

XVI.

THE ELDER SON.

My father was the second son of a wealthy baronet. As he and his elder brother formed all the family of my grandfather, he inherited the whole of his mother's fortune, which was considerable, and settled on the younger children. He married a lady whom he tenderly loved ; and having taken orders, and procured preferment, retired to his deanery in the north of Ireland, and there took up his abode. When I was about ten years old he lost my mother. I was their only child.

My father was something of an ascetic, if such name can be given to a rigid adherence to the precepts of morality, which arose from the excess, and not the absence of feeling. He adored my mother ; he mourned for her to the verge of insanity ; but his grief was silent, devouring, and gloomy. He never formed another matrimonial engagement : secluding himself entirely from society, and given up to the duties of his sacred calling, he passed his days in solitude, or in works of charity among the poor.

Even now I cannot remember him without awe. He was a tall and, I thought, a venerable-looking man ; for he was thin and pale, and he was partly bald. His manners were cold and reserved ; he seldom spoke, and when he did it was in such measured phrase, in so calm and solemn a voice, and on such serious topics, as resembled rather oracular enunciation than familiar con-

versation. He never caressed me ; if ever he stroked my head or drew me on his knee, I felt a mingled alarm and delight difficult to describe. Yet, strange to say, my father loved me almost to idolatry ; and I knew this and repaid his affection with enthusiastic fondness, notwithstanding his reserve and my awe. He was something greater, and wiser, and better, in my eyes, than any other human being. I was the sole creature he loved ; the object of all his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. Abstracted and even severe as he seemed, he has visited my bedside at night, subdued by womanly fears, and hung over me for hours, to assure himself of my life and well-being. He has watched by me in sickness night after night with unwearied assiduity. He never spoke harshly to me, and treated me at once with a distance and gentleness hard to be understood.

When I was eighteen he died. During his last illness the seal was taken from his lips, and his heart threw off that husk within which he had hitherto concealed its true nature. He died of a rapid consumption, which terminated his existence within six months of his being first taken ill. His body wasted under the effects of mortal disease ; but his soul assumed new life and energy, and his temper became as soft and demonstrative as it had hitherto been repulsive and concentrated. He became my father, friend, and brother all in one ; a thousand dear relationships combined in one stronger than any. This sudden melting, this divine sensibility, which expanded at once, having been so long shut up and hid, was like a miracle. It fascinated and entranced me. I could not believe that I was about to lose him at the moment when we discovered each other's worth : I mean by that expression, as regards myself, all the happiness that he derived from the truth and vivacity of my filial affection.

It were vain to attempt to refer even to our conversa-

tions: the sublime morality he inculcated; the tenderness and charity of his expressions; the overflowing and melting eloquence with which he talked of the affections of this world, and his aspirations after a better. He died suddenly at last, as I was playing to him a simple air my mother loved. It was a moment of horror, yet of solemn and pious resignation: his soul had sought its native heaven and congenial companion—might it be blest! Yet I had lost him, and grief immeasurable was the result. The impression of the misery I suffered can never be entirely worn from my mind: I often wonder my heart did not break with the violence of my sorrow.

I had been brought up at the deanery, apart from all acquaintances. I had had a governess, a most worthy woman, who married just before my father was taken ill, and who kindly came to me when all was over, to endeavour to console the inconsolable. One of my father's objects in life had been to accumulate a fortune for me; not for the sake of placing me in the dangerous situation of an heiress, but to render me independent. It thus happened that by his ever-lamented death I inherited considerable wealth. His own fortune, my mother's, and his savings, formed the sum of fifty thousand pounds. He left me under the guardianship of his elder brother, Sir Richard Gray, with only one restriction, that I was not to marry, even with my uncle's consent, till I was twenty-one. He wished thus to secure me freedom of choice, and time for deliberation. To this sagacious clause I owe the happiness of my life.

As soon as my health and the first agony of my grief would permit, I left the deanery. My kind governess accompanied me to Dublin, and Sir Richard Gray came hither himself to fetch me, and to carry me to his seat in England. I was beyond measure surprised when I saw my uncle. He was a year older than my father—my venerable father—and he looked in comparison a boy.

