurance she lapsed into an agony of weeping.

Aleck was reading in his chamber when he heard his brother gallop into the yard on his return from Colonel Floyd's, and a minute afterwards his running step upon the stair, and a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he said, surprised at the unseasonable visit.

Robert entered, blithe and glowing, after his swift ride in the cold.

"Ah! old boy!" he began, without preliminary, walking straight up to his brother, his hand outstretched, "I have made all right with her, have told her that I have acted like a brute and a villain, and she, like an angel (by the way, she doesn't fall far short of one!); and now I've come to beg your pardon for my shameful treatment of your friendly advice; to ask that we may stand once again upon

our old footing. Quarrelling is a new and unpleasant business to us, my dear fellow!"

"It is!" Aleck wrung the proffered hand. "I thought you would understand me better when you came to think over the matter. You can never know how dear your happiness is to me, Robin, or the pain this estrangement has cost me."

They sat down, side by side, and talked freely and affectionately—one of them happily—until the clock struck three.

"Never mind the march of Father Time!" said Robert, as the other exclaimed at the lateness of the hour. "The faster he gallops, the better pleased am I! We shall not have many more such seasons of dissipation either. The habits of a staid Benedict and householder, such as I hope soon to be, must be, perforce, diametrically opposed to irregular hours, and I fancy that your Gretchen will knit her pretty brows at these propensities in her husband. Ah! Aleck! you have not acted quite fairly with me in that affair. Here I have turned out the lining of my heart to you, and you have been keeping your most precious secret locked away from my brotherly eyes."

"I do not understand!" answered Aleck inquiringly.

"You hypocritical rascal!" Robert collared him, and searched his face with his mirthful eyes. "Do you persist in your deceit? Is Aunt Ruth the only worthy depositary for your confidences? Do you dare to deny that you are every whit as deeply in love as I am? still to keep up the flimsy pretence that the improvements going forward, with such un-German velocity, at Maple Hill, are designed for your personal delectation and our good aunt's comfort, you dutiful dog?"

"Soho!" Light beamed over Aleck's puzzled visage. "I begin to comprehend! And you were blessed with a perusal of the private and confidential missive directed to Aunt Ruth, and crammed with eulogies upon the little German beauty? *You* were so verdant as to swallow the hoax I intended as a reward for her monthly epistle upon the dangers to which a marriageable young man is exposed when he has no aunt near to guard him from temptation, and the passing importance of making a judicious choice of a 'pardner,' as she pronounces it? Gretchen, forsooth! The jade never cared three straws for me, nor I one for her!"

"I am glad and sorry too!" replied Robert. "Pleased that I



am not to have a foreign sister-in-law; very sorry that the high place in your heart is yet vacant. My happiness makes me sympathize the more keenly in your poverty in this regard. You could love warmly and truly, Aleck: and if you had that *summum bonum* of earthly blessings, Aunt Ruth's well-chosen 'pardner,' would prove yourself a capital husband."

"Thank you! If I ever summon courage to try the experiment, I will apply to you for a certificate to that effect," Aleck promised, with a laugh, as they separated with another warm clasp of the hand.

He was off to Maple Hill the next morning; spent every day and nearly every night there, until Christmas.

Thorough as was the revolution in the appointments of the long-disused mansion, it scarcely exceeded that going on at Greenfield, or the tumult which prevailed at Bellevue. Seamstresses plied hot needles; hot ovens disgorged loads of cake and every imaginable species of delicious home-made confectionary; the din of scrubbing, polishing, and hammering, was lively and incessant; fires burned in every chimney all day, and piled the hearth-stones over night with huge beds of live embers; and two teams of stout oxen found abundant occupation in hauling wood to feed the throats of the voracious smoking monsters. Mrs. Floyd was too busy to heed her husband's "tempers," and nothing can be cited that would prove more strongly her absorption in the great work she had in hand.

Christmas eve came. The sun set gloriously behind the dark, interminable line of forest bounding the view in all directions, and the stars glittered dazzlingly as they were kindled in the clear, frosty sky. Everything gave promise of a fair day for the approaching festival. In Helen's chamber was collected a bevy of chattering girls, the bridesmaids, busy in the discussion of the important duties before them. Of course, all talked at once, and each strove to drown her neighbour's voice, yet Virginia Shore contrived to make herself heard above the clamour.

"Isn't it a shame?" she called in her highest key. "Helen declares that she is in sober earnest in refusing to be married in that lovely set of pearls Mr. Aleck Lay brought her from Europe! I tell her she had better try at the outset to gain the blind side of her husband's relatives, and that his brother will have a right to feel

offended at the manifest slight put upon his gift, which, every one can see, was meant for a bridal toilet."

The cabal agreed that the neglect would be an insult and unpardonable, even were the jewels as tasteless and unbecoming as they were handsome and suited to the owner and the occasion.

"But what ornaments will you wear, Helen?" questioned one.

Virginia interposed her ready tongue. "That is the most nonsensical part of the story! Nothing but a pitiful little tea-rose in her hair, and another in her bosom, and just because Mr. Robert Lay gave her the bush, and this is the first time it has blossomed! Isn't that *too* love-sick?"

Helen remained unmoved by the ridicule and arguments of her finery-loving train.

"My mind is made up," she said, pleasantly, but decidedly, to their varied and repeated attacks.

"She might have had orange-blossoms from Lily's greenhouse, if she wished," pursued Virginia. "I see that you have a tree loaded with them, Lily. It was very generous and considerate in it to come out in full dress just now, and in you to keep every flower and bud for the benefit of your friends."

"Not one of them shall be gathered by you, or any one else, for to-morrow's frolic!" returned the proprietress of the flowers, curtly.

Virginia stared in blank astonishment.

"Why, Lily! that is downright stinginess, and not what we should have expected from you! We girls expected a sprig apiece for our bouquets, and the bride's should be composed almost entirely of them. What is a wedding without orange-blossoms?"

"You will shortly have an opportunity of seeing, unless you furnish yourselves from some other quarter. Not one of mine shall you have."

Apparently, the diminutive beauty was what would have been termed, in a larger and homelier woman, "desperately out of humour."

"One would think that this tree was a present from *your* true love—you value its productions so highly!" observed another "friend."

Lily bit her lip, and her blue eyes emitted sparkles of angry light. Only Helen, of all the girls, knew that Robert was the donor of nearly every rare plant in her collection; that the orange-tree was

one of his contributions, she having raised it from a graft set expressly for her by his hand, three years before, in a fine bush that graced the Greenfield conservatory; and Helen did not know how sedulously she had tended it to its present flourishing estate; the kisses she had showered upon its glossy leaves; the tears that had lately gemmed its snow-white petals—but the random hit was stinging.

“Lily is quite right, allow me to say, young ladies!” said the bride, coming to the help of her discomfited rival. “The tree is too beautiful as it now is, to be spoiled by your destructive fingers. The greenhouse will be lighted to-morrow evening, and the orange be the queen of the floral belles.”

“I comprehend! ‘Touch not a single bough!’” said Virginia, dramatically. “But I want to ask, my dear Mrs Lay— Mercy, Helen! don’t murder me with your eyes, and upon my word of honour as a lady, I won’t give you the title again until the minister grants me leave!” cried the giddy creature, crouching behind the chair of her nearest neighbour, in affected terror.

“What were you about to inquire?” said Helen, recovering herself.

“Only whether you expected Mr. Lay over to-night; whether he is so selfish and lover-like as to deprive us of your society on this, the last evening of your freedom?”

“He will not be here, I think. Do you want me, Sally?”

“No, ma’am—but your uncle told me to say as how he would like to speak to you a minute in the office.”

Sally never said “master” to or of Colonel Floyd, when she could avoid it, since the shooting adventure in the melon-patch. She did not belong to him, she used to boast, and would not compliment him by the respectful title.

To the office Helen bent her way, leaving her fair attendants to talk over and wonder at her marvellous serenity; as Virginia Shore had it, “her cool style of taking what threw most girls into fits. Surely no other woman ever looked and acted as she does, upon the eve of her marriage-day!”

Helen crossed the dining-room, with its long table set for supper; went along the passage beyond, to the scene of the moonlight talk with Robert, on the evening of Aleck’s return. Upon the threshold

of this apartment, the wave of renovation that had swept through the rest of the mansion had been stayed. There was more lumber stored there, and it was overspread by a thicker coat of dust, and fringed more heavily with cobwebs, than at Helen's former visit, and the dark, airless smell of the place seemed heightened instead of dissipated by the fire feebly burning upon the hearth. To this uninviting retreat had Colonel Floyd retired with his tormentors—the accounts of his ward's estate, or papers purporting to be such. They were scattered upon a dingy table, from which hung tattered strips of baize that had been green, and whereupon stood also a couple of candles and an inkstand. He was bowed over a great book, yellow and ink-spotted, at his ward's entrance, pen in hand, his countenance grave to dolefulness.

Helen stopped in front of him, keeping the desk between them.

"You sent for me, I believe, sir?"

"I did! Sit down!"

"Thank you! I prefer to stand, unless our conference is to be a lengthy one."

"It need not be. I assuredly have no wish to prolong it. I have prepared and collected a few papers which it is necessary for you to sign, in order that I may proceed in the work of legal surrender of the charge placed in my hands by your father—the care and management of your estate. There is one!"

He pushed towards her a sheet of large dimensions, covered with figures.

"I will take a seat, since this is to be inspected," said Helen, coolly, drawing up a chair with a broken back—the most secure one that offered itself among the unfortunate collection—and dusting it with her handkerchief.

The colonel's brows met ominously.

"You are not required to undertake that task. Mr. Lay has examined it, and is satisfied that it is correct."

"I do not see how that can be. This, as I learn from its heading, professes to be a report of my expenditures since I attained the age of fifteen—bills for clothing, board, pocket-money furnished, etc.,—matters of which Mr. Lay is profoundly ignorant. I am the fittest person to judge of the accuracy of your statements."

Unheeding the muttered curse at her "perversity" and "unbearable

insolence," she reviewed the long columns of numerals; dwelt thoughtfully upon particular items, and raised her eyebrows meaningly at the sum total.

"I shall not affix my signature to this, sir!" she said, letting the sheet fall as she finished its study. "I too have a statement to make, which it is proper you should hear. My uncle, William Gardner, was joint guardian with you until his death, which occurred at the date when this account begins. Until then your reports were subject to his examination. When you assumed the entire charge of my property, I opened a private expense-book. He advised me to the measure, upon his death. I have kept it with scrupulous exactness, in anticipation—let me say—of the final settlement upon which we are now engaged. I can prove by it that the sums disbursed by you for my expenses do not exceed *one-half* of the amount you have here set down. I have taken pains to omit nothing in my account. Every school-bill was copied with punctilious care before I passed it to you; every sixpennyworth of ribbon was registered so soon as it was procured. I cannot truthfully certify, as you wish me to do, that I have received, either in ready money or its equivalent, all you declare has been spent by and for me. There is a mistake somewhere, and a great one!"

"Girl! do you know that you are accusing me of swindling?"

"I have used no such word. I have said that there is an error in your computation. We will therefore lay this paper aside for further consideration. Did I understand you to say that there are others to be inspected?"

"Will you have the goodness to 'inspect,' since you are so fond of using the word, *that*—and let me have your ladyship's judgment of it?"

He flung an envelope over to her, so rudely that it whizzed past her cheek and fell to the floor. Nowise disconcerted by his violent tone and action, she stooped to pick it up.

"This is directed to Lily—not to me!" she said, reading the address upon the back.

"I am aware of that. You will find, notwithstanding, that it concerns Miss Helen Gardner very nearly. You recognize the handwriting, I presume?"

"I think that I do."

"It bears a very tolerable resemblance to Mr. Robert Lay's, does it not?"

"It does." Helen laid the letter down with an air of unconcern.

"It *was* written by him, and intercepted by myself—"

"In that case I shall take the liberty of restoring it to the rightful owner," interrupted she, stretching her hand towards the letter. He secured it before she could touch it.

"You had best not be over-hasty, young lady! You may reverse your decision when you learn the contents of this epistle," tapping the cover meaningly. "This, which came into my possession this very afternoon, confirms what I have long suspected, the fact of Robert Lay's infidelity to my wealthy ward, and real love for her poorer but more beautiful cousin. He tells Lily, here, that his heart has failed him at the eleventh hour; that he cannot and will not, unless driven to it by her cruelty, carry out the projected union with yourself, and proposes an elopement upon his wedding-day. What say you to this pretty arrangement? It offers quite a refreshing variety to the ordinary hackneyed style of entering the hymeneal state, does it not?"

If demon ever wore more fiendish smile than the sneer that curled his lip and looked evilly from his eye at that moment, it must have been the prince of devils himself.

Helen's features hardened into stone beneath it.

"I have nothing to say to such a tale, sir, except to insist, still, that the letter shall be delivered to the person for whom it was intended."

"You do not care to read it yourself?"

"Certainly I do not! The act would be dishonourable."

"You may, perhaps, not object to glance at the signature. It is boldly and well written!"

Before she could draw back, or divine his intention, he thrust the open page abruptly under her eyes.

"*For ever your own, Robert,*" she could not help reading, in the round comely characters that were traced upon many a note to herself.

"You refuse to take it still! Your principles of honour are invulnerable, your curiosity stagnant?" mocked her companion, as she arose in offended dignity.

"I have seen no reason why I should change my mind," she replied.

"Be it as you will! I shall not transmit this letter to the lady-love No. 2 of this fickle swain—shall uphold Mammon's cause against Cupid's," continued Colonel Floyd, replacing the epistle within the envelope, then putting it, with ostentatious care, between the leaves of his pocket-book. "It is my duty to protect your reputation and your cousin's so long as you are inmates of my house, reckoned by the public as members of my family. Disgrace is a word unknown in the Floyd annals. Mr. Lay's disappointment at not finding his bonny Lily at the place of rendezvous (not a euphonious name for a romance—Rock's Tavern!), his chagrin at her non-compliance with his petition, may produce a reaction in your favour; so, do not despair of seeing him in his appointed position to-morrow evening."

"If he comes I shall marry him, without demanding a word of explanation!" said the low, determined tones he had been used to hear from her, in her obstinate moods, since the days of her wilful childhood.

"Very well? What woman ever let 'a good chance' slip through her fingers? I will oppose no obstacle to your manifest destiny, which is to show yourself to be as grand a fool as he is a knave!" rejoined her guardian contemptuously. "The remainder of my business may with propriety be delayed until the knot is tied. 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip!' I am to meet the amorous bridegroom at the clerk's office at eleven o'clock to-morrow, when he applies for his marriage-license. It will then be seen which of my wards he has finally decided to promote to the dignity of favourite in his harem. Fascinating creature! what a pity he was not born in Turkey!"

Nothing but Helen's indomitable pride enabled her to carry an unblenching front up to the last word spoken in this unlooked-for trial, this unprecedented emergency. Pride was her master-spirit. It had impelled her to the destruction of her earthly happiness as a blind for a slighted, broken heart; had bound her fast to the fulfilment of a rash and sinful vow; it came to her aid now—strengthened her to cast back disdainfully this crowning insult.

"If, as I suppose, this is the climax of your choice observations, sir, I will, with your permission, retire."

She swept him a lofty curtsy in return for his mocking obeisance, and walked erect and haughtily from the room. Once out of his abhorred presence, she quickened her stately gait to a rapid flight, traversed hall and porch, avoiding lighted apartments, gained the little conservatory in the rear of the parlour, shut the door behind her, and sank upon a bench against the wall panting and exhausted.

“Am I going mad? What am I to think? What can I do? God help me in this fearful strait!”

The glimmer of the stars through the glass roof met her agonized upward glance, as the unwonted petition broke from her;—the holy watchers, beyond whose shining bands HE dwelt whom she blindly invoked.

“Of purer eyes than to behold evil!”

The text came unsought to her mind, and the swift inference followed: “Then HE has neither notice nor compassion for me!”

They still beamed mildly, benignantly, upon her—the eternal sentinels of heaven! and she could not withdraw her answering regards. Beneath their pure rays, as under the distilment of refreshing dews, feelings trampled, soiled, and crushed by the fierce rush of earth-born passions, began to revive and lift themselves anew. She had sowed the wind: the whirlwind of humiliation and despair was the legitimate harvest; but her proud spirit prayed in its writhings that she might be spared the direful punishment. Slowly sinking to her knees, she cried out of the depths to the All-merciful, with tears and sighs besought Divine succour and support amid the snares that encompassed her.

“Lead me into a plain path!—however hard and thorny it may be, I will tread it without a murmur! Strengthen me to tell *him* the truth, and then do with me as Thou wilt. Keep far from me all bitter or revengeful thoughts of him—for, oh! am I not the more guilty of the two? Did not my sin of unfaithfulness and deceit precede his?”

She still knelt—still looked upward, in inaudible supplication, accompanied by fast-flowing tears, when the lock of the door, which she thought she had made fast at her entrance, was drawn back, and a figure glided in. The faint starlight revealed enough of the small figure and waxen face to show who was the intruder, if her cousin



had not recognized her by the noiseless grace of her movements. Supposing that she had come on some errand that would not detain her more than a minute, Helen crouched lower to avoid being seen, and waited, with hushed breath, for her departure. Every fibre of her frame thrilled to the low cry of agony that stirred the silence of the place. Lily was standing by the orange-tree, which loomed up a pyramid of dusky white in the darkness; bent over and caressed it as if it were a sentient thing, while sobs, mingled with incoherent lamentations, attested the depths and reality of her sorrow.

Helen never afterwards inhaled the scent of orange-blossoms without a return of the heart-sickness, the deathly faintness of spirit, that came over her in that season of painful irresolution. Lily's heart was breaking,—and *she* stood between her and happiness,—she, with her empty vows and failing resolution! and did not Robert approach the altar with a divided, if not a recreant heart?

“Oh, Helen! if you could only know!” said Lily, with a fresh paroxysm of tears.

In the woman's grief there was still a touch of the child's fretfulness and impatience at being thwarted. Helen seldom denied her any gratification which it was in her power to afford, and this moan appealed to the sympathies of the listener with peculiar and pathetic force. She was the elder of the two—the stronger and wiser;—her own folly and perverseness had brought her trouble upon her; but what had this poor girl done that her life should be blighted?

“She *does* know, my darling!”

Helen put her arm around her neck; would have drawn her to her bosom; spoken words of pity and promise; but at her voice and touch Lily sprang back with a stifled shriek; in her mad alarm, struck at the speaker with all her strength, and sped away like a frightened hare at the sound of the hunter's horn.

The assault took Helen so entirely by surprise that she staggered against the orange-tree and fell to the floor with it. When she regained her feet, she was alone in the darkness. She would not, she could not follow Lily then! Hers was a generous and not implacable disposition, but it was not in it to recover immediately from the indignation awakened by this unfeminine and uncousinly treatment. She had bruised her shoulder against the flower-stand, and her bosom ached intensely from the effects of Lily's blow. She had not meant

to hurt her, Helen knew—perhaps had not recognized the person who accosted her so unexpectedly—but her hand had fallen sharply.

“To-morrow!” Helen promised herself. “By that time she may be ready to listen and I to speak calmly. A night of sober thought will be beneficial to both of us.”

Merriment and gamesome entertainment ran high in the parlour that evening, for the bridesmaids were not without their attendant train of admirers. Yule-log and Christmas jokes and wassail-cup were not wanting to enliven the youthful band, who watched for the first hour of the Advent-day; and no smile was brighter, no voice more ready in laughter and song, no step more elastic in the dance than were Lily Calvert's. Etiquette and inclination for once united in advising that Helen should not appear below, and she had no fear of loneliness. She would be better satisfied if they would leave her to herself.

Lily would have been as extravagantly gay, had her cousin been present in the hilarious gathering, for the blood that never tinged the alabaster skin yet seethed hotly in her veins; rushed, a tumultuous, tide to and from the heart. Says Charlotte Brontë of a certain crisis in her heroine's life—

“It found her despairing—it left her desperate—two evidently different stages of feeling.”

The second and more trying of these, Lily was now learning.  
And thus passed the eve of the wedding-day.





## CHAPTER VIII.

**M**ISS RUTH had slept but indifferently well the night before Christmas. Her maidenly dreams were vexed by images of bridal veils; jellies that poured from the moulds in splashing, insipid liquids, when she would have had them pellucid, flavorful, and firm; torn kid gloves, that could not be mended; burnt and curdled custards; cakes with sticky icing and streaky interiors; pie-crust heavy with rancid butter, or tough as leather for want of the forgotten "shortening;" nuptial benedictions; showers of tears; hailstorms of kisses, congratulatory and confectionery; jumbled into a confusing, distracting medley, that allowed her tortured brain not one hour of natural sleep out of the six she spent in bed.

"Upon my word," said the good soul, when a ray of red light from the coming sun flecked the grey east, and apprised her that the world would soon be awake—"upon my word, I don't believe I could have rested worse if I were expecting to be married myself to-day—and that is saying a good deal!"

By sunrise she was dressed and had mustered her troop of menials. The happy pair were to come home for the second day's feast, the splendour of which was to suffer no diminution by contrast with Mrs. Floyd's wedding-supper. The same company would be present and comparisons were inevitable. The dear woman was brave and confident in view of all this. She had not kept the cleanest house in three counties, and the best table in six, for twenty years, to be appalled by the array of any odds of this kind that could be brought against her—no! no! not by the Floyds themselves, whose profuse hospi-

tality was proverbial. So, buckling on her armour, in the shape of an immense check apron, two breadths wide in the skirt, reaching to the bottom of her dress, and with a broad bib attached, which was pinned up to her double chin, she walked, with her prim but brisk little pace, to her cake-room.

Cake, cake everywhere, and not a faulty crumb in the collection ! Snowballs whose hearts were yellow sponge, and their surfaces white satin ; loaves of " pound," smooth, fluted, and beflowered, conical and hexagon, all rich enough to guarantee, on their own responsibility, a fit of dyspepsia to each rash taster among the expected guests ; silver cake that, when cut and heaped in alternate slices with the gold, should present a pleasing sight to the eye and agreeable associations to the mind of the beholder ; piles of slender " ladies' fingers " and macaroons, cocoa-nut and almond, light as a feather and sweet as sugar ; two immense structures, precisely similar in size and shape, inwardly a toothsome but perilously indigestible conglomeration of currants, raisins, citron, and spices, held together in a not very strong union by a cement of eggs, sugar, and flour, made brittle with butter—externally, twin mountains of snow, wreathed with garlands of the same material as the icing ; and upon the summit of each a pink Cupid—the festoon of roses, his insufficient tunic, offering a self-evident apology for the exaggerated flesh-colour of his cuticle, when the thermometer stood, as it did this morning, at the freezing-point. He trode with one foot upon a pair of hearts, also in sugar, spitted together by a red dart, and his bow was drawn at a venture.

Before these her *chefs-d'œuvre*, being the bride and bridegroom's cakes, and destined to adorn the head and foot of her dessert-table, Miss Ruth paused in full satisfaction, folded her hands upon the check apron, and set her head on one side. A minute elapsed before she spoke or moved ; then she inclined her head towards the other shoulder, gently rubbed her fat palms together, and sighed, in sublime content—

" YES ! "

A shout of laughter from the open door behind her answered. Her nephews, both early abroad on this morning, had encountered each other in the passage leading past the apartment devoted, for the time, to the genius who presides over " good things," and stopped

simultaneously to inspect the array and the chief-priestess of the temple.

"Yes!" repeated Aunt Ruth, in an altered tone, a blush creeping up to her cap-border.

The "particle," as first enunciated, denoted the height of mortal complacency: now it signified—"I know you wicked boys are making fun of me, but I don't care! I am strong in the consciousness of merit."

They came in—Robert foremost—still laughing.

"Aunty, do you mean that Mrs. Lay, who-is-tobe, is to live by cake alone throughout the honeymoon? That would be rather too impressive an illustration of the saying, 'Sweets to the sweet!' Hey, Aleck?"

Aleck smiled but somewhat constrainedly.

"I believe that caged humming-birds are usually fed upon honey-paste, as the diet best suited to their constitutions and tastes, while in a state of bondage. Aunt Ruth, you have excelled yourself! I can say nothing more complimentary!"

"Wait until you see the jellies, blanc-manges, charlottes, and ice-creams!" replied the housewife, in pardonable vanity. "Or, rather, until you *taste* them! My good things are not show-pieces, fancy articles, to please the eye only, as you'll find out, Robert, when you eat your second day's dinner and supper."

"I do not feel, just now, as if I should ever care to eat another mouthful," said the groom expectant, with a slight grimace. "I was scared with visions last night; tormented by all sorts of hobgoblins, and am appetiteless this morning."

"Yes!" retorted Aunt Ruth, slyly.

"I suppose that it is a common symptom in the circumstances!" answered Robert, colouring a little, "but I had not expected to feel exactly as I do on this, my wedding-day."

"The smell of the cake is sickening to an empty stomach!" said Aleck, retreating towards the door. "I don't see how you can endure it, Aunt Ruth."

Robert overtook him upon the piazza.

"You look pale, Al!" he remarked, linking his arm in his brother's, and falling into step with him, in his hurried walk up and down the long porch. "I wish that I could attribute my uncomfor-

table sensations to bodily ailment! It may sound ungallant, unloverlike, and pusillanimous, but I must confess that I could, without great repugnance, cast my vote for a postponement of the 'happy occasion,' ardently as I have desired its coming, from the earliest hour of my engagement. I wish it were all over! I grow positively nervous and tremulous in the anticipation."

His laugh did indeed shake, and his complexion, usually clear and sanguine, took a cadaverous tinge.

Aleck gnawed his moustache—a fierce, restless movement he strove to conceal by passing his hand over his mouth.

"I suppose," he said, presently, "that, as Aunt Ruth intimated, this species of stage-fright frequently seizes upon men in your position, and that persons of your temperament are peculiarly liable to fall victims to it."

The latter clause was added involuntarily, as it were, and Robert flushed up at the latent touch of meaning in the accent.

"It is sheer nervousness—nothing else!" he returned, eagerly—"induced, I verily believe, by the ugly dreams that beset my pillow all night. One vision haunts me wherever I look. I thought that I sat by Helen, holding her hand, and talking earnestly and happily of the life upon which we were about entering, when, all at once, she started up and confronted me, and I saw, instead of her features—ugh! I will not tell you of the horrid sight! Yet I dreamed this three times, and awoke half dead with fright."

"You had the night-mare. The sights and smells of hot sweets that have hung about the premises lately have been enough to give any one dyspeptic visions. Do not dwell upon such fancies! You are but deepening impressions unsuited to your real feelings and the actual event before you. What a splendid day!"

"Is it not?" With his accustomed elasticity of mood Robert welcomed the change of theme. "Happy the bride that the sun shines on! May this bright Christmas morning be an augury of good to her! I shall try to make her happy! If zealous endeavour and ardent desire of mine can do this, she will never have cause for sorrow. Yet I have not been without my doubts on this head."

Aleck made no reply, and they took several turns in their promenade before the other resumed:

"She is a singular girl—a woman of marked character, and I

have often feared, recently, that we did not quite understand one another; asked myself if we ever would attain to that perfection of mutual confidence that constitutes so large a proportion of the happiness of the true marriage. There seems to be a background of motive and feeling to which I am denied admittance. Yet I do love her! I have loved her from the time when we were happy children together, we three, and—Lily Calvert!”

There was a slight hesitancy in his pronounciation of the last name, and Aleck's eyes fell quickly—burningly—on the speaker's countenance.

“Is she the cause of the misunderstanding you deplore?” he asked, sternly.

“Partly—and yet, no! You wrong poor Lily, Aleck, and I fear that Helen does also. I know the child better than either of you can do. There are many allowances to be made for her.”

“You make many, I see! But we will not revive that subject on this day, of all others. A year hence these trivial differences of opinion and feeling between us will be forgotten, will have died a natural death and be buried without parade. And sooner still will fade into empty air the imaginary want of confidence and congeniality between your wife and yourself.”

“You are the prince of prophets—the king of seers! Away with bugbears and dreams! *Vive l'amour!*” called out Robert, swinging his hat around his head, while the early sunshine wove of his fair hair a glittering crown.

Aleck looked at him with a loving, aching heart.

“You are a handsome fellow, Robert; I do not wonder all the girls fall in love with you!”

“Nonsense! You are the right sort of man to play the deuce with the softer sex! tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and ‘bearded like the pard’—‘grand, gloomy, and peculiar,’ as that rattle, Virginia Shore, called you in my hearing one day. I have said to Helen several times that it was strange she had not taken you instead of me. You would have made a splendid couple!”

“Don't, Robert! it is both wrong and foolish to run on in that strain,” said Aleck, in grave, sad rebuke. “I cannot understand how you bring yourself to jest upon such a theme—how you endure the imagination of resigning her you love to another.”

"Because it is an imagination, and nothing else! What a glorious day! Did you ever breathe such invigorating air before—ever see such sunlight? Every beam is clarified to diamond purity and lustre. 'Happy the bride that the sun shines on!' I say again. What is the corresponding adage? There is one, isn't there?"

"'Blessed the corpse that the rain falls upon,' I believe," responded his brother. "It runs somewhat after that fashion."

"For pity's sake, man, keep your death's heads out of sight, when you can!" Robert exclaimed, half angrily. "I had a surfeit of them last night. What have they to do with daylight and bridals, I should like to know? But isn't that Gabriel trotting down the road? I hope nothing has gone wrong at Belleview."

They walked out to the gate to meet the Cimmerian Mercury. His grin and bow in nearing them, his saucily-deferential "Christmas gift, my marsters!" dispelled whatever anxiety either might have experienced as to any outward calamity in his master's household.

"All well, Mars' Robert," he replied to the inquiry after the health of the family. "I've brung a note for you, sur."

Aleck turned to go back to the house as this was presented, but, against his will, his falcon eye saw the address before he wheeled—so carelessly was the transfer from one hand to the other performed. The billet was directed to "Mr. Robert C. Lay, Greenfield—*In haste*," and the chirography resembled Lily's, he thought. It was assuredly not Helen's. He had paced the porch for perhaps fifteen minutes when Robert joined him. Aleck had seen him scribble something with a pencil upon a scrap of paper, using the gate-post for a desk, fold it, and give it to the messenger—Gabriel, meanwhile, sitting still upon his horse and eyeing the operation, from under the brim of his old felt hat, with intense interest. When he had deposited the reply in the crown of the said head-covering, he set off on a gallop in the direction of home. Then the bridegroom came slowly up the walk, wearing a very unbridegroomlike aspect, re-reading the gilt-edged sheet. He thrust it into his vest-pocket as he reached the steps, mounted them, and continued the exercise the boy had interrupted. He volunteered no explanation of what Aleck had seen and overheard, although he looked worried and perplexed, and sighed repeatedly, in deep thought or sadness.

Finally, when the breakfast-bell ended their matutinal stroll, and



disturbed his reverie, he said, with an appearance of frankness, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder,—

"I am ready to acknowledge that you know my weak points better than I do myself, Al! I wish I were more like you in certain respects."

"You have chosen a sorry exemplar!" replied the other. "Act out what conscience and honour dictate, Robin, and you cannot go wrong."

"Is the voice of feeling then to be wholly disregarded?" asked Robert, looking down.

"If it militates against the other and surer monitors—yes—a thousand times, yes!" said Aleck, emphatically.

And, "Ah! brother mine! we are made of different stuff! where you would be adamant, I am very soft wax—a fickle, cowardly dog!" ended the dialogue, for Aunt Ruth, to whom every minute of daylight was now precious, appeared in the house door to expedite their progress to the dining-room.

Robert had, as he had said, little or no appetite for food, but he either was, or feigned to be, in finer spirits than he had been able to summon, an hour previous. He rallied Miss Ruth upon her household arrangements; prophesying all manner of failures in the delicate and critical manufactures that yet remained to be perfected; teased her about an antiquated bachelor planter, a former beau of hers, who had, he affirmed, been fitted by a Baltimore tailor with a bran-new suit of clothes, to be sported that night, in the hope of tempting her to a reconsideration of the discard she had given him twenty-five years ago; condoled with his brother, because of the probable state of utter isolation that menaced him in his sojourn at Maple Hill, in view of his housekeeper's defection and desertion; inquired gravely from whose establishment the marriage would take place, and warmly advocated the claims of Greenfield to that honour; in fine, conducted himself in such a wild, inconvenient manner, that his aunt was heartily rejoiced when he obeyed her commands and quitted the table.

Aleck met him soon afterwards on the stairs, equipped for a ride.

"You allow yourself ample time for your jaunt!" observed the elder brother, taking out his watch. "I meant to ride with you so far as our way remained the same, but I have not ordered my horse yet."

"You are very kind, and I should like to have your company, but I am in a hurry," said Robert, pulling on a tight new buckskin glove, and studiously avoiding Aleck's eye.

"It is but half-past nine, and I understood you to say that you were to meet Colonel Floyd at the clerk's office by eleven."

"Oh! for that matter, twelve would do as well as eleven if the colonel is faithful to his practice of unpunctuality," replied Robert, with an indifferent effort to speak gaily. "But the truth is, that I have another engagement at ten—one that I ought not to put off. I dare say you might not deem it obligatory upon yourself to keep it, you are such a stone pillar in firmness and fixity, when you will it to be so. I ought not to say more to you about this, much as I would like to make a clean breast to my father-confessor. I believe you never unwarily get yourself into a scrape. I do! and I am afraid I have done it now. Don't look as if you thought me the worst fellow living, please! Be as charitable to me as you can, old boy! If the right time ever comes while you and I are in the flesh, I may explain matters more to your satisfaction than now seems credible to you. Good-by!"

Could the loving kinsman ever judge harshly of him, while the image of that face, with its sweet smile and ingenuous eyes, remained stamped upon the mind's retina?—so long as the pleading tones, gentle and fond, yet not free from mournfulness, continued to sound in his ears? Adamantine pillar though his brother regarded him, Aleck would, if questioned thus at that moment, have replied indignantly in the negative.

"Robert!" called Miss Ruth, hearing the ring of his iron heel upon the frozen walk outside of the window of the pantry, where she was up to her ears—figuratively speaking—in calves'-foot jelly.

She threw up the sash, and he leaned upon the sill.

"Where are you going?" inquired the aunt, without suspending her occupation of whipping into aggravated pallor and foam the whites of a dozen eggs she had just broken into a dish upon the table.

"To the Court House."

"To get your licence?"

"Even so. You are a very Yankee at guessing."

"You have put it off long enough."

"Maybe I feared that we might change our minds at the last moment. 'There's many a slip'—you recollect!"

"Yes!" intensely ironical.

"You need not speak as if that were impossible in this case. There is nothing certain in this world."

"Except death," said Aunt Ruth, solemnly oracular—feeling herself in duty bound not to omit an opportunity for dropping in a seed of exhortation.

"And taxes," added Robert. "But I shall not believe that I am really going to commit matrimony until I find myself face to face with the parson. Aunty, you are looking divinely to-day! Have you no bowels of mercy, that you can coolly contemplate the certainty of driving old Gales to desperation by the spectacle of your unapproachable charms?"

"Yes!" sneered Miss Massie, in lofty incredulity; but the wintry bloom deepened in her plump cheeks, and the egg-whisk flew like lightning through the thickening froth.

"I never was more in earnest in my life!" pursued the nephew. "Look at me, as at an imperfect illustration of what his deplorable condition will be. Don't you see that I cannot tear myself from the survey of so much loveliness?"

Miss Ruth set down the dish, and picked up a switch from a bundle that lay near, to furnish rods for beating trifles and creams. Robert dodged the blow—not a heavy one, it must be owned.

"Cruel creature! is this the treatment which all your admirers are to receive?" he complained, at a safe distance. "Alas, for Gales's new broadcloth!"

"When are you coming home?" inquired his aunt, dignifiedly. She would have no more of this foolery. "Mind—we must have an early dinner—at two o'clock, anyhow! There's a world of work to be done yet, and I can't be bothered with waiting for you boys. Aleck is always up to time, and if you *are* in love, I want you to remember old habits for this once."

"I cannot promise! My present expectation is to get back in decent season for the ceremony to-night. If any thing should happen to detain me beyond the hour, you and old Gales must be spliced in our stead—*pro bono publico*—which means for the satisfaction of your neighbours. It would never do to cheat the company out of the

show they have assembled to behold. They might search far and near, without finding a more seraphic bride than you will make. Only—you ought to wear that bib-apron and enchanting cap, and go bare-armed, as you are now."

A pelting rain of empty egg-shells upon his head and shoulders admonished him to retreat, which he did, reeling with laughter, and glancing over his shoulder at Aleck, who had remained upon the end of the piazza—a spectator of the spirited scene. How handsome and light-hearted he looked! Cravens and traitors never wore such innocent and joyous mien!

"He may be misguided by judgment, unduly swayed by his pliable temper and tenderness of heart, but he can never be guilty of actual and deliberate wrong!" was Aleck's conclusion.

"That boy will plague the life out of me yet!" said Miss Ruth, in a tone intended to counterfeit peevishness. "I don't know what has got into him this morning. It's a bad sign for a bird to sing before breakfast; the cat will catch him before night—and Robert has begun the day in too great glee. I just hope he mayn't change his tune before sundown—that's all!"

"It is not likely that he will!" returned Aleck, soberly. "Gaiety is natural to him, and if ever man had an excuse for exuberance of spirit, he has. I am going over to Maple Hill presently, aunt. Can I do anything for you there, or on the way?"

"No, dear!" She petted her favourite "boy" more than ever now-a-days, from some indefinable maternal instinct that told her he stood in need of love and sympathy. "But I would like to have you come home by two o'clock, if you can conveniently."

Her manner of suggesting the wish was very unlike the imperious style in which she had laid down the law to Robert.

"Do not wait for me! If I dine here I shall return by that hour."

"You ought not to go at all, I think. You are looking badly. Come back early, and take a nap this afternoon. This evening's work will be no trifle to you, seeing you are first groomsman and Robert's brother."

"You are very thoughtful, but I hope that I have strength to do and bear all that lies before me," responded Aleck, walking away.

He nor she dreamed what unforeseen exigencies the evening would bring.



## CHAPTER IX.

**I**T was not often that Aleck Lay's eyes played him false; yet, notwithstanding their evidence in this case, Gabriel was Helen's messenger. She had arisen early on her wedding-morn—before the herald ray that ended Aunt Ruth's uneasy slumbers pierced the darkness of the night—and committed to paper the substance of a confession composed during the many sleepless hours she had consumed in prayer and thought. She no longer withheld from her intended husband the secret of her prior attachment, while she sedulously concealed the name of the one she had loved, and all circumstances that might assist in leading Robert to a correct surmise as to his identity with his brother. She had suffered an early disappointment, she said; one that had, she was sometimes led to fear, deprived her of the power of ever loving again with equal fervour. While smarting under this blow, she had precipitately and wickedly received his attentions, and entered into the engagement of marriage now existing between them.

“I beg that you will acquit me of having, in this transaction—culpable as it was—been guilty of wilful wrong to you,” she wrote, in continuation. “I was persuaded, when I promised you my hand, as I am now, that I could give you all the heart I have left to bestow upon any man. I love you sincerely, appreciatively, as a friend who is nearer to me even than a brother could be. I can pledge you my faith without a sigh for a happier lot; can take honestly upon me the vows of wedded fidelity. It will cost me no struggle to love, honour, and obey one whom I know to be in all respects, worthy of my affection and duty.

“Yet before we set the indissoluble seal to a contract that death only can render void, it is best, for both our sakes, that the work of self-examination should be severe and thorough, and its result undisguised from each other. I have unveiled my past history—the saddest chapter of my life—to you, and I have surely a right to expect, if not to demand, a corresponding degree of candour in you. Robert! I charge you by every principle of truth, honour, and manliness, to answer me plainly one question—*Do you love Lily Calvert?* I do not inquire if your conduct to her has been, in every respect, consistent with your engagements to myself; if you have ever given her cause to believe that your attachment for her transcended that which her old playfellow and friend might innocently indulge and manifest. I look deeper; appeal solemnly to the innermost depths of your own consciousness—depths unknown save to yourself and your God. Marriage is a momentous step. I have felt this within the past twelve hours as I never thought to do. I beseech you to give the subject your most earnest consideration. If, as I apprehend, from my knowledge of facts connected with your intercourse with Lily, and my acquaintance with both your characters, you decide that your sentiments for her are more like those a husband should have for his wife than the love you bear me,—your way and mine are plain. Do not act unfairly to yourself and to me,—cruelly to her, from the consideration that you have gone too far to retrace your course with honour. I have excellent reasons for believing that Colonel Floyd is already cognizant of your affection for his niece, and that your union with her would be far more acceptable to him than the one you at present contemplate.

“This is my proposition, if the result of your deliberation should be what I expect. Write me a line by the bearer of this, advising me of your purpose: then ride over to see Lily, this morning. Ask boldly for her, and if you gain her consent to the course we have concluded to adopt, afterwards keep your appointment with Colonel Floyd, and have the license filled up with your name and hers. I know what I say when I assert that there is no likelihood of your meeting impediments in your path. Even if you should, it is the right one—the only plan you can with rectitude pursue. This done, commit the rest to me. You have often praised my daring and self-possession, and I engage to afford you, in this instance, a notable

display of both qualities. Instead of frowns you shall meet nothing but smiles from the witnesses of your marriage ceremony; congratulations upon the cleverness of the *ruse* that has deluded the community into the belief that you were betrothed to one cousin, while you were really, with her knowledge and approbation, plighted to the other. I am aware that this looks like a bold scheme, and that my programme of arrangements is unprecedented in the chronicles of courtship; but, Robert, dear friend! we have had enough of half-confidences and harrowing misunderstandings. Let us, at the very base of the altar, throw off the mask of unworthy deception, that must work out a weary weight of misery to us in the end, and appear in our real characters—dare to tell the truth, and the whole truth! I plead for Lily's sake no less than for ours.

"But if, after all, my misgivings have been groundless, my penetration at fault with respect to your feelings in this affair; if you are still prepared to attest your love for me by marrying me, I stand ready and willing to fulfil my part of our agreement. A line or word sent by Gabriel to the effect that 'all is right' will suffice to convey your intention to me. Since I have confided to no one the step I have resolved to take in the writing of this note, there need be no inconvenient explanations. Matters can go on in their present train, and I shall expect you at the appointed hour. I leave the decision with you. It will be fraught with important consequences to us, and I pray—if indeed my unworthy petitions ever reach Heaven—that you may be guided aright. Whatever your determination may be, believe that I must ever remain

"Yours affectionately and truly,

"HELEN."

If this novel epistle strike somewhat too boldly at the root of established prejudices and precedent in love and match-making, the shocked reader will please bear in mind that the writer was, as her betrothed had affirmed, "a singular girl—a woman of marked character." This was further demonstrated by the exclamation with which she arose from her writing table, when the departing footsteps of her post-boy had died away in the corridor.

"Now, whatever comes, I can respect myself once more!"

She had borrowed Gabriel privately from her aunt—an accom-

modation arranged between them the preceding evening—and to secure secrecy on the subject of his errand, rather than to enjoin him to the needful exercise of faithfulness and despatch, she had him summoned to her chamber and herself gave him his orders. The imp was agog with anticipations of “Christmas times,” including the wedding, and Helen contributed further to his exhilaration by a bountiful douceur in honour of the day he was prepared to celebrate. But he hearkened with a tolerable semblance of decorous seriousness to her instructions, received the packet, and buttoned it with exceeding care inside his roundabout, and pledged himself to inviolable discretion. He was very fond of Helen, whose steady favour and kindness were in grateful contrast to Mrs. Floyd’s fidgetiness, her lord’s harshness, and Lily’s caprices. His young mistress did not doubt that she could rely upon him in a matter requiring so much zeal and intelligence.

She enacted her part well at breakfast-time; was not only collected and cheerful in deportment, but vivacious in talk, with sprightliness more real in appearance than was Lily’s factitious animation. The latter came down late, as she generally did, and, Helen fancied, avoided her cousin markedly and coldly.

“By-and-by,” was the elder’s consolation, “I may be permitted to tell her all, and she will do my affection justice. Until then, the less we say to one another the better. I will not rush into temptation, and I must await *his* warrant for speech.”

Altogether, it was a merry party, with the exception of Colonel Floyd, whose settled moroseness did not affect them long, since he ate little, and withdrew from the table before any one else was half through the meal. The bride’s room was the popular resort of the young ladies during the day, and Helen could not, without positive rudeness, seclude herself for thought or preparation. The gentlemen wisely dispersed to parts unknown directly after breakfast, most of them not showing themselves again until evening.

Helen was affecting to attend to and bear a part in the frivolous chit-chat rung into her nervous ears by the knot of idle pleasure-lovers about her, when Sally opened the door just wide enough to allow her mistress a glimpse of her face, and made her signal, unobserved by the others. Helen felt the blood curdle suddenly about her heart, and numbness seize upon her limbs, at the apparition for



which she had watched so long. The sign notified her of Gabriel's return. With an unintelligible murmur, intended as an apology to her associates for leaving them, she walked tottering into the entry, where she found her messenger. It did not occur to her then that he looked or acted unlike himself, although his cowed, sulky behaviour produced an unfavourable impression upon Sally, who was interrogating him with considerable asperity as to the causes of his dilatoriness.

"You stopped to play 'long the road, I'll be bound!" she was saying when Helen emerged from her chamber, "or, you went out of your way to go by the Court House. That's always the way with you good-for-nothing chaps. So sure as you get a cent to spend, you're crazy till it's gone."

"That will do, Sally!" interposed, Helen faintly. "Did you deliver that letter safely, Gabriel?"

"Yes, ma'am!" dropping his head, with a hangdog expression, altogether unlike his accustomed pertness.

"And you have an answer for me?"

"No, ma'am. He say dere was none, and tole me jes' fur to tell you dat all was right," answered the page, mustering his briskness, but forlornly enough.

"You are sure! Have you made no mistake? Had you that message from Mr. Lay himself?" pressed Helen, in the earnestness of the dying hope whose existence she had not confessed to herself until this instant.

Annoyed or nerved to boldness by the implied doubt of the accuracy of his report, Gabriel looked up straight at her—an exhibition of courage or forwardness bordering upon effrontery.

"I done tell you de 'xact truth, Miss Helen! He say as how you'd onderstand it, and I must be pertickler to 'peat it jes' as he said it, and I s'posed *you* would be satisfied ef he was!"

"You disrespectful little vilyan!" exclaimed Sally, lending him a cuff upon the ear. "Do you know who you're talkin' to?"

"You lemme 'lone, now! you'd better!" growled the unlucky urchin, doubling up his fists. "I won't be blaggarded by women, and black ones, at dat, nohow!"

"Shame!" Helen's native dignity was aroused at the disgraceful altercation. "You both forget where you are! I am ashamed of

you! Gabriel! go downstairs directly. Sally, I forbid you to speak to him again this day!"

Gabriel was too glad to slink away, wiping his eyes and nose upon his jacket-sleeve; but Sally stopped her mistress, who would have passed her by in offended silence.

"If you please, Miss Helen, I'm very sorry I've displeased you 'pon your weddin'-day, but I mistrusted that boy had been up to some mischief, and maybe lost your letter or the answer—he looked so kind o' guilty, and I spoke sharp to him before I remembered myself—"

"Never mind, my good girl!" Helen interrupted the excuse, that was fast becoming a tearful one. "I know you meant it for the best. We are all apt to act hastily and foolishly sometimes, and as you have said, it is my wedding-day, and I ought to overlook trifles."

Her smile was positively ghastly as she repeated, musingly,

"Yes! it is my wedding-day! There is no doubt of it now—none! none!"

She walked slowly away to the other extremity of the hall; halted by a window, and seemed to look out.

"It is a beautiful day!" she said at length, less dreamily. "I think, Sally, that I should enjoy one more good, long lonely walk in the woods. Will you bring me my hood and cloak? and take care that nobody sees you! I do not feel like having company."

She succeeded in escaping from the house and yard without being challenged, and took the beaten path to the spring. At the rocky seat beside it she paused a long while, remembering what was buried beneath the rugged tomb, and the binding words—more binding now than ever—so soon to be irrevocable—that had been spoken above it—"Until Death parts us!" Then, stooping and pressing her hand, as in caressing farewell, upon the rough, grey surface, she said firmly—"Let the dead Past bury its dead!" and ascended the wooded eminence beyond.

She stopped again when she reached the great oak where she and Robert had held their "business talk" on that moonlight November night. The first shadow of estrangement had fallen upon them then and there. It was all her fault that the cloud arose—since, while she was striving to act up to the strict requirements of the duty she owed him, her heart was in wild, almost unconquerable revolt.

"No wonder that he was chilled and repelled! no wonder that I have absolutely driven him from me scores of times since then; forced him to seek consolation in another's sympathy, if not happiness in another's love! But we understand each other now—quite well! With our eyes open to the truth, each knowing the other's peculiar temptation, we are ready to write hands and lives, 'for better, for worse.' Heaven helping me, I shall try to please him in all things; to make him content, that he may not repent his choice!"

How vividly every incident of that evening stroll was stamped upon her memory! even Sally's sleepy approach, and the reason she had given her mistress, subsequently, for her interruption of the lover's conversation, were not forgotten. The fugitive Lem had never been recovered, but the dread of runaways, so common among women and children of the Slaveholding States—the bugaboos of nursery and fireside tales—had never had a hold upon Helen's mind. What she most feared just now was the society of her fellows; what she sought, in her feverish restlessness of body and spirit, was solitude for reflection—and to gain it she plunged more deeply into the trackless forest. The ravines, whose moss-grown depths and sides thickly fringed with brushwood, afforded cool and tempting retreats in the summer's heat, offered, at this season, warmer nooks than were to be found upon higher ground. At the distance of nearly half a mile from the spring, Helen espied a resting-place that suited her fancy and purpose. Letting herself down a steep bank, overhung by dwarf cedars, she gained a white stone deeply embedded in moss and fallen leaves—and, although but a few feet above the frozen rivulet that had worn the chasm to its great depth, forming a dry and comfortable seat. It had been one of her girlhood's tricks to seek out such nooks and take possession of them while she read, studied, or dreamed, as her mood disposed her to do.

She was not studying or dreaming now, she would have said, yet she had matter for thought that kept her there a long while—how long, she never exactly knew. She sat motionless as the stone itself, leaning listlessly against the stout cedar clump that kept off the wind, if there were any stirring. There were not many, and they were exceedingly trivial occurrences, to diversify the monotonous passage of the hours or minutes, whichever they were. A torpor of misery had

complete mastery over her ; and, with a dull consciousness that after this woesome day it would be a crime to yield to its desolate entrancement, she was passive, and let the gloomy spell work unchecked. The penitence and higher resolve of the preceding night were recalled in stupid marvel how she happened to feel thus—what power supported her then, and bore her thoughts and aspirations into a purer, nobler sphere. She could not pray or determine now. She had expended her energy in penning that useless, may-be worse than useless letter, which Robert had not deemed worthy of a line of reply. The die was cast by another's hand, and she must abide by the throw. Ah, well ! what was easier, in the abstract, than to do nothing ? How arduous she found the practice of quiescence, concerned nobody except herself.

A few winter birds hopped from bough to bough of the cedars, in quest of the blueberries that grew thereupon. She smiled vacantly in perceiving that they were not scared at seeing her. Perhaps their bright eyes were too intent upon their search for food to observe the presence of the intruder, for her green cloak and hood offered no striking contrast to the dark verdure of the evergreens. Once she heard a gun—not very far away it seemed in the still, clear day—but the report did not startle her—only as it served to awaken more poignant reminiscences than those upon which she was meditating when the sharp echo rolled through the leafless woods, was caught and repeated by the ravines, and died away sullenly among the distant hills. Did Aleck ever think of her last hunt ? of the watch she had kept beside him in the Greenfield woodlands ? Was the scar yet upon his shoulder ? What a cruel wound it was ! how fast the blood trickled through her fingers as she renewed the compress Robert had applied, when it became deranged by the incautious movement of the injured lad ! Had he forgotten all these things ? Did he hate and despise her when he looked at the mark left by the shot ?

She wished at times that he did hate her, and that she knew, for certain, that he felt this aversion. Any active sentiment would be preferable to his unvarying coldness, his studied civility, his constrained address.

“How little I imagined in the dear old times—” She did not finish the sentence, but a single tear forced its way from under the lid, and dropped upon her hand. She shed but that one.

Again, a crow sailed slowly between her and the sun, and the shadow crossing the gully, made her look up. He uttered a hoarse croak, just as the shade of his black pinions fell upon her brow.

“A bird of ill-omen!” she thought, languidly. “Portents cannot terrify me now! I am like the man upon the wheel, to whom has been mercifully dealt the *coup de grace* as the first blow!”

Awhile later, she did not trouble herself to think or care how long afterwards, there arrived another interruption to the sluggish currents of idea. This was the tramp of a horse’s hoofs, breaking the dry sticks, and rustling the dead leaves that strewed the ground under the trees.

“It will be time enough to move, or take flight, when I am seen,” was her reflection; and her indolence or listlessness prompted her to the wisest plan for avoiding discovery.

The rider was forcing his way through the undergrowth, there being not even a bridle-path in that part of the forest. It could not be the hunter, whose gun she had heard, for the Belleview lands were posted, and no sportsman in the neighbourhood was so reckless or intrepid as to trespass upon a domain guarded by the law and a master like the proprietor of this plantation. It must be Colonel Floyd himself or his coloured overseer, or, possibly, some other negro belonging to the estate, taking a near cut to the house from the main road. Yet this would be an unusual procedure. In spiritless curiosity, she leaned slightly to one side, where a gap in the bushes promised a sight of the equestrian. It was but a glimpse, and an imperfect one, which she obtained, the head and neck of the horse and the upper part of the rider’s body only being visible above the high bank. The animal stepped proudly, and manifested some symptoms of restiveness, curveting in such a style as to elicit a sharp reprimand from the man who bestrode him.

“Go on, you fool!” he said, angrily.

It seemed that a prick of the spur or a cut from a whip followed, for the mettled creature gave a forward spring and a neigh of pain or viciousness. The human brute was Booker, Colonel Floyd’s confidential agent. He was looking right ahead, and was, moreover, too busy with his ill-mannered steed to notice her. She was glad of this, for his intolerable surveillance, and reports based upon it, were not

confined to the cases of his fellow-servants, as Mrs. Floyd, his nominal mistress, had occasionally learned to her sorrow, after having covertly transgressed some of the bye-laws her lord had seen fit, in his sovereign pleasure, to enact for the government of the household. Helen disliked the man with a heartiness she took no pains to dissemble, and, crafty as he was, he had contrived to express to her, at seasonable opportunities, his reciprocation of the antipathy. It was very fortunate that he had not descried her, hiding like a lost or fugitive thing in that out-of-the-way spot, where no other lady of the family or region would ever think of coming. Her guardian would otherwise have been supplied with a subject for sneering ridicule which he would have improved to the utmost advantage, and whenever she least desired its introduction. She waited, therefore, where she was, until there was no longer any danger of encountering the spy in his forest-beat, or of falling in with one she cared still less to face, Colonel Floyd. Like hunter and hound, they were seldom far apart in their business rounds, by day or by night.

Stiff and chill, from having sat for such a length of time upon the ground, she arose with difficulty, climbed the precipitous side of the ravine; listened for a moment, to make sure that the way was clear, and set out for home. When free of the woods, she was surprised to see that the sun had passed the meridian. Mrs. Floyd, like Miss Ruth, had ordered an early dinner, and Helen was not so careless of what gossiping tongues might say, as wilfully to provoke the hubbub of inquiries and teasing observations to which she would be subjected, should she be missing from the table and the house, when the rest were summoned to that repast.

She found Gabriel at the spring, leisurely filling a pail with a gourd.

"Is dinner nearly ready?" she asked.

He jumped up, letting go the gourd, and it splashed back into the spring.

"Oh, is dat you, Miss Helen? How you skeered me!"

She repeated her question.

"No, ma'am, not as I knows on; leastways, marster ain't come home, nohow!"

He raised the pail to his head in a mighty hurry, and began his journey up the acclivity towards the house.

"Has anybody called to see me since I went out?" Helen quickened her pace to overtake him.

"No, ma'am," walking yet faster.

"And no letter or message sent that you have heard of?"

"None as I've heard on, ma'am!" puffing onwards, the water dashing in great streams from the brimming vessel, down upon his shoulders and sooty physiognomy.

"There is no need of such haste, Gabriel!" said Helen, smiling, in spite of her heavy heart, at this ostentatious celerity in one who had the reputation of being the laziest fellow on the place. "I may not have another opportunity of speaking with you alone."

Gabriel was almost running now, but she kept up with him.

"I want to tell you how sorry poor Sally is for her unkindness to you this morning, and how much I blame her for it. She is disposed to be hasty, but she is a good-hearted girl, and likes you. I do not want you to bear a grudge against her or me when we are gone. You have done me many friendly turns, for which I shall always be thankful, and if at any time I can be of service to you, you must not be afraid to apply to me. Oh! Gabriel! stop! I am out of breath!"

Thus adjured, the hurrying Aquarius stood still in his tracks; but, instead of facing her in respectful attention, he made a feint at digging out his eyes with his wet knuckles, and burst out crying.

"Why, my boy! what ails you?" inquired the young lady, in amazement. "Are you sorry that I am going away?"

"No-o-o, ma'am!"

"Indeed! I had hoped that you were!" returned Helen, laughingly. "What, then, is the matter?"

"I don't mean I ain't sorry! Boo-hoo!"

Rivulets of salt water mixed themselves with the fresh upon his shining cheeks.

"You scoundrel! what are you fooling there about?" roared a voice from the houseyard, now only some twenty feet distant.

"My gracious! if thar ain't marster!" exclaimed the frightened boy, and he resumed his laboured flight along the path, breathless under his burden, and palpitating with fear.

He was not disappointed in the reception he met. Colonel Floyd waited for him at the gate; bestowed a curse and several blows of

his riding whip upon him as he passed through ; then glowered at his wife's niece, as if anathematizing the accident of sex that prevented him from saluting her in like manner.