He was indeed under fifty, and had at first sight a juvenility of aspect quite astonishing. On examination, the traces of years and care became perceptible; and there was a haggardness in his face which contrasted strangely with its expression of thoughtlessness. No one could be kinder than he was to me, and yet his very kindness was revolting, from the contrast he formed with my lost parent. The world, society, and pleasure occupied his time and thoughts. Solitude and misery were synonymous terms with him; and he called everything solitude that did not include the idea of a crowd. He rattled away during our journey, thinking his anecdotes and good stories would enliven me. He was so sorry that it was not the season that I could go to London—he would have invited his daughter, Lady Hythe, to his seat, that he might arrange a party to enliven it for me; but she was on the Continent, and his other married daughter was resident in Scotland. What was to be done? He had engagements himself during the shooting season at various gentlemen's houses; and I should be moped to death at Beech Grove. This account of the seclusion of my retreat was all my comfort. I declared that nothing should induce me to go into society for several years. He stared, and then smiled, and in his usual caressing gallant manner said, I should do as I liked; he would never contradict me in anything: he only hoped that he should be always able to please and gratify me.

My uncle's story is soon told. He married, very early in life, a girl of inferior rank. His relations were exceedingly enraged, and discarded him. His father died; and his grandfather, fearing that he would sell his expectations and squander the whole property, offered him a large immediate income, upon condition that he would entail the estate upon his eldest son. He consented. A few years after, his grandfather died, and he came into the titles and estate. The new Lady Gray made herself

many friends from the extreme propriety of her conduct. They had a large family, but lost many children; and she died in childbed of her youngest. Five only survived. The eldest son was abroad: two daughters were well married, and the youngest, a girl of only twelve years of age, lived with her governess at the family seat at Hampshire. Sir Richard talked kindly of his children, but chiefly of his eldest son, against whom therefore I conceived a prejudice; because, from his father's description, I considered him dissipated and worthless. Such, indeed, was my uncle; but I did not dislike him, for by the charm of manner he vanquished aversion, and I transferred to his favourite son the disapprobation he had at first excited. I was glad to hear that my cousin was at Vienna, and that I was not likely to see him.

We arrived at Beech Grove on the 29th August. It was a fine summer day, and the country in all its glory. The house was spacious and elegant, and situated in an extensive park, laid out with infinite taste, and kept up with extreme care. All looked so gay and smiling, so unlike the sombre scenes I had left on the shores of the dark northern ocean, that I contemplated my new abode with distaste: such is the force of habit. My uncle had expected that I should be enchanted with the novel beauty of an English park and mansion, and was disappointed at my languid praise. There were no rocks, no sea, no extensive moors. Groves of beech, a river threading verdant wooded banks, a variety of upland and valley, glade and copse, did not command my admiration; so true it is that we seldom admire that which is absolutely new. A few months totally altered this first impression. The cheerfulness of the scene imperceptibly acted on my spirits. I became reconciled to its (to a certain degree) tameness, and learnt at last to love its refined and elegant beauty.

Sir Richard talked of visiting and company. He

would have called his neighbours round us, and forced me to accept invitations at the various houses where, in the shooting season, were assembled large parties of the rich and gay. I earnestly assured him that my depressed spirits and deep-rooted sorrow needed tranquillity—that the seclusion which his house promised was its principal attraction—that I was most happy to be alone. He could not believe my assertions; it hurt his feelings to leave me in this desert; he actually delayed his departure for two days, not liking to quit me. At last he went; and speedily, in the pursuit of pleasure, forgot my existence.

I was not absolutely alone in his house; my cousin Marianne inhabited it with me. She was a pretty, agreeable girl, of twelve years of age; and we got on very well together. I had recourse to her society when over-weary of thought; and she was so young that I could leave her, and betake myself to my mournful, lonely reveries, whenever I liked, without ceremony.

I had not been at Beech Grove more than a week, when late one afternoon, on returning from a drive, we distinguished lights in the dining-room. "Can it be my brother?" cried Marianne; "can Clinton have arrived?"

"I hope not," I said.

"Oh, do not say so," replied the little girl; "you would love Clinton; he is so lively and dear—everybody loves him."