"So, my young lady, this is the company you select upon your wedding-day !" he snarled. "I hope his conversation has edified you !"

Without deigning a reply, she trod past him with her queen-like, elastic step ; not hurriedly, but as if she had not seen or heard him.

"You still expect your gallant to-night, do you ?" he followed her to say.

"Are you speaking to me, or to Gabriel, Colonel Floyd ?" she interrogated, casting a side ray of supreme disdain at him.

His complexion had a purplish flush ; his eyes a wild, unsettled glare ; his articulation was thick and tremulous.

"He has been drinking !" thought his ward, in disgust. "I may steel myself for any amount of insult."

"I am talking to you ! You are hoping to welcome your devoted in season for the ceremony, are you ?"

"If you mean Mr. Lay, I expect him certainly !" walking on.

"He was in no haste to procure his license," her tormentor continued, still at her heels. "I waited for him a good hour and a half."

"You will oblige me, Colonel Floyd, by never opening your lips to me again with respect to the matter officiously brought forward by you last night !" returned Helen, confronting him courageously, and speaking with authority. "I wish you to understand distinctly, now and for ever, that there is a complete understanding between Mr. Lay and myself, upon this and every other subject. Your interference is impertinent and unwelcome. I trust that I have made my meaning sufficiently intelligible. Mr. Lay is competent to the management of his own affairs and mine also."

She went into the house, without staying to witness the effect of her declaration of independence.

Virginia Shore assailed her in the lower hall.

"Helen Gardner ! you strange, mysterious, provoking girl ! where in the name of common sense, and everything else that is reasonable, have you been traipsing to ? Here is the day two-thirds gone, and



not an individual thing done. And don't you think ? something or somebody upset Lily's elegant orange-tree last night, and snapped ever so many of the finest branches ; so we girls have been busy gathering the flowers from them, and putting them in water ; and isn't it a mercy they were so little withered, and are reviving beautifully ; and we find there are enough to distribute among all seven bouquets, unless you are bent upon having yours composed altogether of orange-blossoms, which isn't in the least necessary, it seems to me, for there are white rosebuds, and candytuft, and featherfew, and a lovely camellia, if you must have all white flowers, as I suppose you will, and geraniums and arbor-vitæ for greens ; then, too, I am certain that Mr. Lay will send your bouquet from Greenfield ; he hinted something of the kind to me—and, would you believe it ? there's Lily gone to bed with a bad sick headache—she always picks the most inconvenient season to have them ! and won't let a soul of us come near her room, and Mrs. Floyd is afraid she won't be able to be down to-night ; says she has fever and all that ; and, in that case, what will you do for a first bridesmaid ? Dear me ! what unlucky things do happen at weddings some times ! ”

This breathless string of talk was rattled out while pursuing Helen upstairs to the chamber of the latter, where Miss Shore threw herself into a chair and declared that she was “ fagged out—half dead, in fact ! ”

“ I am sorry to hear that Lily is sick ! ” was Helen's reply, while Sally divested her of her cloak and walking-shoes. “ She appeared quite well at breakfast time, I thought. I am afraid that she has over-exerted herself.”

“ Between you and me, she has fretted herself sick—if she *is* sick—about the accident in the green-house—if it *was* an accident ! ” said Virginia, knowingly. “ You never saw such a look as went over her face when she heard of it. I found it out just after you took such very cool French leave of us. I was hunting high and low for you, and peeped into the green-house, among other places, and there lay the stand, pot and all, upon the floor ! So I tore off upstairs to tell the news. I really thought that Lily was going to strike me, at first ! She grew paler than a corpse, and her eyes blazed like lightning, I can tell you ! She caught her breath, like one strangling, when I tried to pacify her by saying that no doubt the mischief

was done unintentionally, in the dark, by a dog, or one of the servants.

“No!’ she said, in a sort of choked whisper; ‘I know all about it! It was not an accident! I will be revenged for that piece of spite, if I die for it!’

“‘Why, Lily,’ I said, ‘how unkind and unreasonable!’ But she would not listen—only took herself off to her room and bed, and there she has been ever since! Who would believe that she could be so peppery a little vixen when she is once aroused?’

Helen thought sadly and deeply for several moments upon what she had heard. In the pressure of anxieties personally so much more momentous, the damage done her cousin’s pet shrub had entirely escaped her mind, until it was recalled by Virginia’s narrative. If Lily were indeed so distressed at the disaster as her volatile friend represented, she might be conciliated by a truthful statement of the manner in which the misadventure occurred, and Helen’s regret at having been innocently the cause of it. As a preliminary step she despatched Sally to Lily’s room to inquire how her headache was, and request the privilege of an audience for her mistress.

The tiring-woman returned in high dudgeon.

“The door is locked on the inside, Miss Helen, and when I knocked, that impudent Sylvy opened it a little ways, and peeped through the crack, and had the assurance to tell me that Miss Lily had just fallen asleep, and must not be waked on no account. Then she shut-to the door again, and I heard her with my own blessed ears speak to Miss Lily kinder easy-like, and Miss Lily answer her. Asleep—ha? Humph!”

“There! that will do!” Helen arrested her indignant volubility, and congratulated herself that Virginia had flitted off to some other part of the house before this item could be added to her budget of scandal.

She did not censure Lily for averting an *éclaircissement* that would be productive of embarrassment to them both; and, moreover, it would be of no avail now. Her destiny, and, so far as a strange fatality had intertwined Lily’s with it, hers, also, were no longer in her hands. Robert’s laconic, but significant message, and his non-appearance, had settled that matter.

The afternoon wore away all too rapidly to the idle, taciturn

bride, as to the fussy, excited bridesmaids, and another starlight evening, as cloudless and colder than yesterday's, came on. The marriage service was to be recited at eight o'clock, which, in the accommodating phraseology and according to the pliant customs of that region, meant any time from half-past eight to ten. The more unpunctual a bridal procession contrived to be, the more aristocratic were the performances esteemed. Nevertheless, at six o'clock Helen cleared her apartment of the chattering, officious sisterhood who clamoured for the honour of assisting at her toilette, rejecting their overtures kindly, yet peremptorily; fastened the door upon the last of the reluctant exiles, who was, of course, Virginia Shore, and sat herself down before the mirror to have her hair dressed by Sally's skilful fingers. The maid's manipulations upon the luxuriant locks were conducted silently. If her heart had not been too full for useless speech, a glance at the grave, settled features, so young in outline and colour, so old in expression, which were reflected in the glass would have sealed her mouth. She comprehended, in some dim and imperfect fashion, that her mistress did not go to her bridal as most other women she had seen arrayed for their nuptials had done; that there was no tremulous joy, no excess of happiness, in the suppressed sighs that, ever and anon, heaved her breast; no delicious dreaming in the thoughtful eyes, that seemed to study the untried Future.

The glossy hair was wound smoothly around the classic head, braided and looped at the back, and Sally was obliged to speak.

"You will not have the flowers put in just yet, will you, Miss Helen? They will droop and wither before you are ready to go down."

Helen aroused herself and glanced at the white buds with their graceful group of leaves, simply beautiful, in spite of Virginia's abuse. They awaited her pleasure in a small vase upon the dressing table.

"They will! you are right. Perhaps I may not wear them, after all. We will attend to that by-and-by."

"The young ladies all seemed to admire the pearls most," suggested Sally, timidly. "And don't you think, Miss Helen, that Mars' Aleck—"

Helen raised her hand with a frown. "Not a word more, Sally!

When I am at a loss what to do, I shall ask other people's advice, not before."

Further debate was prevented by a knock at the door.

"What do *you* want?" said Sally, snappishly, unlocking it, and in unthinking imitation of her favourite detestation, Sylvia, opening it far enough to allow the tip of her nose to be seen by the person without.

The reply was in the voice of an under-housemaid, whom the brisk Sally was wont to denominate a "stupid, no account body, who went through the world with her eyes and ears shut."

"Mr. Lay downsta'rs. Want to see Miss Helen, d'rectly if she can come down. He won't keep her more'n a minute, he say. He in de office."

"The office! What did you show him in there for you goose? It's dark as pitch, and cold as Christmas, besides being dirty as a pig-sty!"

"Marster made me light a fire dar, to-day, and he's been a-settin' by it, constant, from dinner to supper-time," drawled the woman, "and Mr. Lay, he asked Gabriel to take him somewhar' whar' he could see Miss Helen by sheself. Gabriel, he took him in de office, and *sont* me for to let Miss Helen know—"

"Isn't your master in there now?"

"No—he went away somewhar', 'pon horseback—he an' Uncle Booker, nigh 'pon half an hour ago. Dey ain't got home yet."

While this colloquy was going on, Helen had thrown off her white wrapper, and, with the utmost haste her shaking fingers permitted her to use, put on, in its stead, a crimson dressing-gown—part of her bridal outfit—which had been hung over a chair near by.

"Let me pass?" she said, trying to knot the massive cord around her waist as she spoke.

"There's no hurry, dear Miss Helen (you be gone, Judy!)—there's not the least hurry in the world, my dear young mistress!" reiterated Sally, soothingly, taking hold of the silken cable, and tying it herself. Mars' Robert knows you've got to dress, and he's one of the thoughtfulest men that ever was born. It's likely he wants to ask some question about the ring, or the glove, or some sech little thing, and he shows his sense by not trusting his message to

any of them harum-scarum young ladies—for, if I may make so free as to speak my mind for once, I never see a wilder set. Here's your handkerchief; and now you are all ready, and pretty as a picture, and I'll be bound Mars' Robert will tell you so. I shouldn't wonder if he begged you to be married in that dress. I'll go with you to light you through the dark entry."

Encouraged by this homely and cheering strain of reassurance, Helen went quickly down the stairway, and through the dining-room, encountering only servants on the way to the "dark entry," which was the narrow passage connecting the last-mentioned apartment with the office. The attached maid stood midway between the two rooms, holding her candle above her head, until her mistress, having hesitated for an instant upon the threshold of the farther, to gather breath or resolution, turned the bolt of the door, and disappeared from the loving eyes watching her.

There was a handful of smouldering coals and a smoking log or two in the fireplace. A solitary candle was upon the mantel, but its yellow flame gave light enough to enable Helen to recognise the person who advanced to meet her.

It was not Robert, but Aleck Lay!





## CHAPTER X.

“**A**LECK?”



“Helen!”

In the agitation of the moment they forget the more formal style of address they had employed towards each other of late. Their hands were joined, too, in a clasp altogether different from the cold, passive touch they were used to exchange at their infrequent meetings. When Helen would have withdrawn hers, she found it held fast; nor was it released after Aleck had led her to a chair, and placed himself beside her. Her gaze of wondering confusion was answered by one so intense, so eloquent of love and compassion, that her heart thrilled, while she trembled with apprehension and suspense.

“My poor girl, I am the bearer of sad news to you.”

“Does it concern your brother?” There was not a particle of colour in her cheek, and her eyes dilated, but she could still articulate the inquiry, “Is he ill? Is he *dead*?”

“Heaven forgive me for saying it! but I could wish that he had died before dishonouring himself so vilely,” exclaimed Aleck, passionately. “Helen, he has perjured himself, brought indelible disgrace upon his own head, upon his family—worst of all, dragged down shame and misery upon *you*!”

“No! no!” The girl’s haughty spirit sprang to its arms. “Not shame; no mortal can do that while I retain my self-respect. As to misery, better so, a million times better, than if he had suspended his action for a few days or months. Now let me hear all.”

"Can you bear it?" he asked, doubtfully, looking in unspoken admiration at the noble face, tintless yet, but pure and serene as a marble image of peace.

"Yes, unless the reality far exceeds my imagination; and I do not think that it can."

"Robert left home this morning early, shortly after the receipt of a letter which was brought to him by one of Colonel Floyd's servants—"

"Gabriel. Yes, I know," she assented. "It was from me."

"Indeed! I thought I recognized your cousin Lily's handwriting in the superscription."

"You were mistaken; I sent it."

Aleck went on.

"He ordered his horse at half-past nine, that he might keep an appointment at ten. I suspected that it was in obedience to a summons from the writer of the letter, both from his behaviour, and the circumstance that he had not alluded to the engagement until after Gabriel's arrival. I was confirmed in my surmise by a brief conversation we held just at parting. He confessed that his expedition was not one that I would sanction, said he could not retreat from it with honour, entreated me to be charitable in my judgment of him, and hinted at a satisfactory solution of the mystery at some future day. From that hour to this he has not showed himself at home; but when I reached Greenfield, at five o'clock, having spent the day at Maple Hill, this letter was handed to me by one of my own servants, who had met Robert in the road about the middle of the afternoon."

She took it, and attempted to read; but the characters were irregular, and the lines blotted. The sheet had apparently been written upon in the utmost haste or agitation, and folded while the ink was yet wet. Aleck brought the candle, and held it behind her shoulder while she deciphered it.

"Aleck, old boy, you will never let me call you brother again after you have read this; but it can't be helped. You have done your duty towards me, and the hardest struggle I have had in making up my mind was to conquer my fear of your displeasure. My resolution is taken. It was nailed fast to the mast by the

perusal of the enclosed, which you saw delivered to me this morning. The last feather breaks the camel's back, and my feather was not a light one, as you will see. You will agree with me, or ought to, when you have studied this specimen of feminine composition, in the opinion that she who could write thus on the morning of her marriage-day was never designed by the Maker of matches to be my wife—never desired to be. She says, in effect, 'Be free, if you long for freedom! Be happy with another, if you love her better than you do me! And I am resigned—rather, relieved—if the truth must be told.'

"I take her at her word. The direction of my flight I cannot reveal at present, for obvious reasons. There are hot-brained fellows—Harvey Floyd, for example—who would not scruple to chase me down, and pistol me for the slight offered the bride—that is not to be. I am not certain that you would not undertake the job yourself, you have such Roman notions of honour. I may say to you confidentially, however, that I am not without strong hopes that my journey will not be performed alone—that, at no remote stage of it, I shall be joined by a companion fairer and dearer to me than all the universe beside. I commit to you the awkward task of breaking to Miss Gardner and her family the intelligence of this trifling alteration in the programme of the play for this evening. Perhaps the easiest and safest way for you to accomplish this disagreeable but necessary business will be to forward her letter with this to Colonel Floyd. He is the most proper person to manage the affair. Shun an interview with him if you can; he has a high sense of what is due to himself, and all of his blood. I should be sorry to have you embroiled in a quarrel with him on my account.

"The 'daring and self-possession' upon which Miss Gardner plumes herself will have abundant scope for display when the guests are convened to-night. I am not racked by fears lest her heart should sustain any serious fracture. Her pride may bleed a little, but depletion there will do her moral system good. My respects to her, and best wishes for her welfare and happiness. May I trouble you to send to Rock's Tavern for my horse? I shall have him left there until called for. If all goes well, you shall hear from me again before long. Good-bye! Love to Aunt Ruth. I



hope her cake will not spoil for the want of mouths to eat it, although I suppose the second day's feast must be postponed.

"Believe me, ever (whether you will allow it or no!)

"Your loving brother,

"ROBERT C. LAY."

"Can it be possible!" Helen let fall the letter as though it had defiled her fingers, and sat transfixed; the deep dye of offended delicacy, just anger and astonishment at its contents, and the ungenerous animus of the writer, suffusing neck and temples. "Cruel! unjust! This insult, at least, he might have spared me!"

"You are only too lenient to him," said Aleck, in stern wrath. "Like yourself, I could not have credited the possibility of this baseness without the evidence furnished by that infamous communication. Yet I have seen very much that I considered reprehensible in his intercourse with Lily Calvert; have warned him, once and again, of the evil which might result from the intimacy. He had always a ready excuse or evasion wherewith to ward off my attack—and I believed him! He was wickedly weak—she, subtle—I, blind! This is the end!"

"It is!" Helen arose, erect and calm. "I thank you for the gentleness—the true brotherly kindness with which you have discharged a trust that could not but be abhorrent to you. I am especially grateful that you did not accept the alternative of transferring the unpleasant duty to Colonel Floyd."

"I did not entertain the suggestion for an instant. Here is your letter. You notice that he—Robert, I mean—says that it was sent for my perusal. I need not assure you that I have not read a line of it."

"I wish you had!" she said, impulsively—then, checking herself, a new flood of crimson bathed her face. She had recollected the confession embodied in the earlier portion of it.

"That is"—she resumed, more composedly—"I would like to have you read certain parts. You would then see how faithfully I have striven to be guiltless in this matter; whatever may be my faults, and they are many, I am not habitually insincere. Will you oblige me?"

She proffered the open sheet, designating the top of the second page as the place where he should begin.

"I require no testimony beyond what I already have to convince me that your conduct in this lamentable affair has been irreproachable," replied Aleck, repelling the offer by a gesture.

"But I would have you acquit me intelligently. When the tale is trumpeted abroad—as it must be"—her lips were whiter in saying this—"as it must be, very soon, it will be a great satisfaction, the best comfort I can have, to know that there is one who, with a full knowledge of the case, from beginning to end, yet pronounces that I have tried, and tried hard, to do my duty; that I would have shielded Robert from reproach at the same time that I secured his happiness by a union with the woman he loved—for I was sure that he *did* love Lily!—have spared him the trouble of this flight, and myself the ignominy of being publicly rejected!" She turned her head aside, too proud to let him see how keen was the smart of the last thought, and still extended the letter in mute appeal. Aleck unclosed his lips to speak, then, changing his mind, took the paper with a bow of submission to her requirement.

"Robert! I charge you by every principle of truth, honour, and manliness, to answer me one question!"

This was the heading of the paragraph to which she pointed, and he read the letter through, from that adjuration to the close; with what sensation of pain, love, pity, and marvel, his countenance, varied and marked as were the expressions that succeeded one another upon it, but feebly indicated.

"And this generosity he spurned! this angelic candour, this noble self-renunciation he could despise! could speak slightly of conduct that should have moved him to worship!" broke forth Aleck, impetuously. "Helen! I cannot ask you to pardon him. The man who could sin thus grossly against the love and forbearance you have exhibited towards him, merits your scorn and the reprobation of the world!"

"Hush! hush! It is not the act, but his manner of freeing himself from the distasteful bonds that I deplore. As he says, I offered him his freedom, and he took me at my word. Only"—the childlike, troubled look that he had seen before, when she alluded to the public scandal menacing her, came back—"will it be asking too great a favour of yourself and your aunt, if I tell you that it will be an incalculable help to me to have you remain here this evening, and

show that *his* friends are still mine? that they, having known me from my childhood, do not cast me off as an unworthy creature, whose heartlessness has forfeited their confidence? For you must recollect that the people who were invited to the—the wedding, will come; that there is not time to send word to a single one of them. The invitations cannot be countermanded, and I *must* see them! the story must be told! He quotes correctly, you observe, when he alludes to my boast of ‘daring and self-possession.’ Had the event been what I proposed, and for a time expected, I think that he would have found these sufficient for his purpose and mine. As it is, the trial will be far greater!”

She faltered.

“Helen!”

She did not repulse him when he took her hand again. In this dark hour of mortification and perplexity, she had no other adviser; no other friend or comforter; and his tenderness of sympathy was inexpressibly sweet.

“Before I answer your question, let me entreat your indulgence while I unfold *my* plan of action; that which I conceived and matured while coming to you to-night. It is a kindred idea to that which I find sketched in your letter, recommended by you for another’s adoption. The coincidence is an encouragement to me to proceed. Will you bear with me if it offends you? You will not shrink from me in horror and loathing?”

“Certainly not!”

She gazed at him in unsuspecting wonderment. The earnestness of his imploring tone; the anxiety with which he hung upon her look and reply, were more of a mystery than his words. Seeing that he hesitated to go on, she added gently, almost affectionately, “Whatever may be my opinion as to the propriety of adopting and acting upon this unknown ‘plan,’ I should be unjust and unkind were I to resent your goodness in presenting it. I have known you too well and too long to impute to you unworthy motives. You could not propose anything that would involve the sacrifice of truth or honour, however distasteful its terms might be to me.”

“Ah! there is the fear!” He groaned in bowing his head upon his hands.

She laid one of hers on his arm.

"Aleck! will you not be frank with me? Is this a time for mistaken delicacy—false scruples? This should be an honest hour with us both. Will you not tell me what it is that you desire to say? It is your old friend and playfellow, Helen, who asks this of you?"

"I will be a man! will brave everything!" He started from his dejected attitude. "At the risk of debasing myself in your eyes to the level of a selfish, unfeeling monster, who would take advantage of your distress to win his own ends, I will speak! Helen! I have loved you all my life!—loved you more than I ever have done anything else on earth! I thought I had made you understand the nature and aim of this affection before I went abroad. Fervent as was my devotion, I had yet the manliness and justice not to bind you by a formal pledge. While absent, I dared to think and dream of you as my own—mine only;—to anticipate a future spent with you as a fair and probable prospect. I returned to find you betrothed to my brother. What I suffered; what I have resigned; what concealed under what must have seemed to you a heartless and repulsive exterior I have not strength or time to tell you now. I do not offer my love—unabated and unconquerable, after all my battlings with it—as a solace for the pain inflicted by the desertion of your betrothed. But I do tender you my name and my hand as a shield against calumny and insult; ask the privilege of protecting you in this hour of isolation and perplexity. I exact nothing in return save that which you have but this moment informed me is already mine, your friendship and confidence. If you will marry me to-night as my brother's substitute, I pledge you my solemn word that no unreasonable or ungenerous demands on my part shall ever cause you to regret the act."

He delivered this extraordinary proposal in a hard, almost fiercely abrupt fashion; the result of overpowering emotion he tried ineffectually to suppress into the collected, moderate show of earnestness he had resolved on. He did not look at her as he brought the speech to a close. Would she flee his presence as from a moral leper? Would she strike him dead with imperial scorn?

For a whole minute there was a profound stillness throughout the room, except for the quick fluttering pants from the figure at his side. Had his audacity taken from her the power of utterance?

Then she spoke—very softly, very musically to his excited senses, that had shrunk in dread of accents so different.

“I thought that were you betrothed to a lady in Germany. They—your aunt and brother—told me so—last summer!”

Aleck made an impatient movement.

“That absurd fiction again! I never loved her—never thought of betrothal to any woman besides yourself; have never breathed a word of affection to any other, at home or abroad. The letter from which my aunt deduced her preposterous conclusion was, as anybody but herself could have seen, a foolish, barefaced hoax, from beginning to end. I have told her this since my return, and undeceived Robert also. Could I be so base as to offer you a hand upon which another had a lien?”

Still he did not look towards her. If he had he must have been at a loss how to interpret the warmer blush that slowly mantled her cheek; the fervid, yet tender, sparkle of the eye.

She reopened the letter to Robert. He heard the rustle, in wondering impatience. What had they to do with that part of the question now?

“I cannot give you a reply until you have read the first page of this.”

She could hardly have enjoined a more irksome task; but he obeyed her behest instantly and without a remonstrance. His mind was not in a condition to be easily receptive of hope, or he might have drawn all the encouragement the most ardent suitor could have desired from the cautiously-worded confession; would not have looked or spoken with such mournful firmness, as he ceased reading.

“I do not love you more hopelessly now than I have done from the moment I heard of your engagement to my brother. You say in this letter that a union with him whom you first loved is for ever impossible; that you have only half a heart to bestow upon any man who shall hereafter seek your favour. If I am personally disagreeable to you; if my presence will annoy or displease you, instead of being a comfort, I withdraw my suit. Otherwise—unless, indeed, I can bring about a reunion between yourself and your early love—”

“You do not ask who it was!”

“And never shall! It is your secret—yours alone!”

“But what if I insist upon telling you?”

He gazed upon her now, but in unspeakable amaze. What was the meaning of the playful yet shy intonation that impressed even his infidel perceptions; incredulous to whatever seemed to bode happiness and success to himself? Stranger still, she smiled in his bewildered face, a smile radiant as heaven's own light.

"We have both 'played too long with edge tools,' dear Aleck! Suppose we abandon the dangerous trifling, and take to truth-telling for the remainder of our lives! I will set the example by revealing to you the 'dear, fatal name' of him who long ago gained my whole, undivided heart; whose supposed desertion drove me to the mad, wicked step of engaging myself to another. Shall I?"

"If you will."

He articulated the monosyllables with difficulty in the tumult that possessed his soul.

"Bow your tall head, then. I cannot say it aloud."

Still mystified, doubting, fearing—anything but hoping—he bent his head to her lips. They breathed one word in his ear.

Had Colonel Floyd or his devoted servitor and imitator, Booker, chanced to pass through this retired portion of the grounds just then, upon his nightly patrol, and glanced into the low window, he would have beheld an unexpected and highly-interesting scene: one which might possibly have awakened sensations the reverse of delightful in the bosom of the unseen spy.

But it happened instead, that this select and exemplary body of police was, at that important instant, engaged about other business, the nature of which shall be briefly explained in the next chapter.





## CHAPTER XL

**S**ALLY "had the fidgets"—a description of fit that became more violent with every added minute of her mistress's absence. In the adjacent chamber, dedicated to the toilette services of three of the six bridesmaids, she could hear the confused clamour of busy tongues, the patter of slippered feet, and frequent outbursts of such mutual admiration as girls are prone to indulge to their own and one another's delectation—all denoting the forward march of preparations for the great event of the evening. Bells were rung from divers other apartments, upon first, second, and third stories; there was continual rushing up and down stairs, and through entries, of valets, butlers, and ladies' maids; each on the run, and all equally regardless of the danger of collisions; already several carriages had rolled around the drive in front of the mansion, and discharged their freight of unnecessarily punctual revellers, mostly relatives and intimate friends of the family, who liked to preface the public proceedings by a little social talk. Yet she, in whose honour all this commotion was raised, the star actress of the promised performance, without whom the play would, in fact, be a remediless wreck, and a disgrace to all concerned in its announcement and management, was still dallying away the fleeting, priceless moments in love-talk, that could be as well if not better attended to after the ceremony.

"There is a season for everything!" muttered the tiring-woman, distractedly, shaking out the satin robe and lace veil for the twentieth time. "And this isn't the time for no such boy-and-girl play as they're carrying on!"

Sally was in love herself, and, as a consequence, extremely lenient to the delinquencies of others similarly situated, if said derelictions had Cupid's warrant for their apology; but there was a point beyond which delay became inexcusable negligence, and this she considered; and, it must be owned, with just provocation, that the bride was fast nearing. She went into the hall repeatedly, and listened over the balustrades for the returning feet of her charge—the increasing tumult of arrival and reception below, meanwhile, aggravating her inquietude to the verge of frenzy; once she stole down-stairs, and into the dark passage conducting to the office door—went near enough to that uninviting room, now consecrated as the chosen retreat of Love, to hear the low murmur of earnest voices; finally she resolved to sit down in desperate resignation by the fire of the bridal chamber, and “not budge one single inch again until Miss Helen saw fit to show herself—no! not if she had to wait there until midnight!”

Her waiting, albeit it was the reverse of “patient,” had its reward shortly after she had taken this sensible resolution. A light footstep her ears were quick to recognize skimmed the floor of the hall, stopped at the door, and the long-looked-for personage appeared.

“Sally, my good child! I have kept you waiting a tedious time, I suppose, but there is no haste, none whatever!”

“It's a quarter past seven!” responded Sally, not too amiably.

Generally the most docile and respectful of handmaidens, she yet availed herself occasionally of the privilege, earned by years of faithful service, to lecture her young mistress.

“I know that, but the—ceremony will not take place for an hour or more.”

She had sunk into the chair before the mirror, and spoke breathlessly. This might have been the effect of her haste in climbing the stairs, and her rapid flight through the passages, to avoid being seen abroad at this unseasonable hour; but the sparkling eyes and glowing complexion could hardly have been induced by these influences. Resting her chin in her palm, and her elbow upon the dressing-table, she remained for some minutes, apparently lost in reverie, fond, yet agitating. Her lip trembled while it smiled; the fire in the eye shone through a soft haze—even to Sally's untutored sight, her aspect was refined and elevated by the emotions that wrapt



her in silent happiness. Then, a change which was even more lovely grew upon her—a chastened gravity, that mellowed every feature; an upward glance told that thought was rising to yet more exalted themes of contemplation.

She turned kindly to her attendant.

“Sally! I should like to be alone for a little while. Do not be uneasy. I will be ready in season.”

“Just as you say, ma'am.”

Unwilling to submit to further procrastination of the momentous business yet to be performed, but awed into implicit obedience of action by her mistress's look and manner, the maid withdrew.

Helen's chamber was upon the second floor of the main building, which formed the central pile of the large and irregularly constructed old homestead; and access was had to this, not only by the wide front staircase, but also by a steeper winding flight, leading down to the back door. Sally was near the head of these, on the alert for the summons to her post of duty, when her attention was distracted by the rumble of wheels. This was now a frequent, almost an incessant sound, but the vehicle to which these belonged drove around the right wing of the house, where there was no carriageway over the lawn, and stopped at the rear porch. The listener stretched her head over the railing, with the curiosity characteristic of her class, to obtain a view of the back entrance. What or who was to be introduced into the mansion at such a time, and in this unusual way?

Colonel Floyd pushed the door open from without. He was arrayed in overcoat and hat, and carried in one hand his inevitable riding-whip. The other grasped, and, it would seem, not very tenderly, the arm of a lady, muffled in a large cloak and drooping hood.

“Good Fathers, Miss Lily!” ejaculated the astonished Sally, under her breath. “I thought she was sick in bed!”

Behind the supposed invalid cowered the confidential abigail, Sylvia. She bore a bandbox in her arms, and her mulatto complexion was the hue of ashes with fear. The group was completed by her husband, the family coachman, who brought in a mall travelling-trunk, apparently from the conveyance standing without.

“Up! that way!” The colonel thrust Lily upon the lower stair. “And you had better rig yourself in your finery in double-quick time, or I will be along to hurry your smart waiting-maid, here!”

He lent Sylvia a cut across the shoulders with his whip, by way of further admonition. "I flatter myself that I have spoilt your fun for this night; and the next time you undertake an elopement, look out that I am not at your heels. Leave that trunk there, you scoundrel!" pointing to a corner of the entry. "I take it for granted that there is no bridesmaid's gear in that, and she has changed her mind about playing bride, for the present."

Lily had now gained the top of the steps, leaning heavily upon her maid, and Sally had retreated to a dark corner, not too distant to prevent her from seeing and hearing all that transpired. Finding that her uncle had not ascended behind her, the poor fugitive stopped, and fell back, rather than rested, against the wall, as one half-dead with fatigue or fright.

Sylvia urged her, in a frightened whisper, to go on to her chamber.

"I cannot yet! I am so faint!" sobbed the trembling girl, pressing her hand to her heart. "What will become of me? Oh! what shall we do?"

Low as were her accents, the sound reached the savage warder below.

"Are you there still?" He came part of the way up to catch sight of the laggards. "If you want more of my help, you have only to say so, and it is at your service."

The terrified women hurried down a side passage in the direction of Lily's room, and at that instant Sally heard her mistress's bell, and made good her escape.

Helen's preoccupation of mind prevented her from remarking the queer looks and behaviour of her assistant. Apart from the revolution in her position and feelings, there was much that required her most serious meditation; an imperative necessity for self-command, and ingenuity of speech and conduct. The Court House—the universal name applied to the shire-town of each county in the Southern States—was but three miles from Belleview, and the county clerk, to whom application must be made for a marriage license, resided near his office in that village. There would be no difficulty in obtaining this, both the parties to the contract being of age; yet Aleck had deemed it best to take into his confidence, and secure as his companion in his nocturnal gallop, Harvey Floyd, a second cousin of the colonel's and distantly related to Helen her-

self. He was a merry rattle of a fellow, kind-hearted as quick-witted, and was to have officiated as second groomsman, according to the original arrangement of the bridal train.

This gentleman, on being summoned from his dressing-room to receive the astounding news of a change of bridegrooms, "supposed," when the shock of the communication had passed off, "that it was all right—indeed, it was a capital joke—the boldest and cleverest thing he had ever heard of—this having hoaxed a whole community, the wedding party included—up to the very last moment! He would relish amazingly carrying out the matter in good style. A splendid Christmas trick!" and he laughed until the mouldy walls of the office threatened to come down about his ears.

This was after Helen had left the two young men together; but she conjectured that his cooperation was obtained without much difficulty, from the fact that she heard the clatter of their horses' hoofs down the road in less than ten minutes from her time of parting from them. Harvey was to ride directly back to Belle-view so soon as the license was granted; Aleck would return by way of Greenfield, and bring Miss Ruth with him. Let them use what speed and diligence they might, there would still be a delay of considerable length in the solemnization of the marriage, and this it was Helen's object to make as little noticeable as possible. By way of beginning, she must confide that to Sally which no one else—not the bridesmaids themselves—was to learn until the final moment. She was explicit, but brief, in her narrative to the petrified tire-woman. She—Helen Gardner—was to marry Mr. Alexander Lay, and not his brother, as was commonly supposed, but the secret was not to be divulged as yet to any other person. Least of all must Colonel Floyd, or any member of his family, receive the slightest intimation that could lead to the discovery of the plot. Certain preparations would detain Mr. Lay for an hour, perhaps more, beyond the time set for the marriage, and, to escape unpleasant comments upon his tardiness, the bride's toilette must not be complete until nearly nine o'clock.

It appeared doubtful, for awhile, whether Sally would ever be equal to the functions of her office, so staggered was she by the intelligence, coming, as it did, before she had entirely rallied from the effect produced by the discovery of Lily's escapade and capture.

Helen laughed merrily at her bewilderment—so heartily, that Sally smiled in real pleasure.

“I have not heard you give a laugh like that in ever so many months, Miss Helen. It does my heart good to hear it; it sounds so like old times!”

“I have not been so happy for a long time, Sally. There have been painful misunderstandings that are now cleared away,” was the response, sincere and simple.

She never imparted to any one else a more circumstantial account of the dark days of her life, and the sudden burst of sunshine following them.

Below, the apartments appropriated to the use of the company were filling fast; and until some officious individual had the bad taste to discover, and was guilty of the ill behaviour of promulgating the intelligence, that it wanted a quarter of nine o'clock, and no bridegroom had yet arrived, everything went blithely enough. Colonel Floyd was a conspicuous figure in the sight of every one that entered. He was dressed with extreme neatness and elegance, and his commanding stature and stately grace of bearing recalled to many of the elder guests the memory of his most palmy days, when no other resident of the region could vie with him in manly beauty and deportment. He had deteriorated since, and, by his evil courses had latterly lost much of the prestige given him by this earlier reputation and his family rank; but to-night he upheld the dignity of the Floyd escutcheon in a style that constrained his worst enemies to admiration. Mrs. Floyd was a cipher, according to custom; but she did her best to receive her friends cordially and entertain them hospitably, and there were few who were so destitute of right feeling as to be wanting in appreciation of her motives.

At a quarter to nine, then, an unmannerly buzz went hissing, like a serpent, through the crowd, leaving in its track dismayed silence, glances of alarmed inquiry, nods and winks of malicious meaning. The knowing and observant ones began to notice the fluctuations of the host's florid complexion from purple to pallor; that his face was lowering, and his eye gleamed ominously as he conferred apart with his wife; and that she, poor soul, looked amazed and disquieted, and could not prevent her regards from straying every instant to the door. At nine o'clock, without any pretence of apology or show of conceal-

ment, Colonel Floyd left the apartment—it was conjectured, to institute official inquiry into the cause of the mysterious and most ungentlemanly nonappearance of the person who should have been one of the earliest upon the ground. No sooner was this plausible supposition reached by a majority of the assembly than there was a general and palpable effort to seem lively and unconcerned—a commendable and ostentatious display of ignorance that anything was wrong which deluded no one, failed to impose upon the most single-minded creature there, and that was unquestionably the lady of the house.

Colonel Floyd crossed the hall and entered a small cloak-room, occupied, for the nonce, by four very stiff and uneasy gentlemen—the groomsmen—who awaited the signal to join their fair mates and take up the line of wedding march.

“This is a very strange affair, gentlemen!” said the colonel, gravely, “and it is my painful duty to inquire into it, without further delay. It may have been a mistaken delicacy which has kept me silent so long. Has any one of you seen or heard from Mr. Lay to-day?”

Every man looked at his fellow, and there was a unanimous shaking of heads.

“He called on me at noon yesterday, and engaged to meet me at the clerk’s office this morning at eleven o’clock,” pursued the colonel, visibly moved by some powerful emotion. “This engagement he saw fit to neglect. I waited for him until past twelve, and since my presence there was not a legal necessity, obeyed the call of other duties, and returned home. Since then—”

He was interrupted by the entrance of his relative, Harvey Floyd.

“Well, boys!” said the new arrival gaily, “how goes it with you by this time? Tired of waiting—hey?”

“They may well be!” returned the colonel, indignantly. “What have you to say, Harvey, respecting this very dilatory groom? The business begins to look very black to us. He is a particular friend of yours, I believe. Are you the bearer of his excuses?”

“Well, not that exactly, sir, but I can answer for him that he will be here pretty soon, sure as a gun!” thrusting his hands into his pockets and strolling to the window, where he commenced a

careless whistle, that suddenly, and without apparent cause, exploded into a laugh.

All were startled, several shocked by the sound.

"Beg pardon, colonel! Excuse me, gentlemen, but the truth is you four look so like pall-bearers at a funeral, and my respected cousin there so like chief undertaker, sexton, and parson combined, that I cannot keep my countenance. Haw, haw!"

He dug his hands down deeper into his pockets, and stamped about the room, rolling and choking with merriment.

"There are some subjects, young man, that are not to be jested upon!" rejoined the colonel, his brow blackening with suppressed wrath, while the veins in his temples stood out like cords.

"No offence intended, sir!" Harvey tried manfully to swallow his amusement. "Only, when a man goes to a wedding, it does seem ludicrous to see every one else behave as if it were a funeral. Actually, a stranger would feel disposed to look for crape upon the left arm of each of this lugubrious quartette, and to listen for your official pronouncement of 'dust to dust, ashes to ashes.'"

"When you can express yourself in a manner becoming your position as a member of the respectable family so grossly insulted by the conduct of your associate, the expected bridegroom—*expected*, rather than expectant, it appears—I should like to talk with you upon this very unpleasant matter," said the colonel, with increasing choler.

He walked out with immense stiffness. The door opening upon the back porch, the same through which he had conducted Lily upon her return from her evening jaunt, stood ajar, and the aperture was filled by a dusky figure.

"I would like to speak to you, sir!" it said in a guarded voice, as Colonel Floyd crossed the hall.

The master started as if the word were a bullet.

"What is it?" he asked, hastily.

Booker retired into the portico, whether the colonel followed him, shutting the door after them.

"The moon will be up before we get there," said the man, in the same cautious key. "It's time we were off."

"Had we not better wait until the moon *does* rise? It will be a dark, rough walk," suggested Colonel Floyd, staring up at the starry heavens.

His manner was less that of the arbitrary owner than the equal of the one he addressed. But for the absurdity of the idea, one might have imagined that there lurked in his accent a certain degree of respect—of humility. The negro's reply was assuredly positive and familiar, such as few white men would have dared to employ in conversation with the lord of Belleview.

"So much the better! We don't want light until we get to the woods. If you are seen quitting the house when it's full of invited company, folks will wonder at it, and there's a chance of our being followed. Then, the ground's froze hard as a rock, and the path is a rough one, as you say, besides being a good mile and a half long. We will want every minute of our time. If I'd had my way, we would have been off an hour ago."

"That could not be, you know." Colonel Floyd manifested no anger at the imperative language of his inferior. "It was necessary that I should show myself first to those people in the parlours, and contrive some excuse for leaving them."

"That may be so, but we ought to be off now!" repeated Booker, doggedly. "There's nothing else to be gained, and much may be lost by waiting."

"Are you sure that you have everything ready?" whispered the master, peering over his shoulder at the lighted windows, blazing all along the rear of the building.

"All's right, so far as I am concerned!"

"Then I will be with you in three minutes!"

He went back into the house, and stopped in the hall to collect thoughts or courage for the next move. His face was curiously changed. A leaden hue had come over it, and he had to clench his teeth to hinder them from chattering—probably with cold or nervousness, for no living man had ever seen him show fear or presumed to accuse him of cowardice. He felt the alteration in his looks, for he stroked his features to compose them; while his hand shook from the same cause that had induced the discomposure he would conceal. First, he proceeded to the dining-room, unlocked the sideboard, and helped himself to a glass of strong brandy and water; waited a minute to ascertain the potency of the draught, and swallowed a second. Then he again sought the presence of the uneasy groomsman.

There was a glare in his eye that looked like fierceness; and if

his voice were slightly husky, and not so steady as usual, it was attributed to the same, or kindred emotions, and these were regarded as altogether natural and commendable by the spectators, or by four out of the five. Harvey may have had his own ideas upon the subject. He, of the number, seemed least concerned by the announcement that should, in consideration of his relation to the bride, have affected him most.

"Gentlemen! you will oblige me by making yourselves at home in my house, and, so far as lies in your power, allaying the apprehension that may have been excited in the minds of others by Mr. Lay's extraordinary and utterly inexcusable behaviour. For myself," drawing himself up, and speaking hoarsely, yet dignifiedly, "I shall go in person to seek that young man—to call him to account for the dastardly slight put upon my niece. I think that I have a clue which, if rightly used, will enable me to ferret out the truth."

"Better stay where you are, colonel!" interposed Harvey, in some alarm; "or, if it is necessary to make inquiries, let me go in your place. Don't be precipitate! Things may come right without your troubling yourself. Lay is an honourable fellow, and, if he is above ground, I am willing to wager my head that he will furnish in good season a solution, and a satisfactory one, of this puzzle."

"Mr. Floyd!" The colonel wheeled suddenly upon him. "This is my affair, and I warn you, once for all, that I will not be interfered with. The only true kindness you can at present do your cousin, Miss Gardner, is to undertake the painful office of breaking to her, as gently as you can, the unexpected news of Mr. Lay's disappearance."

"Shall I find her upstairs, sir?"

Harvey was near rupturing a blood-vessel in his frantic attempt to repress another uproarious fit of mirth.

"I presume that she has not yet left her room."

"Then I'll run right up!" said the willing bearer of the afflicting intelligence.

He went up the steps, three at a leap, as the colonel solemnly bowed around to the bewildered quartette, and left the house by the back door.

It was Sally's luck this evening to play the undesigning eaves-dropper. While Colonel Floyd and Booker held their cautious



colloquy upon the porch, she was within ear-shot of most that was said. She had been to the kitchen upon some trifling errand, and was on her way back to Helen's room, when she espied Booker peeping in at the hall door, either watching or waiting for some one within. Sally instantly crouched, like a hare upon her form, and, inch by inch, crept under the portico steps—not with the intention of overhearing what might follow, but to keep out of the man's sight, and avoid the chance of meeting him. She hated and feared him, not without sufficient cause, as the reader will allow, and was panic-stricken by the thought that if she encountered him at this juncture of the plot confided to her keeping, he might drag the whole truth out of her. She believed him to be possessed of the craft, as he was of the depravity, of the great adversary of mankind. She quaked in her shoes when the pair—master and man—in drawing away from the door and windows, walked directly above her head, and there arranged the preliminaries of their expedition. Some words were lost; others but partially comprehended; still, she made out the drift of their purpose, and, while she was greatly mystified by certain expressions which occurred in the dialogue, she blessed the business, whatever it was, which took them out of the way at the moment when her mistress was expecting the real groom.

“Before you get back the knot will be tied fast and hard, and then let's see you break it,” she chuckled.

Not audibly, for Booker was standing upon the top step, awaiting his accomplice's return. The flight was not a tall one, nor was her position comfortable or desirable, bowed together as she was, and not daring to move a finger, hardly venturing to draw a breath, while she could hear the creak of Booker's boots as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, on the very plank against which her head rested. Her imprisonment was of a brief duration in reality, tedious though it seemed to her. She did not quit her covert until the clang of the iron heels upon the flinty spring-path quite died away; but she had one glimpse of the patrolling party, as they passed through the broad stream of light pouring through the dining-room window. Colonel Floyd carried his gun, his inseparable companion in his nightly rambles, and Booker also bore something she could not determine what, upon his shoulder.

“There you go?” soliloquized the girl, stretching her benumbed

limbs. "Two as great vilyans as ever breathed! Hunting run-aways, are you? You've tracked some poor fellow to his den, and mean to have him out, live or dead! 'Taint the first job you've joined hand-in-hand in—but you won't go unpunished in the end, or the Scriptor is mistaken, which ain't likely. Bless the Lord, Lem's hundreds of miles away, anyhow? So you won't catch him! Now, to tell Miss Helen that the cats are away—both of 'em!"





## CHAPTER XII.

**S**ALLY had no opportunity for the proposed communication. Outside the door of the bride's chamber stood Helen, in close conversation with her cousin, Harvey Floyd. Both were laughing ; for if Harvey attached any importance to the Colonel's threat of retribution upon the sinning Robert, he kindly and discreetly refrained from whispering to her a syllable relating to this part of the scene, which he pretended to describe to her with great exactness and evident enjoyment. The consultation was broken off by the outburst, from the adjoining room, of a figure in white robes.

"Helen Gardner ! why aren't you in hysterics, or swooning, or something like that—as is suitable and graceful in the circumstances ? I should be terrified into convulsions, if I were in your place. An hour after the time set for the ceremony, and not a word from the bridegroom ! It's a perfect scandal—or, else, some terrible accident has happened—and, in either case, you ought to go crazy !"

"I have just brought her a message that obviates the necessity of parting with her wits," replied Harvey. "The fortunate man is now on his way to happiness. I left him only half an hour ago. Aunt Ruth's newest cap was not ready in season, and he could not, as a dutiful nephew, leave her—while she was conscientiously opposed to wearing her second-best. It was trimmed with green, which she said was an unlucky colour at weddings. There were twelve yards of white satin ribbon to be furbelowed upon the new one, and the last bow but one was being sewed on when I came away ; so they cannot be far behind me. You are divine to-night, Miss Virginia."

"Humbug!" with a smile of conscious vanity. "You ought to see Lily now. *She* is heavenly; so pure-looking, so ethereal, so exactly like a snowflake, that you are positively afraid that she will melt away before your eyes—be exhaled like a dewdrop."

"I hope she won't melt or exhale while *I* am looking at her," answered the saucy groomsman. "Where is this same snowdrift, or snow-drop, or whatever you call her? I would like to take a parting look at her before she leaves this world for good and all."

"In there, with the rest of them," nodding backwards into Helen's room; and Harvey, taking the hinted invitation, walked himself into the midst of the fair and fluttering group.

There was a little scream of affected horror and surprise at his unceremonious entry; then the girls closed in upon him on every side.

"Mr. Floyd, what is the matter downstairs?"

"What makes you gentlemen so tardy? We're tired to death waiting."

"Hasn't Mr. Lay come yet? It's shocking!" And similar inquiries pelted his ears—a confusing volley, even to one of his consummate impudence.

"All right, all right! He will be here shortly," he repeated, over and over, with slight variations, until the Babel subsided into a satisfied hum.

Lily had remained aloof, looking on with sad contempt, that was heightened into disdain when her cousin accosted her.

"Come, Lil; stand out into the light, and let me see you. Miss Virginia likens you to snowflakes, and dew-drops, and all manner of other beautiful things."

He pulled her towards him, that he might take a better view.

"Don't, Harvey! you hurt me! Let me alone, I say!" she cried, sharply, trying to wrest her hands from his.

He held her tight.

"The half was not told me," said he, in mock reverence. "You are a gem—a star of the first lustre and sixth magnitude—but not snow! There's too much heat for that!"

If Virginia's simile had any aptness, this external fairness was the snowy crust veiling a volcanic heart. Lily's great eyes glittered feverishly; her skin was hot; her lips had a scarlet tinge.

You are to walk with me, you know, Queen Mab," continued

Harvey. "I shall watch you very closely, lest you unfold a pair of starry wings and fly away."

"I know no such thing!" she retorted, peevishly; and Harvey perceived his blunder when he recollected that Aleck Lay, as first groomsman, was the attendant assigned to her.

The sound of an arrival below relieved him from the necessity of fibbing to hide his *lapsus linguæ*.

"There he is at last!"

He dropped the struggling hand and was off like the wind. Miss Ruth passed him on the stairs, mounting to the dressing-room under the pilotage of a maid. The poor lady looked scared and flurried, and Harvey laughed to himself, in the imagination of her amazement at the recent disclosure made to her. Aleck was in the hall, handsome and self-possessed—a smile of heartfelt satisfaction dispelling every vestige of cynicism from his features.

"All goes well!" was Harvey's salutation, "and I have served a notice upon Chandler, to take the vacant place in the train. You will find him with the rest of the fellows, in the room over there."

"Thank you!"

Aleck preceded him to the apartment designated and presented himself to the anxious fellows.

"I am sorry that I have been unavoidably detained, gentlemen—less on your account, however, I confess, than because I fear my delay has occasioned discontent to the ladies who are awaiting you. Everything is ready, I believe. Shall we go up and make our peace, as best we may?"

"Is your brother here?" questioned one.

"My brother was called suddenly from home this forenoon, and has not returned yet. Fortunately, his presence is not indispensable, however much we may desire it."

"Not indispensable!" ejaculated Tom Shore. "What do you mean? Who ever heard of a wedding without a bridegroom? unless, indeed, you act as his proxy!" he subjoined, with a half laugh.

"I shall be married on my own account—not in the stead of another," replied Aleck, coolly. "This was a matter which was determined upon between Miss Gardner and myself, more than two years ago. Perhaps you would like to test the truth of my assertion by an appeal to the lady herself."

He led the way to the floor above, and the others, including the "dumfounded" Tom, followed in his wake.

Helen did not lift her eyes at their approach, but the brilliant carmine of her cheek answered the fervent pressure with which Aleck laid her hand within his arm. Never were voluble girls rendered so mute by astonishment as was the knot of pretty attendants. Lily clung to Harvey for support; searched his face in such agony of inquiry, that he could not help whispering an explanatory sentence or two.

"It's all right! They have loved one another for years and years. She was always queer, and so is he. The engagement with Robert was a blind. It's the best joke of the season!"

Honestly he believed but half of this tale; but he was pledged to carry the matter through, and he would do it with a brazen face if not with a stout heart. Lily utterly discredited this account of the sudden reversal of preconcerted arrangements, but it mattered little to her how it had come about, while the evidence of her own eyesight showed her Helen Gardner as the bride of Aleck, and not Robert Lay. Divers editions of the surprising story were breathed by the other gallants to their respective charges during the downward march of the procession; and it spoke volumes for the self-command or aptitude in deception of the feminine part of the band, that when they were drawn up in bridal array, confronting the crowd of gaping and aghast spectators, none of them betrayed the slightest symptom of curiosity or embarrassment; each was competent to the occasion.

Mrs. Floyd uttered an exclamation of dismay or wonder as the clergyman, in obedience to a word from Aleck, and after a glance at the license presented by Harvey, began the marriage service. He paused longer than was needful or customary after the solemn bidding of the charge; bent a gaze, scrutinizing, and not altogether free from severity, upon the youthful couple, while the silence throughout the room became oppressive.

"I require and charge you both (as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts will be disclosed), that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it: for be ye well assured, that if any persons are joined together otherwise than as God's word doth allow, their marriage is not lawful."

Aleck met the penetrating eyes confidently—proudly, while Helen stood firm and calm beside him. The ceremony proceeded; the responses were made promptly and audibly, and Aleck's voice had never been more clear and steady than in articulating the vow:

"I, Alexander, take thee, Helen, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

It was done! and, regaining breath and speech with one simultaneous effort, the assembly surged impetuously towards the newly wedded pair. Inquiries more pointed than polite; banterings of all descriptions, gay, gentle and ill-natured; reproaches that were meant to be playful, and yet had an angry tone mingled with the laugh; every variety of congratulation was heaped upon the perpetrator of the daring deed, in a fashion that few would have been able to bear. But they were blest with dauntless spirits and strong nerves, and while Helen was suffered to remain by Aleck's side, she did not shrink, and he was doubly courageous.

Poor, poor Miss Ruth? She slipped fast and quietly out of the press after kissing her "children," and heaving one little sob upon Helen's shoulder, and betook herself to the darkest corner of the conservatory, where she had her cry out in a comfortable style. She alone, beside her nephew and his wife, knew the secret of Robert's dishonourable defection, and the consequent dénouement between the real lovers; and she acquiesced cordially in Aleck's application of the good old-fashioned doctrines, that "those who truly love one another ought to marry," and that "the sooner a false step is corrected the better;" yet she had been taken so by surprise; her limited range of ideas and conjectures had been so abruptly enlarged; her grief at Robert's inexplicable behaviour so sincere; her dread of compromising him and annoying Aleck and his bride so great, that it was no wonder she was, to use her own language, "fairly upset."

Her privacy was soon invaded. She mopped up the streaming tears at sight of a white dress and the sound of light, hurried footsteps.

"I came to look for you, Aunt Ruth," said Lily Calvert, winding

her arms about the old lady's neck, and sinking to her knees beside her. "I have nobody else to whom I can speak—and speak I must, or my brain will go wild. You will never repeat what I say, will you?"

"Yes — yes—dear!" murmured Aunt Ruth. "That is, I would say, 'No,' my love!"

"You know everything, do you not? Robert has often told me that he kept nothing hidden from you. You must know why and where he is gone?"

"Yes!" assented Miss Ruth, distressfully.

"Don't speak so sadly, please! You wound me to the quick. I had looked for charitable judgment from you. Indeed—indeed he could not help it, Aunt Ruth! You would not have blamed him if you had known all he had to bear—for he saw that Helen did not love him, and—*that I did!*"

She whispered the last three words, and buried her face in the listener's lap.

"Yes!"

Despite the objurgations Aleck had, in his aunt's hearing, and the early transports of his indignation, launched against Lily's coquetry and treachery, the charitable spinster could not discard all tender thoughts of the child she had loved from the sad hour of her birth. Mrs. Calvert had been the friend of Miss Massie's girlhood, and for her sake she had first learned to love the daughter. To her Lily was always winsome and loving, and she believed in her still; sympathized in the emotions whose intensity she perceived without fully understanding. Her motherly hand softly patted the curly head as she thought how young the weeper was—how tender and delicate—how unfit to bear the sorrow that pressed out those great choking sobs.

"All may come right, dear, if you love one another—"

"If!" Lily reared her head eagerly. "I have seen that he did love me this long while, and others saw it too! But this morning there came this letter"—taking one from her bosom—"in which he tells me how dear I am, and begs me to meet him this evening—to go with him—to become his wife! And I would have done it—by this time we would have been together, never again to be parted, but for my cruel, cruel uncle! How he guessed my intention I cannot



imagine, for only Simon and Sylvia knew of it, and they would never betray me—but he overtook me on the road and forced me back. I can never forgive him—never!” Her eyes glowed, and her fingers clutched the letter tightly. “I am not his slave! I want you to write to Robert, Aunt Ruth. I shall be watched too closely for me to attempt that. Tell him why I failed to join him. I cannot have him think that I was prevented by cowardice or indifference—and say, moreover, that if my life is spared I will yet escape and do as he wishes, in defiance of my uncle’s threats.”

“Yes,” said Aunt Ruth, doubtfully; “but, Lily, dear, there is nothing now to keep him away, since Aleck and Helen are married. Doesn’t it seem to you that it will be more proper to wait until he comes home, and let things go on naturally and smoothly? Then again I don’t know where to direct my letter.”

“To Washington! He writes that he will wait there for tidings of me should I fail to meet him. As to propriety, I detest the word!” cried the girl, passionately. “If you are hindered by such scruples, I will steal time to-night to write to him myself. Will you see that my letter is mailed?”

“Yes!” responded Aunt Ruth, yet more slowly and dubiously.

The equilibrium of her ideas was too effectually destroyed by the strange events of the past few hours for her to offer any decided protest against becoming Cupid’s postwoman. When she journeyed homeward at midnight, still dazed and wondering, no one part of the performances she had witnessed was more unreal to her than the fact that in her pocket, nestled among the folds of her immaculate handkerchief, reposed a billet whose superscription, hastily scrawled in a fine feminine hand, was, “Mr. Robert C. Lay, Washington, D. C.”

Harvey Floyd proved himself to be the nonpareil of kinsmen and groomsmen on that trying evening. Having, as an indispensable preliminary, exorcised his conscience by a potent adjuration in the names of expediency and good-nature, he gaily assumed the rôle of master of ceremonies; circulated freely among the curious and suspicious guests, joking, laughing, and lying as he moved; “pooh-poohing” at insinuations of unfair play towards the absent brother; declaring that he had been the confidant of all three of the parties concerned in this “capital hoax” ever since its inception; had

known that Robert was looking after Aleck's interests, while people believed that he was pleading his own cause; had often laughed with him at the adroit manner in which the wool was pulled over people's eyes, etc., etc.

"But how did it happen that neither Colonel nor Mrs. Floyd was cognizant of the true state of the affair?" questioned the shrewd ones.

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" whispered Harvey to his drugged conscience, as it stirred in its sleep, and he replied *sotto voce*, with a meaning wink—"Colonel never liked Aleck—opposed his marrying his ward. My worthy relative is a trifle 'kinky,' as we all know. Had no objection to Robert. Since he could make no legal opposition to the match, both parties being of age, he vamosed so soon as he was informed who the veritable Benedict was to be. The thing had gone too far for him to stop it, but he wouldn't look on. D'ye understand?"

And even the shrewd ones were so verdant as to believe that they *did* understand. Helen was voted "undutiful," "unfeminine," and "fast," by the sober adherents to custom and form; "spunky," "resolute," and "devoted," by the more youthful and romantic portion of the company.

"You are the biggest story-teller I ever heard of!" declared Virginia Shore to the laughing bride. "And to think of your carrying it so far as to pretend that you were going to wear those contemptible rose-buds as your only ornaments, when you intended to behave like a Christian woman, and sport the pearls! It must be owned that you look like a queen in them. Doesn't she, Mr. Lay? But for all that, if I were your confessor, I would make you walk ten miles with peas in your shoes for such abominable fibbing. And, now, I am just expiring to know one thing. If your tongue can speak the truth, after its long and diligent practice in the other line, I wish you would tell me where Mr. Robert is. It is the one unaccountable circumstance in the unravelled plot—and excuse me, my dear—I must say that it has a queer look?"

Aleck came to Helen's relief so promptly that her hesitation at this very direct question was not noticed.

"Until this morning, Miss Virginia, my brother had never intimated an intention of absenting himself on this interesting occasion. Before breakfast he received a letter calling him from home upon

urgent business. The summons was imperative, and admitted of not even an hour's delay."

Lily was passing when Virginia's mention of Robert's name struck her ear, and she involuntarily stopped to listen. Aleck gained her eye at the beginning of his reply, and did not release it until he concluded—held it by a gaze of such significant contempt that, as he said to himself, if the girl retained one grain of self-respect or shame, she must quail beneath its questioning. She did indeed change countenance, but it was a look of incredulity or surprise, not conscious and detected guilt. He let her alone after that. She had no ground to lose in his estimation, and, whatever might be his opinion of her course and motives, he, of all the world, had least cause to murmur at the result of these.

Mrs. Floyd—as she was accustomed to aver in after days—would never have lived through that evening but for the support of Harvey's unblushing mendacity and Aleck Lay's ready tact. Nor was Helen backward in sustaining her aunt in her difficult position. Laying aside the stiff stateliness, enjoined by etiquette upon the bride, she deported herself as the daughter of the house, who was mindful of her guests' comfort and pleasure, and in considering these lost sight of the novelty of her own position. She did not dance, but she was careful that no lady who wished to do so should lack a partner; she chatted easily and freely with matrons; replied merrily to the badinage of the elderly gentlemen, who were not sparing in their comments upon the extraordinary character of her nuptial ceremonies; privily directed waiters, and as privately suggested forgotten duties to the mistress of the establishment. She was incalculably more valuable to her perplexed and worried aunt than was Lily, who spoke and acted all the while like one in a trance.

Never did hostess, especially one by nature and practice so hospitable as was the lady of Belleview hail the departure of visitors so joyfully as did she the first stir of leave-taking among those whose coming she had greeted with unfeigned cordiality. The Colonel had not yet returned, when, at three o'clock in the morning, she threw her wearied limbs and aching head upon her couch, too tired and full of pain to speculate on her lonely pillow as to the causes of his prolonged absence. She slept soon and soundly, so profoundly that

she did not know when the absentee came in, and was awakened at last by the broad light of morning.

"Bless my life, it is eight o'clock!" she exclaimed, springing up, "and I never even heard Amy make the fire! When did you come in, and why didn't you wake me, Colonel?"

Her husband was at the toilette-table, shaving himself. Apparently his hand was not very steady, for the lather he had scraped from his chin was streaked with blood, and the razor inflicted a deep gash as his wife spoke. She had scarcely expected any answer, other than the one which came—a bitter oath! and, to tell the truth, she was much more concerned about the wedding breakfast, and the probable condition of the rooms used by the company the previous evening, than affected by his humour.

He surprised her by a query before her hurried dressing was completed.

"How did your dear five hundred friends take the news that there could be no wedding for want of a bridegroom?" he growled between his teeth.

"Sure enough! How forgetful I am! You were not here when it all came out!" Mrs. Floyd checked herself in the act of lowering her dress over her head. "I don't know how to tell you, or where to begin. It was all so unexpected, even to me! How she contrived to keep it a secret up to the last minute, I cannot divine; but she did, and fooled us all completely. And to think that Aleck Lay could play the hypocrite as well as she did, and Robert too! I wouldn't have believed it of him! I always thought that he had such an open heart and honest tongue. I declare it beats everything I ever heard or dreamed of!"

She was interrupted by a profane ejaculation, and an order "to say what she had to say, and to stop that infernal gabble!"

"Why, my love, I was just going to tell you! Did you ever suspect that she was not in love with him? that she was throwing dust in our eyes all this time, even when she was making up her wedding clothes, and accepting her wedding presents? When Mr. Bradley commenced the ceremony, I really thought that I should faint outright. And nobody knew it except Harvey, and I must say that he behaved very unhandsomely in not giving me a hint. Mercy on us, Colonel! what's the matter?"

He had turned about, his back to the table, leaning heavily against it ; the razor in his hand ; his complexion nearly as colourless as the foam yet left upon his cheeks.

" Ceremony ! what ceremony ? " he said, in a guttural whisper.

" Why, the marriage service, to be sure, over Aleck Lay and Helen Gardner. They were married about nine o'clock, and—oh ! "

She rushed forward with a scream, in season to prevent his falling to the floor, seating him instead in an easy-chair that was luckily close at hand, and supported the heavy head, swaying helplessly to and fro. Her frightened cry speedily brought help. A gang of bustling, terrified servants collected around him ; stripped off his outer clothing, loosened his collar and cravat, and bore him to the bed. By the time they reached this stage of proceedings, he had revived so far as to speak, but so inarticulate was his primary attempt, that his wife begged him to repeat it. He did, with an angry effort.

" Booker ! "

" Run for Booker, some of you ! " ordered Mrs. Floyd. " Do you want him to go for the doctor, dear ? " she inquired, tenderly.

He breathed hard and loudly ; his forehead was dark still with the dangerous flood that had rushed up to the brain, yet he scowled at her ; lifted his hand menacingly towards the flock of negroes.

" Out ! every one of them ! " he managed to say, more distinctly now.

The violence of the attack was passing. Booker did not obey the summons with especial alacrity. He was asleep when it was brought to his house, and awoke unwillingly ; arose sullen. Mrs. Floyd was banished, as her menials had been, at the entrance of this high and sulky functionary. For half an hour she was kept waiting without the chamber, while a low conference went on inside. Her lord was manifestly better when the janitor permitted her return to the bedside ; better in body, but in temper as ill-conditioned as mortal could well be. After an infinite amount of argument and persuasion, she prevailed upon him to admit the physician, for whom a messenger had been despatched two hours before ; and since she was not forbidden the privilege, she remained in the room during his stay.

Colonel Floyd had ridden twenty miles the night before, he stated to the medical man, " upon a false scent "—he interpolated, savagely

—had eaten nothing, and slept none. The consequence was a rush of blood to the head—a trifle not worth naming, but women were such fools!

Convinced, upon examination, that the seizure was really not severe, and his patient in no peril of his life, the doctor recommended a little cooling medicine and a day's quiet; buttoned up his coat, picked up his saddle-bags, and prepared to go.

"The weather has moderated," he remarked to Mrs. Floyd, in quitting the apartment. "We shall have snow by night."

She accompanied him downstairs; received an additional direction or two, and resought her husband's presence. He had shifted his position, and dragged another pillow under his head; raised himself high enough to enable him to look out of the window nearest the bed.

"Didn't the doctor say there would be snow to-day?" he asked, in ill-dissembled eagerness.

"Yes, it is clouding up fast. We shall have falling weather by noon, I think. Aleck and Helen are about going, my dear. Do you feel able to say 'good-bye' to them?"

"If I did, they should not cross that threshold!" he said, vehemently. "Tell them I say 'begone!' and send my curse after them."

Mrs. Floyd wisely and politely concluded to modify this amiable message in the delivery; so the bridal pair were only told how sorry she was that the Colonel was too seriously indisposed to see them, and that the doctor had enjoined absolute quiet.

The dinner party at Greenfield was to proceed, as had been contemplated before the late momentous changes. This was decided upon, partly to gratify Miss Ruth, partly to appease the suspicions of those who obstinately cherished the idea that there was something wrong behind the scenes; the incorrigible sceptics, whom even Harvey Floyd could not lie into belief of the story he promulgated so industriously.

The fields were like unwritten white paper; the roads were growing heavy with drifts, and it was still snowing hard, when, at dusk, a carriage drove up to the ancient mansion of Maple Hill, and Aleck assisted his wife to alight. Neither of them would remain under Robert's roof longer than was necessary for 'appearance' sake.

Both longed for quiet and home. Busy hands had been at work within doors all day. The windows were ruddy with firelight, and the young husband led his bride from the raw, chill outer air into a large, old-fashioned hall, well lighted and warm, where were ranged a score of family servants, dressed in holiday attire, and profuse of smiles and courtesies to their new mistress.

"The blessin' of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be upon 'em!" groaned a pompous voice from the head of the line.

Helen tried to say "Thank you!" but the effort expired in stifled mirth.

"The egregious blockhead!" said Aleck, fretted and yet amused, as having spoken a kind word of acknowledgment to his dependants, he conducted Helen into the parlour, seated her in a great chair, and undid her bonnet and cloak. "The preposterous humbug! A padlock for his mouth, to be worn constantly, except at meal-times, would be an admirable regimen for him."

"Petronius, was it not?" asked Helen, still laughing.

"Of course it was! By the way, I must have a talk with him tomorrow. It was he who brought that letter to Greenfield yesterday afternoon. I omitted in my excitement then to ask him at what point of the road he met Robert. I would like to inquire into the particulars of their interview. Why are you shivering, love, are you cold?"

"No! only a passing chill. I have a strange aversion to speaking of yesterday, or of anything connected with—with—what might have happened."

She was very pale, and trembled visibly. Aleck leaned over to kiss her—put his arm about her.

"Why, you dear little goose! the danger is all over now; your fate is sealed! You are a captive, and your jailer is a perpetual institution."

She smiled mutely; then her head drooped upon his shoulder, and there was silence for a while.

"Speaking of Petronius reminds me of the evening service we attended at Mr. Shore's, some weeks ago," resumed Aleck, cheerfully, to dispel any remnant of unpleasant feeling that might be lingering in her mind. "Do you recollect the bit of paper, the loss of which chagrined Lily so much?"

"Yes. I knew that you had it then, although I dared not thank you for the theft."

He took out his pocket-book. "See here," opening an inner compartment.

"Why did you keep it?" asked Helen, catching at the soiled and creased leaf.

"Because I read there, in your handwriting, that it was 'dangerous to play with edged tools,'" responded Aleck, "and my own disappointed heart responded to the truth of the maxim. I preserved it as a monitor for future direction. The consequence was, that I had made up my mind to live and die a 'crusty, fusty old bachelor!'"

With a gesture of playful petulance, that brought back to him the memory of her girl days, Helen put her hand over his mouth, and tossed the paper into the fire.

"I am glad it storms!" she said presently, looking at the snow-encrusted panes. "It makes our home so much the more cosy and dear."

While they mused, with locked hands, tenderly smiling lips, and eyes full of happy light, upon the sweetness wrapped up in that little phrase, "our home," Colonel Floyd's chamber was dark, save for a feeble glimmer from the fire he would not allow to be replenished, and the waning grey light from the windows. Upon these his haggard eyes were fixed, as they had been from the commencement of the storm, gloating with a sort of greedy satisfaction, which was enigmatical to his attendants, over its continuance and increasing fury. Not until the last ray of daylight had vanished, and he could no longer discern the falling flakes between him and the leaden sky, would he listen to his wife's solicitations that she might have the curtains lowered, and wood and candles brought in.

At nine o'clock Booker appeared to inquire after his master's condition, and receive his orders for the night. Lily happened to be present at the moment. Her uncle had insisted upon seeing her, on her return from the dinner at Greenfield, as if to assure himself that she was actually in the house. She was a heart-sore and peevish creature throughout that lonely evening, but ungraciously promised obedience to his further command that she should see him again before retiring to rest. It was upon this second visit that Booker encountered her.



"What of the weather?" questioned Colonel Floyd of his retainer.

"Snowing faster than ever, sir. The drifts will be four foot deep by morning."

"Good!" The sick man settled himself in his bed, with a grunt of satisfaction.

Booker continued.

"And upon ground so hard froze as it is now, the snow will lie three weeks and better."

"I don't see why that should be so desirable as you seem to think!" said Lily, crossly, shrugging her shoulders. "We will have bad roads all spring."

"Hold your tongue, you jade, and go to bed!" said her uncle, furiously.

"That's because you don't understand, you see, Miss Lily," answered Booker, demurely. "Deep snows are prime for the winter wheat, and for every thing else that's in the ground, for that matter. Good night, sir; I hope you'll sleep sound."





### CHAPTER XIII.

**T**WO months had passed since the wedding, which had set the tongues of the neighbourhood wagging, as only an out-of-the-way marriage or shocking murder can do. It was a mild, soft afternoon, in the latter part of February, and Helen Lay stood at the front window of her pretty parlour, watching the winding road that led up to the house. Aleck had been absent four days, on a business trip to Baltimore, and this evening was to end their first separation. How keenly she had felt it, might be gathered from her restless movements about the room, when her eyes became weary of straining into the unsatisfactory distance; her changeful colour and quickened attention at sight of any far-off moving object, or any sound that fancy could construe into the rumble of wheels or beat of hoofs.

"He won't come while you are looking for him, my dear," observed Aunt Ruth, with a quiet smile, from her seat at the fire.

But, placid as she looked, and steadily as grew the stocking under her fingers, she was not free from impatience herself, and inwardly rejoiced in the signs of anxiety which the young wife could not conceal. They were tributes to her "boy's" worth, proofs of the affection borne him by his best beloved. Helen blushed, and tried to laugh; then came and sat down beside the diligent spinster.

"I believe that I am 'fidgety' to-night, as Virginia Shore calls it; but it is not altogether the desire to see Aleck again, although I do not deny that that feeling is strong. I am oppressed by the idea of some impending sorrow—a presentiment that something

sad or disagreeable is to befall me. You have felt such, Aunt Ruth, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Then you know how hard it is to shake these off."

"Yes!"

Miss Ruth sighed—a respiration telling of a volume of like experiences.

"Not that I believe in omens or presentiments," continued Helen bravely; "only when one is a little excited from other causes, a notion of this kind fastens more easily upon the mind. I have not been very happy to-day; not nearly so buoyant of spirits as I should be. Lily's countenance, as I saw it yesterday at church, has haunted me ever since. You must have observed how sadly she has changed."

"Yes, dear!" Aunt Ruth said, in intonation and look; "who could help noticing the poor child! I never saw a sadder wreck in my whole life."

"I wish, for her sake, that Robert would come home," Helen resumed, pensively. "His movements are a complete riddle to me. They vex Aleck grievously, too. He has written to Robert five or six times, but the two letters we have received from the runaway, make no mention of his having heard from us. The suspense is hard for the brother to endure; what must it be to Lily, poor girl! Hist!"

The faint echo that had entered her ear grew louder.

"Yes!" nodded Aunt Ruth, smilingly, in answer to the brightening eyes and uplifted fingers.

They hearkened a minute longer. A carriage was certainly approaching.

"I will not stir until it stops!" said Helen, poutingly, her cheeks one flush of crimson. "You shall see how well I can behave!"

She fulfilled her promise to the letter; but there was scanty evidence of the spirit of patient awaiting in her gladsome exclamation and rapid flight to the hall door when the wheels ceased to move. The vehicle, a buggy driven by a negro, was similar in appearance to that which had been sent to the depot for the absent master of Maple Hill. It had halted before the porch steps, and a gentleman was alighting when she appeared at the entrance. But his was not the joyous bound of a wedded lover; nor was it Aleck's figure and features that met her dismayed vision. The driver was Booker; his passenger,

Colonel Floyd. Chagrined and disconcerted though Helen was at the unexpected and unwelcome visit, she could not but remark the change in his person and movements effected by his recent sickness. His step was slow and languid; his hair whiter, and his eye had the furtive, uneasy glance of one disturbed by perpetual forebodings of evil, or harassed by constant physical suffering,

"Aunt was right when she told me, the other day, that he was woefully broken," thought Helen, as with instinctive and lady-like hospitality she offered her hand and invited him to enter the house.

Not until he had paid his respects to Miss Ruth, seated himself by the hearth and removed his gloves, did he revert to the errand that had brought him hither. That he had an errand, and one which could not be intrusted to another, Helen was assured the instant she saw him, for he had never darkened the doors of her new abode until now.

"I have called to see Mr. Lay upon business," he said to her, "Business which should have been settled before this late day, but for my infirm state of health."

"He left home last Friday for Baltimore," replied Helen, "and has not yet returned. I am expecting him this evening."

She could not force herself to propose that he should await Aleck's arrival. Polite insincerity could not carry her to the length of deliberately concerting such a defeat of her anticipated joyous meeting with her husband. It seemed that Colonel Floyd was not inclined, in this respect, to stand upon ceremony. He leaned back in his chair, and crossed his legs, with the aspect of one who had lain in a sufficient stock of patience, and had no intention of removing immediately from his chosen position. Aunt Ruth sat up stiffly, lips compressed, and eyes riveted upon her work. Helen made another effort to do the honours decently. She would not essay cordiality.

"I hope that Aunt and Lily are well."

"I believe they are. I hear no complaints."

"Lily is looking badly, I think. I met her yesterday at church."

"Humph! Three-fourths of her disorder is imagination. Her Aunt tells me that she is troubled with dyspepsia and blues this winter. It is fashionable for young ladies to fall into ill-health."

"She is certainly very thin, and coughs a great deal," responded

Helen, smothering her displeasure at his contemptuous reply ; and there was a tedious pause.

Her face kindled presently, and, glancing significantly at Miss Ruth, she left the room. There was no mistake this time. Another buggy had driven to the door—Colonel Floyd's moving on to make room for it, and Aleck Lay leaped to the ground almost before the horse was checked. He came directly up the steps to salute his wife, held her to him in a hasty embrace, and kissed her ; but his first words were abrupt, his tone harsh.

“ Is Colonel Floyd here ? ”

“ Yes, in the parlour. I am very sorry—”

“ I am not.”

He strode into the hall, tore off his overcoat, and tossed it with his hat and gloves upon a table ; then moved in the direction of the parlour without another word. Shocked and chilled by his stern face and negligent treatment of herself, Helen yet ventured to follow him.

“ Dear Aleck ! ” she entreated, hanging on his arm. “ There is no haste about seeing him. Come to our room, and rest awhile ; let me brush the dust off. You look very weary, and a bath will refresh you. I am afraid you are not well.”

“ Oh yes, I am ! I must see this man—get this meeting over at once.”

Helen still hindered him.

“ You know, dear, that I could not help his being here just now. I did not dream of his coming until he drove up. I am sure I wish that he had stayed away. You are not angry with me, are you ? ”

The question or the timid tone served to recall Aleck to his senses. He looked down into the loving, pleading eyes, where the tears were already welling.

“ My precious wife ! could I be angry with you even if I had cause?—and that can never happen. Forgive me if I act strangely ; my mind is full of other and important things—matters concerning which we will talk together by-and-by. You know that I am happy in being once more at home, and with you.”

He gave her another kiss more fond than the former, released her, and entered the apartment where his visitor awaited him.

Helen did not go in directly after him. She ran off into her room, to hide the emotion she would not have others perceive. It

was very foolish and wrong to weep over a trifling disappointment like this, but she had pictured to herself such different things—the murmured words of tenderness; the long, close embrace; the thousand inquiries after her welfare and occupations during his absence, especially how she had borne that separation; the ejaculations of delight at their reunion, that were to have filled the earlier moments of their renewed intercourse. How could he leave her so soon and hastily—how speak so coldly—how plead pre-occupation with more important things? Up to this hour their married life had glided on like a blissful dream—the lover-husband been all that the most exacting bride could require. Was this the beginning of that settling down into the graver actualities of everyday home-life which every one except themselves predicted as their future lot, which they had promised one another should never come to them? It had been easy to tell Robert that she had outlived youthful romance; that she was not a sentimental, unreasonable girl, but a common-sense, matter-of-fact woman. If she had married him, he would doubtless have found her to be all that she had described. As it was—

She walked restlessly up and down the floor; now letting the tears flow freely, now drying them in haste, as fancy deluded her with the thought that she caught the sound of Aleck's distant footsteps. Surely he *would* come—he could not stay away when he observed that she had not followed him! Colonel Floyd's business was a matter of no consequence after all. She was certain that it pertained to the settlement of his guardianship accounts, for he could have none other with Mr. Lay. Into these it may be remembered that she had advised—nay, urged, Robert to look. The idea of being defrauded was then painful to her. She wanted to bring, as her marriage portion, to the younger brother, property that would justify her in a feeling of thorough independence for the remainder of her days;—that should, in plain phrase, pay her personal expenses, and never oblige her husband to lay out a dollar of his own fortune to insure her comfort or pleasure. She believed, then, that she was actuated, as she had said to her betrothed, by a sincere desire for the advancement of his interests no less than hers. She cared little whether she were dependent upon Aleck or no. All that she had was his, and for the rest—benefits—a livelihood itself from his hand

would be all the sweeter because she owed them to his love. Total dependence upon the one truly and only beloved never yet wounded a woman's pride.

She had time to indulge these, and many other meditations in the wearisome half-hour consumed in fruitless waiting and childish fears. Then, with a smack of the old haughtiness she condemned as unworthy, even while she yielded to it, she resolved to cast aside the part of the love-lorn lady, pining in her bower; to show him that she, likewise, could be oblivious of tender weaknesses and alive to rational considerations, such as should govern a sober, right-minded couple, from whose cup of happiness eight weeks of wedded experience had puffed away the sparkling foam. She bathed her eyes, smoothed her hair, added an ornament or two to her tasteful home attire, that he might not construe apparent neglect in dress into proof of an absent or suffering mind, and betook herself, work-basket in hand, to the drawing-room.

Aunt Ruth was no longer there—a circumstance Helen did not discover until she had advanced halfway down the apartment. But she had seen her husband start and look hurriedly over his shoulder as the door unclosed, and imagined that he frowned at seeing her. If her presence were undesired by him, he quickly subdued any token of displeasure or regret, arising to set a chair near the fire for her, and bowing as he did so, as courteously as to an honoured guest.

"Perhaps I had better not stay," said Helen, in an under tone, stopping short when she perceived Miss Ruth's empty seat. "I am afraid that you are engaged!"

"You will be no hindrance," was the reply, spoken in grave politeness; and still doubting which course dignity and expediency would advise, she obeyed his gesture and sat down.

There were candles upon the table, so disposed that they shed a strong light on Colonel Floyd's features, while Aleck, by accident or design, had drawn back into comparative shadow. Helen was nearest him, but could only see his profile. Colonel Floyd almost faced her, and she noticed, mechanically, as it were, that he seemed to be annoyed, or otherwise excited. His hand rested upon several letters and other written papers lying on the table, and shuffled them nervously as he spoke or listened.

"You have had no direct personal communication by mail or in

any other manner with my brother, since he left home, I understood you to say, Colonel Floyd?" said Aleck, interrogatively, going on with the conversation his wife's entrance had interrupted.

"None whatever, sir. The last interview we had was purely one of business, and took place in the forenoon of the twenty-fourth of December. At that time he delivered to me the cancelled bonds I have just shown you. My principal reason in requesting his presence on that occasion was, that I might discharge the debt long due him. He was at my house from ten o'clock until one; our conference was held in the office, for want of a more comfortable place, and continued for nearly two hours, as Mrs. Lay may recollect," bowing and smiling sardonically to Helen.

Aleck waived the reference and Helen's silent bend of assent; did not turn to see whether she had heard or replied.

"You had an appointment with him for the next day, however," he continued, in a tone that sounded dry and guarded to Helen's ears.

"Which he entirely failed to keep!" interposed the Colonel, quickly.

"Without sending you any apology?"

"I received none. I left home at ten, or thereabouts, rode leisurely to the clerk's office, where Mr. Robert Lay was to meet me at eleven; waited for him more than an hour and a half, as Mr. Willis can testify; then, supposing that he had been unavoidably detained, and not knowing how long I might be kept there if I undertook to stay until he came, I placed a certificate in Mr. Willis's hands to the effect that my ward, Miss Gardner, was of age, and therefore free to marry whenever and whomsoever she pleased, and returned to Belleview. Mrs. Lay perhaps remembers that I was at the house when she came home after a morning walk—moreover, that I informed her of your brother's failure to keep his engagement with me."

Again, Helen gave a grudging and unspoken response to his appeal, which was heeded as little by her husband as the former had been. He sat with an elbow resting upon the table; his hand spanning his forehead, and from its shadow his eyes gazed keenly, intensely upon his visitor, never quitting him for a second. Colonel Floyd felt their scrutiny, for he winced at each question, and carefully refrained from looking at his interlocutor during his rejoinder.



"It is growing very late!" he observed, rustling his documents into a bundle, and tying them together with a bit of red tape.

The knot was insecure, as was proven upon trial, and when it gave way at the strain intended to tighten it, the loose sheets were scattered over the table. Aleck assisted in collecting them.

"These are the bonds!" he remarked, pausing in the task to examine two small pieces of paper selected from the heap. "Excuse me for saying it, but it strikes me that this was an unbusiness-like mode of annulment—merely drawing a pen across the face of the instrument. I am surprised that Robert adopted it. I wonder more that you did not demand a receipt, also."

"If I recollect rightly, I did, and received one," returned Colonel Floyd, very busy with the refractory package, his fingers becoming more awkwardly unsteady every instant. "Have it at home. I can show it to you, if you doubt my word, Mr. Lay," summoning his proudest manner and accent.

"I have not intimated such a doubt," replied Aleck, calmly. "My brother's movements of late are enveloped in so much obscurity, and about many of them hangs such an air of mystery, that I am excusable for examining somewhat narrowly into all that can be ascertained concerning the last day or two which he passed at home."

"Certainly! certainly! You are quite right, sir!" Colonel Floyd crowded the packet into his pocket. "And I assure you that any information that I can afford you, any light that I can cast upon this unhappy affair is quite at your command, Mr. Lay. But, to be frank with you, I must say that his conduct is not wholly unaccountable to me. Young blood is hot, and young judgment hasty—and Mr. Robert Lay was young, ardent, injudicious. I have heard rumours of his serious losses at play and other unfortunate indiscretions, to which I would not allude in your presence, but for my desire to elucidate what appears to be a puzzle to you."

There was a stain of fresh blood on the lip Aleck's teeth let go, at the conclusion of this speech, but he betrayed no other sign of passion.

"If I understand you, sir, you counsel me to discretion in prosecuting further inquiries: as a friend to my brother, you would perhaps recommend that I drop them entirely?" he said, with the same steadfast look into the Colonel's eyes.

"I! I counsel nothing! As I have remarked, I stand prepared to render you what assistance I can. My deeds are ever open to the day. The arrangement is, then, Mr. Lay, that I meet you to-morrow at the clerk's office, and settle with you so far as is practicable, upon so short a notice. It is fortunate that I chance to have several thousands lying in bank at this juncture, or your fair wife's precipitate action might have taken me at a disadvantage"—bowing to Helen.

"I do not see how that could be, sir," she was provoked to reply. "You had several months' notice—"

He interrupted her. "Of your contemplated marriage with Mr. Robert Lay, I grant, my dear lady! But there were certain circumstances I will not now stop to explain that made a prospective settlement with your *bona fide* betrothed and present husband a very different affair from what my reckoning with his brother would have been."

Helen was literally too angry to speak—too much incensed to make any return to the pompous adieus that wound up this impertinence.

Aleck attended her whilom guardian to the door—neither his wife nor himself extending to him an invitation to tea—and remained there after the buggy had driven away, pacing hard and hurriedly to and fro upon the piazza, until the bell rang for supper. Then he made no haste to answer the call.

"I wish Aleck would come in," mildly complained his aunt; "the muffins will get solid, and the chickens cold. I should think he would be hungry after travelling so many hours."

Helen said nothing, but seating herself at the head of the board, began setting out the cups and saucers upon the tea-tray.

"Ring that bell again!" Miss Ruth ordered, presently, as the last hope of saving her hot fowls and puffy muffins from woeful depreciation; and at this second call the master came.

"He might as well have stayed away, for all he ate!" thought Aunt Ruth, despairingly noting the untouched food upon his plate.

He drank a cup of coffee, declined his wife's coolly civil offer to send him another, and sat stirring and inspecting the grounds or sugar left in the bottom of the cup, with assiduity as serious as that

displayed by the most accomplished fortune-teller. His brows were bent into settled severity; his mouth compressed into sternness as immovable; and when he answered the two or three queries with which his aunt found courage to ply him, his tone was absent and dreamy. Whatever might be the theme of his cogitations, he studied it with every energy of heart and mind, to the exclusion of every other. Finally he pushed back his chair, hardly vouchsafing a brief "excuse me!" to the ladies, and left the table.

"Is Petronius at home?" he demanded of the servant in waiting.

"I believe he is, sir."

"Go and see, and when you find him send him to me, in the library! I have letters to write, Helen," he added, "several that must go by to-morrow's mail. I am sorry to seem unsocial on the evening of my return, but it cannot be helped." He went out.

Helen, too, arose. "Take more wood into the library!" she said to another domestic. "Your master will probably sit up late."

Not a tone faltered. Her lids were level and dry; but Aunt Ruth divined something of the storm of feeling waxing to its height, and not unreasonably associated these signs of the times with Aleck's reserved, morose mood.

Left to herself to survey the slighted feast, to whose demolition she had looked forward with such lively and innocent delight, the old lady shook her head at the closing door as Helen vanished through it, and sighed a regretful, but not hopeless, "yes."

Not hopeless—for the dear soul had heard of lovers' quarrels, and the certainty and sweetness of reconciliation, and believed that she read correctly the symptoms of this famous but not dangerous distemper, in conduct that would upon any other hypothesis have been inexplicable and unpardonable. Acting upon this persuasion, she lingered not long in dining-hall or parlour. In the last-named room Helen kept her company, sewing steadily, and talking, not freely or continually, but pleasantly, when she did speak; the scarlet spot in either cheek and her curling lip evincing that the inward strife was still far from being quelled.

"Proud! proud!" soliloquized Aunt Ruth, mentally. "Lucifers in pride—both of them! The best thing I can do is to leave her to solitary reflection for awhile; at any rate, to take my old useless body out of the way, in case he should give in first—as I've heard that men

are apt to do—and come to look for her. They will never make up while there are others by. Helen, dear!" she said aloud, "I am pretty tired to-night, or else it is this warmish weather that makes me drowsy. I believe I will go to bed if you won't mind my leaving you. Aleck will be in pretty soon now, to hinder you from getting lonesome. His letters can't keep him much longer."

"If they do, I shall not be lonely, aunt. Do not let me keep you up a minute longer than is convenient or pleasant for you. I shall retire early myself."

Yet she sat there for two long, long hours, hoping, listening, longing, and resentful, sullen, desperate, by turns; now half resolved to seek him, to cast herself upon his bosom and supplicate for some demonstration of the affection so freely and richly lavished upon her heretofore by eye, word, and caress; now avowing that she would die of heart-break sooner than she would adopt a course so humbling to woman's pride. At eleven o'clock she folded her work, closed the shutters, fastened down the windows, and extinguished the lamp, exercising no remarkable degree of caution in performing the work. The library adjoined the sitting-room, and although there was no door of direct communication between the two, yet the occupant of the former could not well avoid hearing and understanding the meaning of the bustle prefacing her retiring for the night. If he did hear it, he would, if he had any consideration for her wishes and feelings, leave his employment—"important" as it was—and come to their chamber to exchange a few words with her before bidding her "good-night." Therefore, she dismissed her maid, professing that she was too wakeful to sleep, and wished to read awhile; then drew her chair near the fire—again to hearken for feet that did not come, to pine for loving tones and language that were not now to feed her hungry heart.

The hands of her watch pointed to twelve, when, exhausted and disheartened, she lay down upon her pillow, and she tossed there a dreary while before falling into a troubled sleep. Dreams connected and vivid, came with more profound slumbers. She was sitting upon the great rock at the spring, in the soft, summer moonlight with Robert. The story of his long-cherished attachment was still sounding in her ears, awakening the strange, sad heart-ache, the mingled pity and sisterly tenderness she remembered so well; his hand

enfolded hers ; his arm was about her waist ; when—sudden, stern and sad, up started the form and lineaments of his brother, and the whole might of her heart's love leaped out towards him. She stretched her arms to him ; cried in the unutterable agony of her soul for him to come and release her—to take her with him—that she loved him—him only—him always ! But he turned scornfully away, and Robert's grasp was inflexible as chains of wrought steel, binding her with a pressure that nearly deprived her of breath.

“ Mine ! mine ! ” he said, in fierce earnestness—“ until death us do part ! ”





#### CHAPTER XIV.



WITH a smothered shriek—a last frenzied cry of “Aleck dearest Aleck !” Helen awoke from the nightmare.

She was sitting upright ; the cold sweat dripping from her forehead ; her hands clasped, and her lungs heaving convulsively, as if the imaginary pressure had been real, and but just removed. The room was dimly illumined by the dull, red glow of the embers. She had replenished the fire just before going to bed. Had it burned out so soon ? Groping her way to the mantel she struck a light and looked at her watch.

Ten minutes past two ! and she was still alone ! Where was he ? Was there then truth in the horrible dream that had scared her native bravery from her breast, and had he deserted her ? Or, was he ill ? Had sudden sickness, or fatal accident befallen him in that far off, lonely room ?

Seeking hastily for a wrapper, she took down from the wardrobe the crimson cashmere robe she had worn when summoned to meet Aleck in the office, on her wedding night. She thought of that interview while preparing for this, and the memory strengthened her resolve. Taking the candle with her, she stepped out into the cheerless hall. A ray of light stole from under the library door, but all was still within. Her soft step had not disturbed the student. With a beating heart she turned the bolt and entered.

“ Who is there ? ” cried Aleck, angrily springing to his feet.

Then, as his wife’s pale, shocked countenance met his sight, he passed his hand over his eyes, as if to dispel the mists of some horrible illusion, and said more gently,

"Ah! Helen! is it you? You startled me a little; is anything the matter?"

"Not with *me*, darling!"

She had seen his face, and pride and resentment fled apace. The terrible anguish that had ploughed those furrows in the brow, and left its imprint upon every feature, should not be borne by him alone, while she lived to share the load. She crept up to him like a child to whom perfect love has taught boldness, and wound her arms about his neck; drew down his cheek to hers.

"Aleck? dear husband! you cannot reject my sympathy in your trouble, even while you may not think it best to confide to me its nature. I wish I could bear it with and for you!"

He strained her to his heart, as if he would never let her go.

"Darling! darling!" was all he could say, in accents strangled by the welling of the pent-up flood of feeling.

Then he placed her in the chair from which he had arisen; knelt before her, and still holding her in his arms, buried his face in her lap, while a storm of sobs shook his whole frame. The bewildered and terrified wife strove by every loving art to win him back to composure. Not once did she inquire into the cause of the agitation that could so master his healthy nerves and powerful will. She only implored him to be comforted, for her sake; reminded him that whatever other calamity had befallen him, they were still spared to one another; that their mutual affection remained unchanged.

"You *are* mine! mine only—are you not?" he asked, suddenly lifting himself to look at her. "You gave yourself to me not because you believed another unfaithful, but because you loved me."

"You know that I have always loved you, dearest."

She pressed her lips to the hot eyes, laid his head upon her bosom.

"Do not think me weak, unmanly," he said, gratefully; "but I had sat here all the night, surrounded by images of such horror, beset by reflections so agonizing, that the reaction produced by your blessed companionship was too great. I shall not be overpowered again. You have done me good, my comforting angel. Poor child!" he continued, stroking the pallid face bowed over his. "You are worn out with watching and anxiety. I am a careless brute, who does not deserve such a wife."

Her hand was upon his mouth, and stopped the words.

"I am not worn out; I have had a long nap, and, awaking, was alarmed to find how late it was; became uneasy lest you might be sick, or some accident had happened, and came to look for you. This is the history of my intrusion."

"Intrusion! a welcome diversion! I was under a spell, and might have remained here until dawn, without moving, had you not broken it."

He was sitting upon the sofa now, and pulled her, with gentle force, to his knee. As she complied with his wish, she saw his eye rest upon a pile of papers heaped in the middle of the table, and that a shuddering anguish, a fearful look of sorrow and rage, went over his visage; felt him tremble violently under her weight.

"I cannot have you stay in this haunted chamber," she said, in forced playfulness. "The influence of the unholy spell is upon you still, I see."

"If I could tell you—but no; it would be cruel!"

"To me, do you mean? If that withholds you from speaking freely, I can answer the objection. How often have you declared that I was the bravest girl in Christendom? And I am *your wife* now, Aleck."

"Thank God for that!" was the fervent response. "There have been moments to-night when I have been ready to call myself a villain, an unscrupulous, criminally-selfish villain, for having married you at the time and in the manner I did. But you are my witness, dear one, that, passionately as I loved you, I never uttered a syllable that conflicted with Robert's rights until I believed that you were freed, and by him."

"Aleck, what are you saying? Did he not free me?" exclaimed Helen, growing deathly pale, more at his look and manner than his language.

"Hush, love! As I have said, you are mine, lawfully and for ever. There was no wrong in what we did, although a morbid sensibility may discern cause for regret that our action was so hasty—that we relied too readily upon the evidence furnished us. But the result would have been the same had we waited for further developments; be assured of that. I would have made you my wife at the earliest date to which I could gain your consent, in spite of



our sorrow and the opposition of others. What should I do without the consolation of your society, the cordial of your sympathy, now?"

"You are talking in enigmas," said Helen, colourless as marble, yet speaking firmly. "And since you have said thus much, I must know all. You wrong me in keeping it back. Every moment of suspense causes me additional and needless suffering. I cannot only be strong, but prudent and secret."

She stood in front of him with composed and resolute mien.

"Not so. You must come back to your old place, to your home, dearest. Only while I hold you fast, and feel the touch of your hand upon mine, can I have courage to go through with the sad tale. I will tell you! my heart aches to pour out its grief before you, and the knowledge must come to you sooner or later. Have you the strength to listen now?"

"I have the strength for anything—for every thing but this racking suspense."

Carefully and gradually as he could, in his own excited state, he unfolded to her all that he had learned and suspected within the past four days.

While in Baltimore he had gone into a jeweller's in quest of some gift for her, and looking idly into a show-case of watches, espied one resembling so precisely a time-piece he had sent Robert from Europe, a year before, that he had asked leave to examine it. His gift to his brother was inscribed on the inside of the case with a peculiar cipher composed of their joint initials, and to his astonishment, he found this identical hieroglyph within that he now held.

"This is a second-hand watch, I perceive," he remarked to the proprietor of the establishment.

"It is, sir, but a first-class article. One seldom sees a finer specimen of the kind in this country."

"I think that I recognize it as an old acquaintance," rejoined Mr. Lay, nonchalantly as he could speak. "If I were sure of the fact I should certainly buy it. Will it be any breach of confidence if you tell me the name of the person from whom you had it?"

"None, whatever, sir, provided we know it ourselves. Everything in our business is conducted fairly and aboveboard," replied the merchant, willing to secure a purchaser.

He referred to his books for the desired information. The watch

was brought to the store on the twentieth of January by a gentleman who professed to dispose of it on behalf of another—but, beyond this, Aleck could learn nothing. The clerk who had concluded the bargain was out, and none of the other employés retained any recollection of the customer's appearance or name. Stipulating that he should have the refusal of the watch until a certain hour in the afternoon, Aleck left the shop and went to transact some business at the bank where his account had been kept ever since he reached his majority.

He was personally well known to the officials there, and the cashier, while paying over the amount he wished to draw, observed : —“ By the way, Mr. Lay, I hope your brother has no cause of dissatisfaction with us. His deposits have usually been heavy, and his drafts so infrequent as to leave a large amount always to his credit. But, one day, about the middle of January, he surprised us by drawing upon us for every cent he had in our hands —for more, in fact, as he has learned from the statement of account we forwarded to him by mail. He overchequed, inadvertently, to the amount of five hundred dollars.”

“Impossible !” ejaculated Aleck. “Who presented the drafts?”

“A neighbour of yours, I think—Colonel Floyd.”

“What !”

“Unless I was mistaken that was the name by which your brother's letter introduced him,” answered the bank officer in some surprise. “I kept it as a voucher, although the bearer came to us in company with a well-known and highly respectable citizen.”

“I should like to see both letter and draft, if you please !” requested Aleck, recovering himself.

They were quickly produced. The note was brief, and dated December 24th ; and it, as well as the drafts, bore Robert's signature.

“The genuineness of which I deny !” said Aleck to the alarmed cashier. “In the first place, I do not believe that my brother would have taken a step so singular and important without consulting me ; in the second, I happen to know that Colonel Floyd would not be the individual likely to be intrusted with this business. Mr. Robert Lay is not at home just now, and I ask you as a favour, to let the matter rest until I can privately investigate it.”

The promise was willingly given, and the perturbed Aleck

directed his steps again to the jeweller's, more anxious than ever to obtain possession of the watch, and unriddle the mystery of its present ownership.

The head clerk was in the store this time, a sharp, quick Yankee, whose wits were always on the alert, and was in this case, disposed to be very communicative. He recollected perfectly the incident of the watch being offered for sale, and the physiognomy, form, etc., of the man who brought it to the establishment. His attention was particularly drawn to these by the oddity of the proposed negotiation on the part of a gentleman so imposing in demeanour, and stylish in apparel. He could tell more; for chancing, on the day after the purchase, to enter the office of a certain fashionable hotel, he had seen the same person sitting there, smoking in company with a party of acquaintances—had inquired his name, and learned that it was Floyd.

With the watch safe in his pocket, Aleck thanked the obliging salesman, and hurried off to follow up another clue to the truth of the dark surmise he yet entertained vaguely—almost blindly. This was an inspection of the hotel register of January 20th. He found upon the record of the 18th Colonel Floyd's name, written in his dashing hand. He had been in the city at that date then, although Aleck had never heard of the visit until now. He it was, beyond a question, who had presented the false cheques, if false they were, and sold the watch. Could he be acting as Robert's agent? Accredited, yet secret? If this were so, there was deep villany somewhere; if not, imagination recoiled at the black abyss of crime unveiled by the doubt. Still undergoing the torments of indecision and never-still suspicions, he set out upon his return journey.

The nearest depôt to Maple Hill was Rock's Tavern, to which place Robert's farewell letter to his brother had directed him to send for his horse. Hero had been found there, securely stabled, and had now occupied his old stall at Greenfield for many weeks; but motives of delicacy, the principal of which was to shield Robert from public remark, had deterred Aleck from making any inquiries as to who had left the animal in the ostler's care. Dismissing these now as absurd, where issues so momentous were involved, he, upon his arrival at the tavern, made it his business to search out the negro who had charge of the stables, and recalling to his mind the circumstance and the time of its occurrence, asked whether he had himself seen Mr

Robert Lay while he waited at the house for the afternoon train. The fellow professed to recollect everything connected with the matter, and was positive in declaring that the horse had not been brought to the stable until two hours after the cars had passed, and when it was already dark ; that his rider was a negro of gruff speech and few words, who represented that he had been ordered to leave the horse in his, the ostler's, keeping, until Mr. Alexander Lay, of Maple Hill, should send for him, and forthwith departed upon foot. He would be loath, he subjoined, hesitatingly, to get an innocent person into mischief, but one of the stable-boys had recognized the horseman by flashing a lantern into his face as he was leaving the yard. He was, the groom was certain, a free coloured man of questionable character, who lived about five miles away.

Aleck diverged from his road on the way home, to call at this fellow's abode—a mean cabin, situated in a pine grove about midway between Colonel Floyd's plantation and the depôt, a sequestered, ill-looking spot, fit to be the scene of evil deeds that shunned the light. The owner of this choice habitation was absent, but his wife appeared at the door when the carriage stopped, and manifested signs of extreme trepidation at beholding the visitor. Alighting with a severe, determined countenance, Mr. Lay called her aside, and boldly proclaimed his knowledge of her husband's errand to the tavern on Christmas night—a job that would get him into trouble unless he could show that he came honestly by the horse, or confessed who had commissioned him to perform the act. The woman hung back for a time. She knew nothing of the matter ; she had not seen the animal ; she was away from home all Christmas week, and a dozen lies more, which Aleck upset as fast as she brought them forward. At last, as he was turning off with the warning that she and her accomplices might shortly find themselves before a tribunal where means would be devised to extort the truth, she burst into tears, and offered to reveal all she knew, provided he would not betray her to her husband. A horse had been brought to their house about three o'clock on Christmas Day, by Booker, Colonel Floyd's head man. She had peeped at him through the window as he talked in the yard with Jeff her husband, had seen him hand Jeff a bank-note, and that the latter led the horse to the rude hut they called a barn, and shut him in, locking the door and pocketing the key. She did not dare to ask question,

or indeed to mention what she had witnessed, unless Jeff should volunteer an allusion to the affair. He made but one remark that could have any bearing upon the subject, and that was at night-fall just after he had despatched his supper.

"I shan't be home until near midnight," he had said, "and I've got one word to say before I start. Whatever you've seen to-day, or may hear to-night, hold your tongue, or you'll suffer for it."

With that he went out, and she distinctly heard the tramping of hoofs soon afterwards.

"While anxiety and suspense were wrought to the highest pitch by my endeavours to shape a reasonable theory out of all this," continued Aleck, "I reached home, and the first object I beheld was Colonel Floyd's carriage, with Booker standing by it; heard from you that he himself was waiting to see me. His ostensible business was to ask me to fix a day for the settlement of his guardianship accounts. He offered the intelligence that he could hand over immediately that portion of your estate which was in ready money, and also render satisfactory statements of sales of property; the yearly crops and servants' hire; sums disbursed for your expenses; and a great deal more plausible talk, to which I lent only half an ear. As adroitly as I could in my unsettled state, I forced him to speak of his liabilities to Robert, the proofs of which I told him my brother had showed me in a couple of bonds, executed and signed by Colonel Floyd, covering an amount of nine hundred dollars. Accomplished villain as I knew him to be, I was yet thunderstruck when he produced from his pocket-book the identical bonds, and displayed a long cross-mark on the face of each, made, he averred, by Robert himself, on the day before Christmas, at which date he had paid over the full amount of his indebtedness, and received these in testimony thereof. Now, my darling, do not be too much shocked by what I am going to say. At twelve o'clock, that very Christmas Eve, Robert and I sat in my chamber, talking over his prospects, pecuniary and matrimonial, and he exhibited these very papers uncanceled—told me of the debt still due to him, expressing his doubt as to its final liquidation, and his regret for the weakness that had beguiled him into lending money to an unprincipled spendthrift."

"Can it be!" exclaimed Helen. "Yet I heard Colonel Floyd tell you—"

"You heard him tell me," interrupted Aleck, with increasing excitement, "like the liar that he is, that he had never held any communication with Robert since the noon of the 24th of December; that the annulled bonds were delivered to him at that time—the papers which I stand prepared to swear I saw twelve hours later in my brother's hands. I purposely made him repeat the statement in your presence, that I might have a credible witness of the astounding falsehood. Now come several grave questions. By what means did he obtain possession of those bonds and Robert's watch, a prized keepsake, which I have often heard him declare he would never part with on any consideration? If that woman's tale be true, and it is corroborated by the ostlers, Colonel Floyd's man Booker must have seen Robert, and had some transaction with him on Christmas morning; else how came he by the horse he left at the free negro's? What is it?" for Helen clasped her hands with a low ejaculation.

"I do not know that it is worth mentioning," she said, "but on that day I took a long walk in the woods back of Belleview, and while sitting under a clump of evergreens, a mile or more from the house, I saw Booker pass on horseback. I had only a partial view of the horse, but I remember he was dark bay in colour, and carried his head high, like a gentleman's hunter. Could it have been Robert's Hero?"

"I believe it," said her husband, emphatically. "In what direction was he going—along what road?"

"That was the strangest part of it! He rode through the thickest heart of the forest, where there was not even a bridle-path. I supposed that he was taking a short cut from the Bryantown to the Maysville road."

"The very route he would have chosen if he wished to go by stealth to Jeff Harris's house. Go on! You heard and saw nothing more while you were there?"

"Nothing; the day was very still. Oh, yes, I did hear a gun! but it sounded some distance off—I should say half a mile."

"Was this before or after Booker passed you?"

"Before—some time before. My idea was, when I saw him, that he had fired it, for there are not many sportsmen daring enough to hunt on Colonel Floyd's grounds."

"Does he allow Booker to carry firearms?" asked Aleck, assuming

the composure that was contradicted by the white strain of the muscles on the lower part of his face.

"Not that I know of. I do not recollect ever seeing him with a gun. Colonel Floyd rarely stirs from the house without his. I have told you that it was by this sign that Sally identified him in the eavesdropper behind the oak at the spring, one night, when Robert and myself were talking together."

Abandoning the effort to look and speak as if no great horror were upon her spirit, she said, gazing tremblingly into her husband's eyes—the more fearfully as she saw them try to avoid hers—

"Aleck, you have not said all yet? Tell me plainly, what is your fear? My brain is in such a whirl that I cannot connect all the circumstances you have enumerated. I only feel that there is some frightful mystery in this."

"Would it be wise or merciful in me to burden you with what may be a mistaken conjecture?" he answered, evasively. "Here are Robert's letters—or those purporting to have come from him since his strange flight. Will you look them over with me?"

The first was dated Washington, D.C., and contained but eight or ten lines. It was, as the writer termed it, "a miserable scrawl," and signed "In great haste, R. C. L." The second was longer, and date and postmark were Vicksburg, Miss. In it, he spoke of himself as a man wrecked in heart and well-nigh ruined in fortune, and intimated his intention of seeking a residence in some distant land. Dishonoured and disappointed, he could not yet face his former associates.

"I have not had one word from you, or from L., since I forsook home, and resigned reputation for her sake. Women are the most faithless of created beings, as even you may find some day to your cost. Love to your wife. I read a notice of your marriage in a Baltimore paper. Are you not obliged to me for stepping out of the way in the nick of time? She was easily consoled, and I am not the person to regret this; yet I should have respected her more if she had paid a decent regard to the proprieties of the case. I wish you joy of your bargain, and often amuse myself by fancying how entirely you agree in heaping contempt upon my devoted head. Ah, well! so wags the world! and I must not complain. It is not likely that you will

hear from me again shortly. I leave this place this afternoon, for New Orleans, where, unless I change my mind, I shall take passage for Europe. You don't care for me now, old scamp, and I am fast learning resignation to this conviction. Let Greenfield stand as it is, for a year—within which time I will forward instructions as to the disposition I wish you to make of the property.—Yours more carelessly than of yore,

“ROBERT C. LAY.”

Aleck's earliest perusal of this epistle had been so hasty and indignant that he had failed to note its irregular characters—been incapable of comparing its coarse, careless language with Robert's gentle and habitually courteous style. That his scrutiny and conclusions on this night had been more searching and correct, was evidenced by his next movement.

“Compare them !” he said, laying down before his wife a letter which his brother had written him while he was abroad.

The clean, clear sheet offered at the first glance such a contrast to the Vicksburg document that Helen changed colour with surprise and consternation before her husband proceeded, word by word, letter by letter, to point out the dissimilarity between the two. A general resemblance existed—sufficient to deceive a cursory or unsuspecting reader, but the longer one looked the more bungling appeared the forgery.

“What does it mean ?” questioned Helen, in a suppressed voice of awe or fright.

“Just this—” Aleck pressed down his wrath and grief to reply.—“just this ! our poor brother never wrote either of these communications. They are part of a villanous plot contrived to dupe us into a belief of his unworthiness, and to hide, Heaven alone knows what degree of, treachery and crime. The introductory step in the system of deception that has imposed upon no one more than myself—blind, besotted fool that I was ! was that libellous letter delivered to me on Christmas night—which—mark me ! that wretch Petronius confessed to me in this room, not four hours ago, he did not get from Robert ? The cowardly knave, terrified by my manner into the belief that I had discovered his false dealing, owned that he had cherished a grudge against me, from the evening of that meeting at Mr. Shore's, on



account of my public rebuke to himself ; that Booker had taunted him with the story several times, and, meeting him in the road on the afternoon of Christmas day, offered him a chance of paying off the score by annoying and mortifying me. The job was an easy one, and if carried through well he was to receive ten dollars. He had only to give me this letter and declare that he had had it from Mr. Robert Lay ; that he had met him at such and such a place on the road, and been commissioned to deliver the envelope into my hands. The rascally hypocrite did his work well. " Oh ! " he groaned, arising and striding through the room, " how dull—how madly stupid I have been ! "

Helen sat like a statue.

" Dearest ! " she ventured to say, after a while, " where, then, is Robert ? What has become of him ? "

He stopped—letting his clinched fist fall heavily upon the table. " Before Heaven I speak what I believe to be the truth, when I declare that Colonel Floyd *murdered* him—either with his own hands, or by means of his servant Booker ? "

In his overwhelming excitement he had not made due allowance for his wife's weaker nerves ; had not appreciated the fact that she had had but one little hour in which to receive and comprehend the dread conviction that had been growing in his mind for three days.

As the word " murdered " left his tongue, she sprang to her feet with a wild, horrified stare, and when the sentence was finished, gave a cry, and fell back fainting.





## CHAPTER XV.

**T** was not long after sunrise the next morning when Aleck Lay dismounted at the Greenfield gate. Returning slightly, and with an absent air, the surprised salutations of the few servants who were about the stables and yard, he went quickly up the walk to the house door, unlocked it, entered, and shut it behind him. The confined air in the halls struck coldly to his heart; the shadows lurking in corners, the feeble light glimmering through the barred shutters, had something ghostly about them. Unconsciously, he trod softly in ascending the stairs;—more lightly and slowly as he reached his brother's vacant chamber. It was very dark, and, to his imagination, colder than the rest of the house. It required an effort of courage to pass the threshold, and he had to grope his way across the room when he wished to draw a curtain and throw wide a blind. Every thing was in perfect order. Aunt Ruth had spent half a day there, during the first week of Robert's absence; had arranged clothing and furniture; swept and dusted, before, in obedience to Aleck's directions, she had shut up the chamber and turned the key on the outside. She had performed her self-imposed duty with many tears, but the housewifery eyes were not therefore dimmed, nor had the neat, swift fingers lost their cunning. Aleck's present expedition was undertaken at his wife's suggestion, and Aunt Ruth's motherly care for her absent boy, joined to her spinsterly particularity, was the main cause.

When Helen was fully acquainted with the nature and extent of her husband's dreads, and had regained some measure of her usual firmness and penetration, he found her acute intelligence and correct

memory invaluable assistants in forwarding his researches. She had recapitulated Sally's account of the dishonourable conduct of Colonel Floyd on the night of the rendezvous at the spring ;—his attempts to induce Robert, and then herself, to consent to a marriage contract ; his chagrin and rage at his failure, which, after overhearing the conversation under the oak, he must have known was irremediable. The maid had never dared to confide the truth of her discovery to her mistress until they were safely installed at Maple Hill, and, when she did impart it, had joined to the tale such confused details of Lily's attempted elopement, and the scene between master and man on the back porch, while she cowered under the steps, as awakened Helen's amazed curiosity, but not her fears. Now these were recalled, and Sally subjected to a thorough examination. Upon sifting her evidence, little that was new could be elicited, and she was stout in her conviction that Colonel Floyd and Booker were out "hunting runaways" when his ward was married.

Aleck, reverting to his impression that the note brought by Gabriel to Robert, on the morning of their parting, was not directed by Helen, but Lily, and coupling it with Robert's declaration that he had an appointment at ten o'clock, was sure that this assignation was, in some manner, the plan by which he was lured into danger and destruction.

"If I only had that note, I feel assured that I should hold the key to the whole mystery," he said, wistfully. "How I wish that I had not obeyed the mistaken delicacy that forbade my questioning him as to its contents !"

"Do you remember what he did with it ?" asked Helen.

"I cannot say with certainty—but my idea is that he thrust it into his vest pocket so soon as he finished reading it."

"Aunt Ruth told me not long since," said Helen, thoughtfully, "that the hardest trial she had had, in all the sorrow connected with Robert's departure, was sitting down in his deserted room and mending a vest he had thrown aside just before going out, Christmas morning. She met him on the stairs directly after breakfast, and observing that the vest had lost a button, and was frayed about the collar and pockets, advised him to change it before he went to the Court House. It was not until she visited his chamber, several days afterwards, to put away his things, preparatory to locking it up, that

she knew how well he had obeyed her injunction. The vest lay on the bureau, where he had tossed it upon taking it off. She was exceedingly touched by this proof of his regard for her wishes. It may be that the Providence who has so strangely guided your investigations thus far, may lead you to further discoveries by means of this seemingly insignificant incident. Say nothing to Aunt Ruth about it. The trouble will fall upon her soon enough. Wait for certainty."

To find this cast-off garment, then, was Aleck's object in revisiting an apartment where every thing he beheld aroused poignant grief and vain, bitter remorse. The drawers at which he began his explorations were carefully packed by Aunt Ruth's tidy hands, and his, although less skilful, handled each article with reverent tenderness. A great change had come over his thoughts of Robert. In place of the flush of shame and anger he had been used to feel warm his brow, at thought of his disgraceful flight, and the unmanly conduct that preceded it; his supposed infidelity and duplicity; the old tide of fostering fondness for his young, handsome brother joined with anguish at his loss, and deep repentance for the rank injustice he had done that gentle, noble spirit, in thought and speech, swelled his heart almost to bursting. There was no time to be wasted in unavailing lamentations, or he must have bowed before the torrent of feeling and memory that flowed at sight of many familiar, and now sacred relics. The homeliest article of apparel—Robert's hunting suit, the heavy, muddy boots he had worn upon their last tramp through the low grounds—a stained and shapeless straw hat, discarded as past worthy when the fishing season was over, and left, forgotten and useless, hanging upon a peg in the closet; these had become most precious in his sight.

One master emotion drove him onward in the work to which he believed destiny had appointed him; forced him forward over the graves of early and dear association and later loves; forbade the burning, bloodshot eyes the indulgence of a tear—the aching heart the relief of a sigh. Justice—justice, swift and awful, upon the head of his brother's destroyer! He was not malignant or vindictive by nature, but he experienced a savage thrill of exultation in the thought that the blood-hound Detection was ready to spring at the murderer's throat, ready, and straining at the least, which he—the rightful avenger of blood—held.

“ At last ! ”

He had feared lest he might not recognize the garment he sought ; yet he knew it at a glance, as it was revealed by an opening drawer of the wardrobe. It lay uppermost, smoothly folded, the wrong side out, but he recollected the glossy black silk, and its tiny embroidered rose-bud, in the portion of the fabric composing the collar. He snatched it up, then stood for a moment, powerless to end his anxiety by further examination. He had to summon physical nerve with moral resolution before he thrust his fingers in trembling desperation into the pocket. They touched a paper, dragged it forth—an envelope directed to “ Mr. Robert Lay, Greenfield,” and bearing in one corner the words—“ by Gabriel.” He was obliged to sit down to read it, he was so utterly weak. The ink was very pale, the pen-strokes delicate. An exclamation of extreme impatience escaped him at the trifling delay caused by the necessity of approaching a window before he could decipher the few lines upon which depended so much.

“ Robert ”—he read—“ I am very, very sad to-day, and there is no one excepting yourself to whom I can speak of my great trouble. It would do me good, be an unspeakable comfort, if I could have one, just one more talk with you before there is put between us a barrier that must last for a lifetime. Believe me, I am not jealous of Helen's superior claims. I pray hourly for your happiness and hers ; yet I cannot help feeling lonely now that I am about to lose my brother—my best—I had almost said, my only friend ! If you have a half hour to spare this morning, will you not meet me at ten o'clock under the spruce pine ? the picnic ground, you remember ! It is not so far from the road to the Court House that you will lose much time in complying with this, as it may seem to you, bold request. I will explain my reasons for making it when we meet. Until then, trust me so far as to believe them good and sufficient. What I have to say concerns you no less than myself. Do not disappoint me ! I shall wait for you until twelve o'clock.—Your fond sister,

“ LILY.”

Five minutes later, Aleck stood upon the piazza and shouted to a negro in the stable—

"Ben! saddle Hero, and bring him around directly! do you hear?"

"Hero, did you say, Mars' Aleck?" said the man, coming nearer.

"Hero! and hurry: are you deaf?"

The groom shook his head as he disappeared in the stable, implying that he could say much more on the subject if he cared to risk further parley with his impatient superior.

While he waited, Aleck walked the porch-floor fast and furiously; gnawed his lip, as was his trick in moments of intense excitement; drew his breath in hot pants, like a wild animal thirsting for prey. Hero was led around to the door, a splendid creature, full-blooded and thoroughly trained, stepping high and daintily.

How poor Robert loved that horse! The brother's look was not less fierce in the recollection, but the pat upon the arched neck, the word of salutation—"Hero—old fellow!" that accompanied the hand caress, were signals of the inward thought.

"He's dreadful skittish now-a-days, Mars' Aleck!" cautioned the ostler, respectfully. "Not a man on this place dars to back him. Pears like he's been bewitched sence he was fetched home from Rock's tarvern! He flung Art'ur three times on de way from dar—as you heerd, may-be. Sumthin or somebody's sp'ilt h'im for good an' all—I'm afeard!"

"He won't throw me! Whoa!"

A spring seated Aleck in the saddle,—the horse bounded forward, and steed and rider swept down the lane with the rush of a whirlwind.

"Thar's a par of 'em!" commented Ben, recovering his breath. "How Mars' Alecks' eyes did snap! Wonder what's crossed him now? I'd rather meet de debbil on de darkest night dat ever shone dan to stan in his way when his blood is up?"

It so happened that the illustrious Gabriel was at that very moment sauntering along the middle of the high road, in the direction of Belleview, snuffing in copious draughts of the pleasant air, and enjoying mightily the increasing warmth of the sun's rays upon his back. His mother, the baker of Belleview, had had "poor luck" with her last jug of yeast, and designing, on this day, to repair the misfortune, had, as he discontentedly phrased it, "rousted" her hopeful son from his bed at an unconscionably early hour, and

despatched him to a neighbouring plantation, to borrow from a sister in the profession a small quantity to "raise" the fresh supply. This was the meaning of the small tin-pail — in southern parlance, "bucket"—that dangled from Gabriel's hand, and was occasionally whirled dexterously about his head without a drop of its contents being spilled; for the errand-boy was an adept in all arts of prestidigitation that came within the range of his observation and practice.

As he walked he sang, kicking up the loose dirt in the road with his toes; stopping, now and then, in his march, never in his song, to stiy a stone at a bird, or a bushy evergreen where bird or hare might be hiding.

"In old Kentuck, in de middle of a brake,  
 Dar lives a nigger, an' dey call him Jake:  
 Aroun' de wood his axe am ringin',  
 An' dis de song dat he am singin':—  
 Oh, whar did you come from?  
 Knock a nigger down!  
 Oh, whar did you come from?  
 Knock a nigger down!

"Hi! what dat?"

Ballad and feet were arrested that he might hearken. From afar off came to his ears the long, rapid gallop of a strained or fiery horse, beating loudly upon the softened ground! ringing sharply against the stones.

"Somebody in a hurry soon in de mornin'!" and evidently considering this a ridiculous instance of non-improvement of the rights purchased by early rising, he laughed, and went on in the roundelay:

"Oh, come, my lub an' go wid me!  
 We're gwine for to leave dis back country;  
 Hoss an' a cart for to tote you roun',  
 Walk up hill an'—

"Lor! of 'tain't Mars' Aleck!"

There was a level and straight stretch of road before him, and just entering this vista he descried a horseman bearing rapidly down towards him. Aleck Lay had never spoken unkindly to the boy; on the contrary, the graceless imp had received from both brothers pleasant jests, friendly notice, and donations which were innumerable by his arithmetical powers. There was no conceivable reason why

he should fear to encounter either of them, if his conscience were void of offence as was their conduct; yet he stood stock still for an instant, eyes starting from their sockets, staring at the advancing terror; then, seized, as braver men—ay, and brave armies have been since—by an unreasoning panic, he darted to the roadside fence, scrambled over it, and scampered across the field beyond, fast as his legs could carry and fear could drive him.

“Hallo, there? Gabriel, I want to speak to you?” called Aleck, who by this time was near enough to identify the flying figure.

Gabriel ran on the faster, looking over his shoulder to see whether he were followed; and, irritated at his contumacy, Aleck put Hero at the fence, cleared it, and galloped over the fallow ground upon the fugitive's track. A race so unequal could not last long.

“Stop, you scoundrel, or I will ride you down?” came so distinctly to the boy's ear that he again glanced back, to calculate his chances for gaining the next and a higher fence.

Not a dozen yards in his rear was his pursuer; his orbs of fire seemed to scorch his sight, even in that brief glimpse; before he could run ten steps further, the horse, whose streaming mane, glaring eyeballs, and open mouth gave him the aspect of a demon, would be upon him. He yelled with affright, and dropped prone upon the earth.

“You young villain!” Aleck leaned from his saddle, and grasping the boy by the collar, dragged him to his feet. “You audacious rascal! what do you mean by running away from me when I order you to stop?”

“Lor' a massy, Mars' Aleck! is it you? I 'clar 'fore gracious I thought 'twas an evil! I 'most skeered out of my senses!” stammered the victim, affecting the uttermost astonishment.

His captor was in no humour to be amused.

“If I served you right, I would flog you soundly!” he pursued, giving him an admonitory shake, under which Gabriel staggered more than was at all necessary. “You knew me perfectly well before you started to run. If you want to save your bones, tell me the exact truth in answer to the questions I am about to ask you.”

“Yes, sar!” Gabriel surveyed the heavy hunting whip in the rider's hand with an air of serious reflection.



"You brought a letter to Mr. Robert Lay on Christmas morning. Who sent it?"

"How was I to know, Mars' Aleck?" whimpered the hypocrite, the picture of aggrieved innocence. "I didn't see it wrote."

"Who gave it to you?" Aleck tightened his hold on the collar and raised his whip. "I'm not to be trifled with, boy!"

Gabriel studied the lowering visage above him.

"If you won't tell on me, sir. Dey said dey would kill me ef I let on a word, an' what dey says, dey will do, Mars' Aleck!"

"So will I! you may be sure of that! What did you do with the letter Miss Helen sent by you, which you promised so faithfully to carry safely?"

"Wasn't dat de same I gave to Mars' Robert?" letting his under jaw drop, and looking as like a fool as he could.

"I shall have to do it, I see!"

Aleck jumped from his horse and clutched the liar's arm, his mien so full of wrathful determination that the last spark of Gabriel's audacity expired.

"Ef you jes won't, sir, I will tell you all—every single thing!" he begged, quaking with fear. "Marster, he nabbed me in de stable, while I was gettin' de horse ready, an says he, 'Gi' me de letter!' and fore I knowed whar I was, Mars' Aleck, he had it in his hand, an says he to daddy, who had come in arter him—'Keep him here till I come back!' and he went to de house. Byme-by, here he come, wid anudder letter, or maybe de same—I can't read, you member, Mars' Aleck—an tells me to ride like fury over to Greenfield an 'liver it, an ef I ever breathed a word of what he said or done he'd make mince-meat of me; and daddy says, 'Ef you open yer ugly mouth 'bout dis I'll mash it in for you;'—an what was a poor feller to do, Mars' Aleck? Miss Helen, she can tell you how bad I felt when she talked to me so kind dat day, an I didn't dar, for my life, to let her know how I had 'ceived her. I'm sure I allers set a deal of store by Miss Helen."

"And that is all you have to say?" interrupted Aleck. "To whom did you give the note Mr. Robert Lay sent back by your hand?"

"To daddy," the boy confessed, shamefacedly. "He was waitin for me at de fur gate, an I dar'sn't say 'no' to him when he speaks"

his mind. He gi' me orders as how I was to tell Miss Helen dat 'Mars Robert hadn't wrote nothin', but jes said 'All's right,' an I stuck to de story, as Miss Helen knows."

"That is all now, is it?" interposed Aleck, as before.

"Everything, sir! I clar 'fore gracious I don't know nothin' besides, and I never told a lie in my born days, only 'cept that once—"

His auditor had other work before him than staying to remind the pattern of juvenile veracity of the array of fibs he had endeavoured to palm off upon him five minutes previous to this solemn asseveration. It was not certain that he heard any part of it beyond the first section, for, before it was finished, he was scouring the field, at full speed, towards the highway. Gabriel stood motionless and agape until he saw Hero leap the fence and the centaur-like figure vanish, with meteor swiftness, at a curve in the road.

Then he remarked, with philosophical coolness—

"Dat ar' horse is done some fox-huntin' in his day, I reckon!" and bethought himself of his pail of yeast.

Not a drop remained in the fallen vessel;—worse than that! Hero had put his iron foot upon it and crushed it—to borrow Gabriel's simile—"flat as a pancake," cover and all! Here was a predicament! Explanation of some kind was unavoidable, and a flogging equally inevitable. The only question that remained for his fertile genius to work upon during the melancholy stroll homewards, was whether the aforesaid flagellation would be lighter if he made a partial confession of the facts in the case, or if he plied his maternal parent with an entirely original version of the accident.

To these perplexing lucubrations we are compelled to leave him, that we may follow the proceedings of a more interesting personage.





## CHAPTER XVI.

**A**BOUT noon of the same day, a party of four horsemen halted in the public route to the Court House, at the entrance—if entrance it could be called—to a disused cart-road which led into the Belleview woods. There were still “draw bars,” that is, rails, that could be slipped back through their openings in their supporting posts, marking the spot where vehicles—wood-carts and farm-waggon—were once wont to pass in, but they were now moss-grown and decayed, and sumach and huckleberry bushes grew thickly on the other side. None of the band hesitated, however, to follow their leader when he tore the rotten rails from their rests, and, remounting, rode boldly past the sign-board, a new and staring one, that forbade trespassing “under the severest penalty of the law.” One pointed this out silently to another as they entered the gap, and the exchange of looks was pregnant with meaning.

“That was put up the first week in January,” said a third. “A queer time to warn off poachers. Especially when there is no game worth shooting in these woods at any season!” said his companion.

The fourth man said nothing—only pushed on deeper into the forest. He knew well the position of the “spruce-pine” and the “old picnic ground.” The tree, the solitary specimen of the kind in the vicinity, stood on the verge of a little glade, a natural break in the wood, turfy, and not too densely shaded, where, years ago, the young people for miles around had held a sylvan fete—a bounteous dinner, and a dance on the grass that lasted until dark. Robert had danced with Lily Calvert more frequently than with any other girl there,

and Helen was oftenest his brother's partner. How strangely the vision of the holiday scene arose before the latter now, bent as he was, upon a mission so fearfully at variance with the events of that midsummer day!

He was diverted from his saddened musings by the extraordinary conduct of his horse. He had ridden Hero that morning at Helen's desire. She fancied that she would be able to decide, upon seeing him now, whether he were the animal Booker rode upon that momentous Christmas day; and although, after hearing Gabriel's story, Aleck had not deemed it necessary to afford her an opportunity to apply this test to her memory, he had not cared, or indeed thought, to exchange the steed for his own riding-horse. He had gone by the most direct road to the Court House, laid his story before a magistrate, obtained a search-warrant, and authority to arrest the suspected man; collected a few friends in whose zeal and discretion he could confide—the magistrate asking permission to be one of the number—and having despatched a line to Maple Hill, to allay the solicitude his wife might feel at his prolonged absence, had set out for the spot designated in Lily's note. They had quitted the faint wheel-ruts that marked the windings of the old road several minutes before, and were making their way, still piloted by Aleck, in the direction of the spruce-tree, when Hero stopped short, threw up his head, and uttered a shrill neigh—a sound so expressive of terror, so like a human utterance of fear or anguish, that it thrilled every heart.

"Is this the place?" asked one of the party, in an awed whisper, riding up close to Aleck's side.

"No! it is fully a hundred yards off! On, sir!" he urged the animal, and mad with impatience, forgetting that it was Robert's horse, and entitled to all gentleness of treatment at his hands, he struck him sharply with the whip. Hero reared once, then stood like a rock, his fore-feet planted deep in the damp woody soil, ears pointed forward, eyes dilate, and nostrils quivering widely, the picture of mortal fear.

"There is something in this, Lay!" said the magistrate—a grave, judicious man, whom no one had ever accused of excitability of imagination or a too ready credulity. "Gentlemen, if you please, we will examine this ground before going further!"

Every man was upon his feet in a moment. The undergrowth was thick thereabouts, and they literally crawled upon their hands and knees in their anxiety to make the search thorough. Stones were upturned; leaves swept away, that the bare earth might testify of any recent disturbance; broken twigs and boughs inspected; but the keenest eyes discerned nothing unusual, nothing that varied from the ordinary aspect of a winter forest.

Leaving their horses, they went on foot to the natural clearing marked by the evergreen spruce, and there the examination was, if possible, more narrowly vigilant, and with a like result. There was absolutely naught to indicate that any deed of violence had ever marred the peaceful quiet of the pretty glade. The sun shone brightly upon the young turf, already sprouting under the genial skies; and warm breezes of the past week; there were birds twittering in the naked branches above their heads; and as they drew together in the centre of the grass-plot, for conference upon the next best step to be taken, a hare, the most timid of forest-bred creatures, scudded by on her way to her not distant form.

"We must make the arrest without additional evidence, gentlemen!" decided Mr. Reverdy, the magistrate. "Colonel Floyd's possession of the watch and bonds must be accounted for, and the matter of the supposed forgery cleared up, before we can lawfully or conscientiously abandon the task we have undertaken."

"It will be a bad business for us all if he gets clear, after we have brought so serious a charge," demurred one of the quartette—a nervous, cautious man, and a near neighbour of the Floyds. "The colonel is a troublesome customer to manage, when his blood is up. I shouldn't relish being at enmity with him, if he is to go at large. He never forgives an affront."

"Then, Mr. Dickson, you had better not accompany us!" rejoined Mr. Reverdy, in calm contempt. "For my own part, I shall probe this affair to the bottom, at any and every cost to myself. If no one else will go with us, Mr. Lay and myself will serve the warrant. Shall we return to our horses?"

Murmuring something to the effect that he had been "misunderstood," and that he was as "little afraid as any other man," Mr. Dickson walked back with the rest.

"Lay! this is certainly very singular!" said the foremost of them, going up to Hero, and laying his hand upon his neck.

The poor beast was covered with sweat, and shook in every joint. He responded to the friendly touch by another frightened neigh,—wild and piercing as the former; and when Aleck took him by the head to lead him on again, struck his hoofs deep into the earth, and pulled back with all his might. They all gathered about him, in wonderment and inquiry. Aleck was the first to remark that the creature paid no attention to their movements; that his eyes were fixed upon a cluster of saplings not four feet off. This they had examined more than once in their fruitless quest, but the change in his features now directed the attention of the others to the place.

"There are no pine-trees near! Those are hickory saplings! Why should the ground under them be covered with pine-needles!"

The exclamation acted like an electric shock. All sprang forward to the work of clearing away the thick brown covering. It was several inches in depth, and looked as if swine had been bedded there during the cold weather—an illusion that had completely imposed upon the search-party, until they observed that the leaves could not have fallen from the trees above; and the improbability that they had been brought from a distance for such a purpose, when the herd could as well have been littered under the pines themselves, presented itself to every mind. A hoe, spade, and pickaxe were hastily produced from a bag which was lashed to the front of Hero's saddle, and while three used these to rake off the matted needles, the fourth scraped it aside with his bare hands.

It was removed in less time than it has taken to describe the process, and there remained exposed a considerable area of lighter colour than the black, rich soil around it, as if the earth had been carefully spread over a wide space, to avoid the appearance of elevation in any one spot? Near the middle of this was plainly visible a sunken spot, long and narrow, and perfectly regular in outline. Not a word was uttered, of command or remark, as each of the three men bent to his work, and dug as if his own life or death depended upon his diligence.

Of the three! The spade had fallen from the nerveless hand of the fourth, and his next neighbour, he who had laboured with his fingers only, caught it ere it touched the ground, and struck it

boldly into the soil. Sick with horror, Aleck leaned against a tree, and watched the rapidly deepening chasm at his feet;—noted the signs of a former excavation, in the leaves and sticks mingled with the earth they cast up. Would they have to dig far down?—and if so, would his strength and reason endure this racking suspense until they reached it?

The pit was already two feet deep, and the dirt lay compact as ever, settled by the snows and rains of two long winter months. Three feet! they worked well! Four!—they must be nearing it!

Ha! how carelessly that man plunged the pickaxe up to the helve! Had he no thought of what he might strike—into what substance the keen, cruel point might sink at any moment! Again he swung the implement in the air—and Aleck seized his arm convulsively when he would have brought it down.

“For heaven’s sake, Dickson, be careful! you cannot be far from it now!” he cried, harshly.

None of the excited labourers had realized their exact position before; but they eyed the dimensions of the pit now with careful wondering attention, and the man who wielded the pick stepped one side and laid down the dangerous instrument. The others kept on with their task, but delved warily, more slowly—scraping instead of digging. The tedious process, necessary as he felt it to be—their expression of watchfulness as each spadeful was removed—were more horrible than all that had gone before.

“This is dying by inches,” he whispered to Dickson, who stood at his side; and he put up his hands to wipe away the cold beads that, dripping from his forehead, were literally blinding him.

“My God!”

The low cry broke from one of the workmen, and at the same instant Dickson clutched Aleck’s shoulder, dragged him some paces before he could recover from his surprise at the movement.

“You must not see this, Lay! indeed, you must not!” remonstrated the neighbour, withstanding, with friendly violence, Aleck’s struggles to escape from his hold. “Sit here!”—he pushed him down upon the trunk of a fallen tree—“sit here, until I go and see whether it is best for you to be there!”

Misled by the apparent obedience of his charge, he ran back to the grave.

A grave, in truth, it was, and within it a figure, from whose features gentle hands were that moment withdrawing the only shield between it and the earth—a coarse, grey blanket spread over the body, after the manner of a pall. Unchanged, save by the pallor of death, he slept there peacefully, as if loving, and not bloody, hands had laid him down to his long rest; as if a costly coffin had sheltered his mortal frame from the contaminating touch of his mother earth, and costly marble sought to immortalize his name and memory.

A hollow groan caused the beholders to look up, and Aleck Lay's white face was seen leaning forward beside Mr. Dickson's, turned for one second to the blue, smiling heavens, and his arms were tossed aloft, none doubted, in agonized invocation of Divine vengeance upon the murderer; then he spoke in accents more stern than sad—

“Lift him out. Mr. Dickson, your house is nearest, will you ride over and send some conveyance in which the body can be carried to Maple Hill? Frank, you will stay here until he returns, then gallop ahead, and prepare my wife for what she must see—that is, if I am not at home myself by that time. I will exchange horses with you; I think that mine will follow *him*. Mr. Reverdy, if you are ready, we will go direct to Bellevue.”

They left the corpse upon a bed, hurriedly made of dry leaves, a cloak wrapped about it and concealing it, save where one curl of fair hair, escaping from the folds, caught the reflection of the afternoon sun—Frank Travis, a cousin of the Lays, and Robert's bosom friend, and the faithful Hero, its only guards.

NOTE.—It may interest the reader to know that nearly every incident relative to Robert Lay's murder had its counterpart in a case which came within range of the author's personal observation. The most important variations in the history, as here narrated, are the needful changes of dates, names, and locality. No portion of the story is more authentic than the phenomenon of Hero's behaviour when in the vicinage of the hidden grave, and the discovery of the body as a direct sequence of the horse's remarkable conduct.







## CHAPTER XVII.

**C**OLONEL FLOYD'S horse and buggy were at the door that morning at an unusually early hour. He had business to transact with a man who lived ten or twelve miles off, and he grumbled loudly at his wife's negligence, and cursed the cook's laziness in not having breakfast precisely at half-past seven, according to the mandate he had issued over-night.

"Lily, my love, you are eating nothing!" said Mrs. Floyd, solicitously, as she witnessed her niece's want of application to the tempting repast.

"I am doing very well, thank you, aunt!" and the girl made a feint of using her knife and fork.

"Colonel, I wish you would call at Dr. Bryan's as you are passing through the village, and ask him to drop in to see her," pursued the aunt.

"What's the matter with you?" snarled the master of the household, addressing Lily.

"Nothing, sir. I feel quite well; the warm weather makes me a little languid, that is all," she answered.

But the slight agitation occasioned by his harsh, abrupt query brought a tremor to her lips and tears into the large eyes, now sadly sunken and unnaturally bright.

Her uncle scrutinized her snceringly.

"Which means that you are love-sick, and have the vapours! Vastly pretty and interesting these look to younger men, but I don't believe that Dr. Bryan will admire them any more than I do. I shan't be home to dinner, Mrs. Floyd," and having made these affectionate adieux, he stalked out.

"Nine o'clock! What is that confoundedly slow fellow lagging about now, I wonder?" he uttered, stamping upon the front steps. "Diek!" he hailed a boy in the kitchen door. "Tell Booker I am waiting for him. Make haste, you rascal! do you hear?"

"Yes, sar!"

The Colonel waited, nevertheless, for a quarter of an hour more, when the dilatory factotum emerged from his dwelling at one side of the yard, and came towards his irate master.

"Come, Booker!" called the latter, in a milder tone than he would have employed towards any other person guilty of the heinous offence of delaying a departure he designed should have been immediate upon the termination of his morning meal.

Booker drove him everywhere now-a-days. Since his apoplectic attack in December, Colonel Floyd seemed distrustful of his continued physical vigour or mental unsoundness. Booker had accompanied him during a week's absence in January—a journey whose direction and intent were not revealed to his own wife—which, Aleck had accidentally discovered, extended as far as Baltimore. The negro was not remiss in the improvement of the privileges accruing to him from his superior's partiality or conscious weakness. He lorded it with a high, hard hand over his subjects, nominal and real, upon the estate, beginning, some were bold enough to whisper, at the haughty proprietor of the manor.

"It is half-past nine, Booker, and we have a long jaunt before us."

"Yes, sir; but I should like to have a word with you first," replied the man, coolly, motioning his master further away from the porch to a position upon the lawn, where nothing they said could be overheard by the inmates of the house.

Colonel Floyd followed, submissive as a child.

"If you take my advice, sir, you will get ready for a very long jaunt," said the confidant meaningly. "If I ain't mightily mistaken, there's mischief in the wind—and a deal of it!"

"Mischief! of what kind?"

"The worst that could come 'pon you, sir; I'd better not mention it, even though there's nobody near enough to hear. Jeff Martin was here betimes this mornin', to say as how Mr. Aleck Lay stopped at his house yesterday, on his way back from Baltimore, and scared Jeff's wife—he was from home himself—into confessin' that I had

left a strange horse thar, Christmas day. The woman wouldn't allow to Jeff that she had told anything, but one of the children was listenin', and let on to his father what a fine gentleman she had had for a visitor. Jeff gave her a proper lesson how to hold her tongue hereafter, you may be sure, but that didn't undo what was done."

"Well?"

Colonel Floyd, his complexion purple-grey, was biting his nails, and grinding his heel into the turf, in a frenzy of anxiety.

Booker's tone and look were dull to stolidity.

"That's one item, sir. Another that I've just picked up is, that Mr. Aleck Lay overtook that boy of mine, Gabriel, on the road, about an hour, or may-be an hour and a half ago, rid him down, and flogged him within an inch of his life, till the young fool was obliged to tell him that the letter he carried to Greenfield before breakfast, Christmas morning, wasn't the same Mr. Lay's wife that is now, Miss Helen that was, had given him. The boy swears this was all that he got out of him, and considerin' that I've been thrashing him for half an hour, off and on, to find out the truth, it may be as he says. Now, sir, I think you'll 'gree with me when I say that, in my 'pinion, Mr. Lay has struck a dangerous scent, one that'll most likely bring him this way before night, and you'd better not be found too easy. Eight miles' ride will take you to the ferry, and by going six miles on the other side of the river, you will strike the railroad. I've got no more advice to give, 'cept that you'd better have a few clothes and a plenty of money along. It's lucky you're not short of cash just now; and oh! before I forget it, colonel, you'd as well leave me a hundred or so, for family expenses, while you're gone."

The unsurpassed effrontery of this address in the mouth of a menial, the fellow's bold, insolent visage and disregard of all the forms of respect he had hitherto affected to observe in his master's presence, passed unobserved by his horror-stricken auditor. Filled with one overwhelming conviction—to wit, that his sin had found him out, and that his one chance of safety lay in precipitate flight—a disordered recollection of his conversation with Aleck Lay upon the preceding day, combining with Booker's revelations, to heighten his dismay, he ran up to his room, his so-called servitor at his heels;

with his assistance, packed a valise with clothing; took from his secretary bank-notes and gold to a large amount—how obtained, the cashier of the—bank, Baltimore, could have told—secreted these about his person; in blind, obedient haste placed in Booker's hands the sum he required, and they were back again upon the piazza, in the buggy, and driving off ere any member of the family discovered that they had not set out at the hour originally appointed.

"Colonel!" screamed Mrs. Floyd, hastening out from the dining-room.

Booker reined up, and the meek spouse bustled down the steps to the side of the vehicle.

"My love, Lily would like to go to the Court House this forenoon, just for the ride, you know, and I think the air and exercise will do her good. Can she have the carriage and Simon?"

"She and you can go to perdition, if you like!" foamed her husband. "Stand back! Drive on Booker?"

The whip was not spared during the earlier stages of the journey, nor was there much conversation between the travellers so long as they were in their own proper neighbourhood, regarded by them as peculiarly perilous. They were within sight of the river, when Colonel Floyd inquired:

"What do you intend doing, Booker?"

"I shall go back home, sir," with a flourish of the lash about the horse's ears.

"Won't that be unsafe?"

"For me, do you mean, sir?"

"Certainly. You may be taken up as an accomplice. Had you not better stay with me?"

"No, sir!" returned the man, impudently. "That would be the unsafest course for us both! Why, it would double the chances of being caught! 'Twould be the easiest thing in creation to track a gentleman travellin' with a body-servant. I shall go home, as I said, may-be hide for a day or two, until I find out what is really in the wind, and if I must clear out, I shan't run in the same direction you've done. If I'm took, that's the worst thing that can happen, you know, sir. There's no proof, sech as inconvenient papers and the like, against me."

Colonel Floyd writhed in his seat.

“ You will not turn informer, Booker ? That would be a bad day for you, my man ! ”

The negro half laughed at the impotent menace ; the ludicrous pretence of the power of revenge from one so completely in his power. The sneer made that moment the most humiliating—save one—of Colonel Floyd’s existence, yet he could not resent the insult.

“ As to the matter of that, Colonel Floyd, we won’t argue who would be worst hurt by what I could tell. But make yourself easy, sir. My evidence could not hang you— ”

“ Hush ! ”

The other started at the word, and looked around to be sure no one was within hearing distance.

“ Could not injure you very badly, I mean, sir. I am a coloured slave—you a free white man ”—with a scornful emphasis. “ They wouldn’t swear me in a court of justice, sir. ”

It was pitch dark when Booker re-entered the outer gate of the Belleview plantation. He had contrived his journey so as to arrive at home under the shadow of night. The sky was cloudy ; the air misty. Better opportunity of concealing his approach could not have been desired ; and congratulating himself upon these, he drove carefully down the middle of the road, eyes and ears on the *qui vive* for any suspicious appearance or noise. There were lights in the windows of the dining-room, and Mrs. Floyd’s chamber, and from the open kitchen-door issued a stream of reddish light, darkened occasionally by a moving figure within. A slave in name alone, he had long cherished ambitious dreams unknown by others, divined least of all by him whom he styled “ master. ” By dint of speculation and undisguised extortion, he had amassed a larger sum than was possessed by any other bondman in the country ; treasured it secretly against such time as he should see the way clear for the prosecution of his darling scheme—viz., the acquisition of his freedom, without expending one cent of his money in its purchase. Now, he said exultingly to himself, was the propitious season ! His master a fugitive under the ban of the law, the hue and cry of the neighbourhood directed after him—himself the owner, or what, in his ethics, amounted to the same thing—the possessor of an additional sum, sufficient to carry him to Canada, if he wished to go so far—what remained to be done but to secure his hoard, and such

valuables as he could lay his hands upon, and flee under the cover of the favouring darkness?

"Whoa—there!" said a deep voice at his very ear, and betwixt him and the kitchen door he saw the dark outline of a horseman;—before he could realize the fact of the apparition, he felt the reins snatched from him on the other side; heard the trampling of hoofs and men's feet in every direction, while murmurs of inquiry and consultation were defined into a simultaneous exclamation as a lantern was unceremoniously flashed into his face.

"We've caught one of them, at all events."

He had not expected the indulgence of sleep that night, but neither had he anticipated lodgings in the county jail.

It was not often that Lily was allowed the privilege of a ride without the attendance of her aunt or one of her cousins, but this morning she had avowed frankly to Mrs. Floyd her desire to visit Helen Lay, and asked for the carriage and driver, that she might carry her plan into execution in her uncle's absence.

"He would not consent to it, aunt, and you disapprove of it, I know, but I must see Helen! I feel sometimes as if I must die unless I learn something which she only can tell me. I am not so strong as I used to be, and things worry—oppress me more than they did when I was well."

Mrs. Floyd's heart melted.

"My dear child! I would do any thing in my power to make you happy—but I really thought that you and Helen had had some quarrel about the time she was married, and not been on good terms since."

"I behaved foolishly, and, I believe, was altogether in the wrong," answered Lily, sadly. "Helen used to be very kind to me. I think she cared for me then. Nobody loves me very long!"

This pathetic petition it was that emboldened Mrs. Floyd to stay her husband's departure for the space of a whole minute and a quarter, and Lily decided to avail herself of the uncivil permission that responded to the request.

Pitying affection was Helen's predominant feeling for the erring, cruelly deceived child, yet she had rather, on this particular day, have seen a basilisk creep into her sunny parlour than Lily's wasted figure glide up to the window where she and Aunt Ruth sat at work:

—the younger lady pensive and abstracted, yet trying to appear as usual; the elder mild and sedate, quite content with the world since she had witnessed the affectionate parting of her adopted children after their early breakfast, and learned that it was Helen's headache that made her so pale and her eyes heavy—not inward disquiet—or disappointed love.

"Yes!" ejaculated the dear old creature, dropping her spectacles upon the floor, Lily's entrance having occurred at the moment when she was resetting them for some superlatively fine stitching upon a collar for her nephew.

Lily understood the "particle" as well as Aleck or Robert could have done. "It is I, Aunt Ruth—not my ghost!"

"Lily!" said Helen, rising to embrace her, "dear child! how long it is since we have seen you!"

"I know it, Nelly, but it has not been easy for to get here until now. I have longed for you lately."

Helen seated her in a lounging-chair, removed her muffings, and smoothed the pale gold hair, gazing on the altered lineaments of the lately happy, thoughtless girl, with an unspoken heart-ache.

Aunt Ruth picked up the key-basket and trotted out.

"Helen," said Lily, catching both her hands, and speaking with feverish energy—"now that we are by ourselves, tell me—have you heard any news of him—of Robert?"

Helen shook her head mournfully.

"Have you no idea where he is! What does your husband think has become of him?"

"He has a variety of surmises, Lily dear. It would do me good to repeat them—they are all so uncertain, as yet. We are both much distressed at his continued absence. It seems unaccountable, and he was not apt to do unreasonable things," rejoined Helen, commanding her looks and language to the best of her power.

"Why do you say 'was?' He is as good now as ever he was. I have faith in him, although all the world may blame him—faith to believe that he would do nothing dishonourable or unkind. Yet his silence is breaking my heart—breaking my heart!"

She bowed her face in her hands with a sobbing, plaintive cry that sounded indeed like very heart-break.

Helen took her in her arms as she would have done a child.

"Dear Lily! my sweet little sister! there is some cause for the silence that we cannot now understand—but it will be explained in time. I have all confidence in Robert's excellence and honour—and so has Aleck."

"Then you don't blame him?" Lily smiled faintly through her tears.

"We do not consider that he was in fault in any particular. The trouble was, according to our belief, that he trusted unwisely and was betrayed—"

"Not by me!" cried Lily, in alarm. "My great sin was loving him too well and envying you because of that love. I did wrong you often in thought, Helen! There were reasons when I was tempted to do it; indeed, of many little acts of spite I was guilty; but I never committed any overt deed against your peace until the day you were married. Then I received his letter—and, dizzy with the hopes it opened up to me, I forgot honour, truth, everything except him and the blessed assurance that he loved me. I would have gone to him, but my uncle overtook me on the way."

"I know!" said Helen, gently, for the girl's bright eyes and rapid incoherence of speech made her uneasy. "You need not enter upon a vindication of yourself, dear. Let bygones be bygones. If I have anything to forgive, it is forgiven, provided you forget the heartburnings and misunderstandings of that unhappy time. Let us keep up hopeful hearts for the future, and if sorrow should come, help one another to bear it."

"Only a glass of milk punch, dear!" cooed Aunt Ruth at Lily's right ear, "with an egg beaten up in it to make it nourishing! You ought to drink one every morning of your life at this season. These warm days are debilitating."

She set down a salver, containing, besides the glass of punch, a plate of light cakes, and a saucer of calves-foot jelly with cream poured over it. "To make it more strengthening," she represented.

"Ah! Aunt Ruth! you were always a sad child-spoiler!" said Lily, with a flash of her old archness. She sipped the creamy foam mantling the cordial. "It is the genuine old receipt, isn't it? Do you remember how often you come over to Belleview to make it for me, when I was recovering from the measles? and how, after I had



that tedious spell of fever, you carried me off by main force to Greenfield, and kept me there for a week, cosseting me with all manner of good things? I couldn't have been more than eight years old then, and was such a wee thing that Robert used to draw me about in his go-cart, as if I were a baby. Aunty, it would have been a happy thing for me if I had died of that fever—don't you think so?"

Aunt Ruth looked thunderstruck at this, according to her principles, impious observation.

"Why, my love," she commenced, when Helen spoke up cheerily.

"Nonsense, little one! you will change your mind when you have finished your luncheon. You need something to make your blood rich and warm, and then you will feel no proneness to misanthropy."

"It is very nice to be here!" murmured Lily, gratefully, obeying the injunction to refresh herself with the delicacies provided.

"And here you shall stay for one while!" said Aunt Ruth, energetically. "After you have drunk the punch, you must come with me to my room, and lie down until dinner-time."

"Oh! I dare not keep the horses so long!" objected Lily. "Uncle is to be away until night, it is true, but he would be angry if he heard that Simon had lost a whole day's work."

"If that is the trouble, we will send him home, and Helen or I will ride over with you this afternoon in our carriage," persisted Miss Ruth, never doubting Helen's cordial acquiescence in the arrangement, and bent upon affording "the poor baby," as she pityingly termed Lily,—a holiday—and trying the effect of an abundance of "nourishing" food upon the wan face and attenuated frame.

Lily was evidently strongly tempted. "Would it do, Helen?" she asked.

"You are the proper judge of that, dear," said Helen, very kindly.

She dreaded lest any display of her opposition to the plan should be attributed by Aunt Ruth or Lily to an indisposition to entertain her cousin in her own house—yet trembled at the thought of the tidings which the next hour might bring.

Lily took in the manner, more than the matter of the reply, and deliberated a moment.

"I will stay," she said. "It may be an age before I have another such chance of happiness."

"Yes!" said Aunt Ruth, triumphantly, without in the remotest degree assenting to the sentiment of the last clause of her pet child's remark. "Now when you have given Simon his orders, you shall go and see what a beautiful room Aleck and Helen have given me. There is a nice, soft lounge, where you shall lie, and I will tuck you up snugly for a fine nap. The punch will make you drowsy, pretty soon. That's the good of it."

"A clear case of involuntary intoxication!" laughed Lily. "Then I suppose I had better use my limbs while I have any control over them—hadn't I?" and she went to confer with Simon.

The lounge justified Aunt Ruth's recommendation, and so did the punch. For awhile Lily lay enveloped in the soft shawls Miss Ruth had tucked about her shoulders, and watching the placid, motherly countenance, whose eyes, ever and anon, strayed from her work to herself, in tender solicitude. There was a clear little fire upon the hearth, and by Aunt Ruth's footstool a grey cat, sleek and sleepy; the clock ticked as if it too were drowsy. Lily wondered whether this were owing to some peculiar knack which Aunt Ruth had in winding it, and, amused at the conceit, sank into a slumber.

She seemed to have slept but a few minutes when she awoke, and saw that she was alone in the chamber. The clock said that her "fine nap" had lasted two hours.

"Aunt Ruth has gone to see about dinner, I suppose!" she thought. "I am glad she didn't stay here on my account. Her lounge must be stuffed with poppies. I only wish I had one like it at home!"

She sighed at the recollection of the many sleepless nights that had been her portion for weeks past, drew back a curtain that she might have more light for her toilette, brushed her hair, replaced her collar, and was ready to rejoin her friends. There was an empty chair just outside the door, and, lying upon the seat, an unfinished piece of knitting work, a coarse blue worsted stocking.

"Isn't that like Aunt Ruth? She stationed one of her maids as a sentinel to prevent my slumbers from being disturbed, and the poor girl grew weary with waiting for me to release her. No wonder!"

She went down a flight of stairs and through a side-passage, without encountering a single person. In her ignorance of the topography of the house, she had taken a private way, one seldom

used except by the servants in carrying wood, water, etc., to the several rooms. Then she reached a porch, enclosed on three sides by the wings and central building, and on the fourth by Venetian blinds; and amused at her mistake, resolved to go on until she found some inhabited region, unlocked the door at the other end of this recess, and found herself in a small, dark entry, another door just ahead of her.

This series of *contretemps* Aunt Ruth and Helen had done everything that seemed necessary to prevent. The maid posted at the chamber door had strict orders to remain there until Miss Calvert awoke, and then to conduct her to Mrs. Lay's own room, there to await that lady's coming. But the girl, who had her share, and possibly more, of Eve's foible, had been seduced into a short absence. To do her justice, it was very brief, for while Lily was wandering in the by-ways of the rambling old house, her janitor, ignorant of the prisoner's flight, was sitting in the chair without Miss Ruth's apartment, knitting and listening dutifully for any sound from within. The parlour and main hall were peopled with gentlemen who would inevitably have arrested Lily's progress, but by her blunder, perhaps we should say through the design of an inscrutable and higher Will than that of short-sighted mortals, she had avoided all these hindrances, and now stood at the outer entrance of the library, Mr. Lay's especial study.

Still smiling at her adventure, Lily laid her hand upon the lock, and went in. Her motion was very fairy-like and noiseless, and her approach was unheard by the occupants of the room. A solemn group was collected there. Aleck Lay, his features settled into stern anguish, stood with one arm upholding the drooping form of his wife, who wept upon his shoulder, at the back of a sofa which was wheeled into the middle of the apartment. In front of it knelt Aunt Ruth, hands clasped as if in prayer, her furrowed cheeks bathed in tears, and eyes steadfastly bent upon the visage of him who was stretched upon the couch. A black cloak—the same that had been thrown over him when first disinterred, hid the earth-stained garments—only the face and bright hair were exposed, and these Lily's second step forward revealed to her horrified vision.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

**A**NOTHER Christmas Eve, frosty and starry, was upon the earth—and through the fading light shed from the lately crimsoned West, Aleck Lay rode slowly up the winding avenue leading to his home. Greenfield was his now, also, but he preferred a continued residence in the house to which he had brought his bride, one year before. There were associations connected with the paternal mansion, that both he and Helen felt would rest, a perpetual moveless shadow, upon the brightness of their hearthstone. Very rosy and cheerful looked the radiance from this now, through the windows of the old place, and as the smile of cheer and welcome caught his musing eye, he quickened his horse's gait.

"All well, Cæsar?" he asked of the man who held the rein, as he dismounted.

"All well, sir!"

Aleck glanced into the dining-room in passing, and spoke a kind word of greeting to the plump figure attired in black, which, knitting-work in hand, was overlooking the movements of the butler, while he laid the snowy damask table-cloth for supper:

"Helen is in her room, I suppose?" he added.

"Yes;" and to her chamber he proceeded accordingly.

She had heard his step in the hall, and met him at the door with a smile and kiss of right wifely affection. But the smile was chastened by sadness or thought—a slight cloud that did not disappear even when she stood with him by a cradle at the corner of the hearth, and saw him stoop to leave a kiss upon the sleeping face of his first-born.

"How are you feeling to-night?" he asked, fondly, after they were seated, her hand in his.

"I am very well. Aunt Ruth says I may eat my Christmas dinner with the rest of you to-morrow. I am quite strong again now, and shall be more cheerful when I can go about the house as usual,—especially when I can breathe the outer air?"

"I am glad you are to take your old place to-morrow. It will brighten greatly the gloom that must always recur upon the sad anniversary—sad—inexpressibly mournful in the recollection of one event—while it commemorates to me another—that has proved the best blessing, the richest happiness of my life. Joy and woe have flowed closely together, yet in divided streams, in our married life, darling!"

"I have been thinking of it as I sat here alone in the twilight, and reviewed the scenes of last Christmas," said Helen, a tear starting in her eye. "Then, my anxiety to hear the report of your visit of this afternoon has been painful. Was the interview a trying one to you?"

"Are you well enough to speak of these things, love? Had we not better postpone the discussion to another day?"

"Not on my account! As I have said, the anxiety and uncertainty do me more harm than a full knowledge of the truth could. How did the wretched man appear?"

"Like what you have called him—wretched—miserable beyond comparison?"

"And penitent?" interrogated Helen.

"Not in the least! Not that he does not express remorse for the deed, but it is palpably sorrow for the awful consequences to himself, not hatred of the crime, or compassion for the grief it has brought upon others. I went to the jail at his summons, prepared to grant the forgiveness which I supposed he, as a dying man, wished to entreat from the dearest earthly relatives of his victim. Instead of humble confession, I was forced to listen to a laboured extenuation of his act, and an appeal to my sympathy in behalf of himself,—'a man in the prime of his years—the scion of a long line of honoured ancestors, condemned to perish ignominiously,' as he said, 'like a common convict!'"

"Incredible! I wonder you had patience to hear him to the end!"

“It was only by bearing in mind that in three days more he would be beyond the reach of human approbation or censure, that I compelled myself to remain in his loathed presence. He was very free in his communications. The disappointment of his preposterous hope that a petition for his pardon would be presented to the governor, has apparently taken from him all desire for concealment, so far as the actions of his Past are concerned. I imagined that he experienced some relief in the horrible recital; I am positive that the attempt to excuse his motives for the committal of these atrocities brought consolation, so deplorably depraved is his conscience. That his forgery of Robert's name was not his first essay in that species of crime, he avowed with infinite coolness. From his youth the facility with which he could imitate any manuscript presented to him had been a mighty temptation to him, ‘the impulse to employ the unfortunate talent for some practical purpose’—I quote his exact words—‘had been well-nigh irresistible.’ His pecuniary difficulties had proved the incentive to this ‘error,’ in every instance; and he rambled off into an insupportable lamentation over the mortifications and hardships to which these had subjected him, until their accumulation and pressure drove him almost to insanity. Your fortune was imprudently risked in speculations that, ‘promising in their commencement, eventuated unsuccessfully.’ That meant, I knew, that the sacred trust had been squandered at the card-table, and I told him this, with no show of passion or indignation—only to recall him to the facts of the matter. Without pretending to deny this statement, he went on to speak of his embarrassment in view of your marriage; his hope that he could prevail upon Robert to execute a contract that, by appointing your former guardian the trustee of your property, would allow him an opportunity to retrieve your losses before the deficiency was detected; at any rate, prevent the institution of a legal process for the recovery of the missing amount. Foiled in this—and as he ‘accidentally discovered’—unquestionably referring to the conversation he basely manœuvred to overhear, that night, at the spring—baffled then, as he learned through the instrumentality of your influence over Robert, he devised sundry other expedients for averting disgrace and ruin. Among these was his endeavour to surprise you into signing the papers he presented to you on Christmas Eve, and the manufacture and exhibition to you

of the letter which was, after the murder, transmitted to Lily, in order to delude her into the idea that her supposed lover had left his home for her sake, and through her attempt to fulfil the appointment she believed he had made for her, to mislead others from the real track. Finding that you were bent upon keeping your promise to Robert, and disdained even to examine the proofs of your betrothed's perfidy which he professed to have obtained, he resolved, as he would have had me credit, upon a final application to Robert himself—a statement of the real condition of his affairs, and an appeal to his generosity.

“To this end he suppressed your letter to Greenfield, substituting a note purporting to be from Lily, asking for an interview at ten o'clock, couched in language he was assured Robert could not read unmoved. Leaving his horse in Booker's care, at some distance from the spot designated as the place of meeting, Colonel Floyd was proceeding on foot towards the spruce pine, when he descried Robert mounted upon Hero, slowly making his way through the underbrush, a little way ahead of him. ‘Like a flash of lightning,’ he said, ‘the thought seized me how easily I could rid myself of the difficulties that hampered me—avoid the humbling revelation, and abject petition, whose anticipation galled my proud soul into madness. My gun was in my hand’—I stopped him there—I could not hear how my only brother was killed like a dog—ay, and buried like one! God forgive me! but I could have murdered him as he told the tale!”

He covered his face with his hands.

“God forgive *him!*” said Helen, by-and-by, in a voice broken by weeping. “If ever man stood in need of the mercy which is infinite, he does!”

“I may be able to say ‘amen!’ some day,” replied Aleck, resuming his former tone and demeanour. “I cannot yet! still less could I entertain a forgiving thought while I saw his unmoved countenance; heard his garbled representations. I felt as certain then, that he deliberately laid in ambush and fired upon his prey, as I did after I proved this to his face, thrust the lying plea of manslaughter down the villain's throat!”

“Dearest husband, remember he is, as you said just now, a dying man. He will soon stand before his Judge and ours!” interposed

the wife, softly and sweetly. "In a very short time, human justice will have its full course."

"My angel monitor!" Aleck raised her hand to his lips—"I have never needed you more, my precious one, than during the hour I spent in that cell. Think how hard it was for me to learn that the vile, odious letter to myself, that, for a season, seduced me into the conviction that one of the noblest beings Heaven ever created, was a weak, perjured hypocrite, unworthy of my love as of yours; that this diabolical composition was framed and committed to paper within an hour after the murder was done! He actually penned it, sitting at Mr. Willis's private desk, Mr. Willis being in the outer office, while he, Floyd, was pretending to await the coming of him whose life he had taken!"

"Oh! horrible!" cried Helen, shuddering. "Was his conscience then altogether dead?"

"His ruling consideration then was to avert suspicion, to account to the community for the disappearance of one whose absence must, before many hours elapsed, excite universal surprise. To effect this purpose, he could imitate, with a true and cunning hand, the style and writing of our poor brother, append his name to the letter, and devise a plan by which it should reach me, without implicating the author in the remotest degree.\*

"His account of the concealment of the body in the bushes, and Booker's being sent off with Hero to the free negro's house, as well as the large bribe paid to the latter to undertake the secret service required of him, without asking any questions, tallied with that given by Booker himself, and by Jeff Martin, at Booker's trial. He alluded, likewise, to the circumstance of the seemingly miraculous preservation of the corpse for so long a time, which was owing, he supposed, to its having been nearly or quite frozen when it was interred. But to these details I could not listen, nor shall you."

"You said that you convicted him of premeditation in what he did?" said Helen, inquiringly.

"Yes! I happened to mention Booker's confession. His face darkened instantly.

"'The cowardly knave!' he said. 'But for his treachery, I should

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\* Fact.



or indeed to mention what she had witnessed, unless Jeff should volunteer an allusion to the affair. He made but one remark that could have any bearing upon the subject, and that was at night-fall just after he had despatched his supper.

"I shan't be home until near midnight," he had said, "and I've got one word to say before I start. Whatever you've seen to-day, or may hear to-night, hold your tongue, or you'll suffer for it."

With that he went out, and she distinctly heard the tramping of hoofs soon afterwards.

"While anxiety and suspense were wrought to the highest pitch by my endeavours to shape a reasonable theory out of all this," continued Aleck, "I reached home, and the first object I beheld was Colonel Floyd's carriage, with Booker standing by it; heard from you that he himself was waiting to see me. His ostensible business was to ask me to fix a day for the settlement of his guardianship accounts. He offered the intelligence that he could hand over immediately that portion of your estate which was in ready money, and also render satisfactory statements of sales of property; the yearly crops and servants' hire; sums disbursed for your expenses; and a great deal more plausible talk, to which I lent only half an ear. As adroitly as I could in my unsettled state, I forced him to speak of his liabilities to Robert, the proofs of which I told him my brother had showed me in a couple of bonds, executed and signed by Colonel Floyd, covering an amount of nine hundred dollars. Accomplished villain as I knew him to be, I was yet thunderstruck when he produced from his pocket-book the identical bonds, and displayed a long cross-mark on the face of each, made, he averred, by Robert himself, on the day before Christmas, at which date he had paid over the full amount of his indebtedness, and received these in testimony thereof. Now, my darling, do not be too much shocked by what I am going to say. At twelve o'clock, that very Christmas Eve, Robert and I sat in my chamber, talking over his prospects, pecuniary and matrimonial, and he exhibited these very papers uncanceled—told me of the debt still due to him, expressing his doubt as to its final liquidation, and his regret for the weakness that had beguiled him into lending money to an unprincipled spendthrift."

"Can it be!" exclaimed Helen. "Yet I heard Colonel Floyd tell you—"

purpose, and instructions to your accomplice? I believed, when my agents sought you in every town and city in the Union; when I urged them incessantly to greater diligence by promises of greater rewards; when I gave in my testimony at your trial; when I heard the verdict of the jurors; when I came here to listen to your dying confession, I have believed always, without a second's wavering, that you murdered foully, in cold blood, with malice and purpose aforethought, a man guiltless of wrong against you or any other mortal, and I go away more firmly persuaded than ever that my conclusion was just. I can stay here no longer. It would be worse than useless, for each falsehood makes heavier the load of your sin.'

"'One question more—but one instant!' he begged, catching hold of me, as I would have left the cell.

"I could not help tearing myself from his hold.

"'I will hear what you have to say,' I said, 'if it does not relate to the subject of which we have been speaking.'

"'It does not!' he assured me. 'I wish to enquire after my niece, who has been, since last spring, domesticated in your family—Miss Calvert. How is she?'

"'Her bodily health is good,' I answered. 'In mind she will probably never be better than she is now—a mere child!'

"'The physicians regard her case as hopeless then, do they?'

"I replied in the affirmative.

"'It might have been expected?' he said, with no more show of feeling than he had manifested heretofore. 'The circumstances of her birth were peculiar, and without doubt predisposed her to this malady. She is harmless, is she not?'

"'She is, perfectly,' I answered.

"'But idiotic—hey?'

"'Indignant at this cool questioning, I said that it was rather a partial failure of certain powers of mind, a loss of memory upon many points, and a weakening of the higher intellectual faculties; repeating, in effect, my former declaration that she was now a child, with occasional lapses into a gentle melancholy, more painful to us than it appeared to be to her.

"'I cannot but consider her state a blessing instead of an affliction,' I concluded, 'when we remember the events that robbed her of reason.'

“Ah! she was predisposed to it!” he reiterated. “I always dreaded some such calamity to her. Is it your intention, may I ask, Mr. Lay, to continue to take care of her—or will you send her to an asylum?”

“Neither my wife nor myself will ever consent to part with her, unless her health should require a change,” I said. “As to an asylum—we are assured by the best medical authorities upon these points, that no beneficial effects to her could arise from her residence in one.”

“Desperately hardened as I knew him to be, I was not prepared for his next observation—

“You may not be aware, Mr. Lay, that my niece has no property of her own—that she will be a great expense to you?”

“That does not alter my resolution, sir!” I replied haughtily.

“You are very generous! I thought it but just to yourself that you should be notified of the fact of her poverty. My sister, Mrs. Calvert, left some little money and a few slaves in my care, but I regret to say, that my own failure has swallowed up the modest provision for her daughter’s livelihood. I was the trustee of my sister’s small fortune—an appointment that gave her husband much discontent—and, I may say to you, Mr. Lay, was productive of more than one quarrel between us. Our last was a serious one, and to him very disastrous!”

“He checked himself with the same expression he had worn upon perceiving that he had contradicted himself, a while before—put his hand to his head and tried to smile. Such a ghastly grimace as it was!

“I think that my mind wanders slightly sometimes, Mr. Lay. You will excuse any incoherence or strangeness in my language or behaviour. It has been long since I had occasion to refer to these family affairs, and the mention naturally agitates me. After all, what was done so many years since, in the heat of passion, and under extreme provocation—we were both fiery tempered—what was done then cannot be mended now, and had better rest in oblivion.”

“He must be deranged!” said Helen, wonderingly.

“You would thought so, had you seen him at that instant,” replied her husband. “In another, he was himself again; desired me to give his love to Lily and his respects to you. ‘Say to Lily,’ he called me back to say—‘that I always intended to provide

for her myself—if only as some atonement—but no! perhaps you had better not repeat the message. She might not understand it. And thus we parted.”

“May I come in?” A silvery voice at the door ended the pause that succeeded Aleck’s strange, sad story.

“Come in, dear!” said Helen, brightening up, and a diminutive figure in white crept forward on tiptoe.

Her beautiful hair had been shorn during the dangerous spell of brain-fever that had attacked her ten months before, and now clustered in short, golden curls about her colourless face. Her eyes were timid and soft, like those of a shy child, and her smile infantile in simplicity and sweetness of expression. She had taken an unconquerable fancy to wear white constantly ever since her illness, and her kindly guardians indulged her whim. To-night she had dressed herself in muslin, and binding her curls was a wreath of holly leaves and berries. A knot of the same was in her bosom.

“Good-evening, Aleck?” she said, putting her hand confidently in his, outstretched with an air of brotherly fondness he could not have shown her a year ago. “I am glad that you are home again. Did you remember that it was Christmas Eve?”

“Remember!” thought he, with an inward groan. He smiled pleasantly at the querist. “Is that the reason you have made yourself so fine to-night, Lily?”

“Yes. Sally got the holly for me, for I thought I had heard that people wore it on Christmas Eve. It looks pretty, doesn’t it?”

“Very!” replied Helen, cheerfully.

Lily surveyed herself in the mirror with unaffected and guileless complacency.

“And to-morrow night Sally is to get me some orange-buds. I made her promise, if you had no objection, Aleck. There are plenty in the greenhouse.”

“Why should I object!” asked Aleck. “The flowers belong to you and Nelly here, not to me.”

“Yes, but I had a notion that you did not like orange-blossoms; or was it you, Nelly?”

“Neither of us, I think,” she responded. “It was all a ‘notion,’ little one.”

“It makes me very happy to hear you say so, for, do you know,

I wouldn't miss wearing them on Christmas night on any account," sinking her voice to a mysterious whisper. "Who was it, Nelly, that told me that it would be a terrible thing not to wear orange-blossoms on Christmas?"

"Another notion!" Aleck hastened to dispel the cloud of perplexity he saw gathering upon her brow. "What have you in your hand, Lily?"

"Oh!" she laughed out, gleefully, "it is a pair of new socks for baby. I knit them myself, on purpose to hang in the chimney-corner to-night. See!"

They were united by a bow of blue ribbon, and she suspended them upon a hook at the left of the fireplace, directly above the cradle.

Helen laughed. "I will venture to say that no younger gentleman in the length and breadth of the land will hang up his stocking this Christmas Eve. Why, Lily, he is but a month and two days old!"

"He understands all I say to him?" retorted Lily, triumphantly. "Look! he is awake! Don't you see that he laughs at me!"

The little arms tossed down the covering that bound them, and the babe actually smiled in the face bowed over his.

"He knows me best!" She patted the tiny face. "Lily's baby? Lily's pet!" And while father and mother looked on with smiling lips and moistened eyes, there came another name breathed in accents of such magical sweetness that one might have thought the child-woman had learned it from angel teachers.

"LILY'S ROBERT!"

THE END.

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