She scarce waited for the steps to be let down, but jumped from the carriage. She returned to me in a minute with an air of disappointment, "It is only my brother Vernon," she said.

"And you do not care about him?"

"Oh yes," she replied, "Vernon is very good, and all that; but he is quite different from Clinton; he may stay a month in the house and I not see him twice."

The habit of solitude had rendered me a little bashful.

I had dined early with my cousin, and the new-comer was at dinner. I went into the drawing-room therefore, and made her stay with me, and awaited his entrance with some alarm. He soon joined us. As he entered, I was struck with his being the handsomest man I had ever seen. His complexion was a clear olive; his eyes a dark blue; his head small and well shaped; his figure scarcely above the middle size, but slender and elegant. I expected the courteous manners of my uncle to correspond with the grace of his appearance; but Vernon had no vivacity, no softness. His words were pregnant with meaning, and his eyes flashed fire as he spoke; but his address was abrupt, his conversation pointed and sarcastic, and a disagreeable ironical smile in which he indulged deteriorated greatly from his good looks. Still, he was very handsome, very clever, and very entertaining.

One part of Marianne's description at least was erroneous. He spent every day and all day with us. He rode or walked with us in the morning; read to us in the evening; conversed as we worked or painted; and did all that a person most sedulous to please could do, except turning over the leaves of our music-books. He did not like music—of which my father was so passionately fond; in all else his tastes seemed mine. He gave me Italian lessons; and, except when I drove him away, was never absent from our side. Marianne declared that her brother Vernon was an altered man. I thought that I knew whence the alteration sprung.

What girl of eighteen, just emerged from solitude, could perceive the birth of love in the heart of a young, accomplished, and handsome man, and not feel her vanity gratified? My peculiar education had prevented my having any of the coquettishness of beauty or the insolence of wealth. I own I felt elated. I became of consequence in my own eyes; and my silly heart swelled with conscious triumph. Vernon grew each day more

openly devoted to me, more solicitous to please, more flattering and attentive. He advanced with imperceptible steps to the desired bourne, and no impatience of temper disturbed for a moment his progress. Stealthy as a serpent, and as wily, he became necessary to my comfort; and I had compromised myself by displaying my vain triumph in my conquest before he betrayed himself by a word.

When I found that he sought a return for his love, I was frightened. I discovered that with all his talents and agreeable qualities I scarcely liked him, and certainly could never feel a sentiment more tender than friendship. I reproached myself for my ingratitude—I felt ashamed of my vacillation. He saw my struggles—he was all humility—he did not deserve better—he was satisfied if I would only be a sister to him—pity him—endure his presence. I agreed, and reassumed my familiarity and good-humour.

It is impossible to describe his refined artifice, or the wonderful assiduity with which he watched by his concealed net till I was completely immeshed. He contrived first that I should consent to listen to him talking of his passion; then he excited my pity for his sufferings—he was eloquent in describing them and in exalting my merits. He asked for so little, he seemed so humble; but he was importunate, and never gave up the smallest advantage he had once gained. Forgotten by my uncle, unknown and unregarded by the rest of the world, I was delivered over to his machinations. Day after day he renewed them. He discerned and worked upon every weakness of my character. My fear to do wrong; my alarm at the idea of being the occasion of pain; my desire to preserve my integrity without a flaw,—these might be termed virtues; but, distorted and exaggerated by natural conceit and youthful inexperience, they rendered me a too easy prey. At last he extracted from

me a promise to marry him when I should be of age. This pledge seemed the only method left me to prove my delicacy and truth. I gave it the more readily because I admired his talents, and believed that he deserved a better wife than I, and that my want of love was a fault in me for which I ought to compensate to him. With all the rashness and inexperience of my age, I confess that I even tried to conceal my latent aversion; so that when, after having obtained my promise, he went away for a week, I willingly assented to his request that I should correspond with him, and my letters were full of affection. I found it easier to write than speak what I did not really feel, and was glad to show my gratitude and my sense of his attachment at an easy rate. At the same time, I consented to keep our engagement secret, that thus I might have an excuse for preserving the reserve of my conduct. I took advantage of this wish on his part to insist on his leaving me for a time. I was glad when he went, yet mortified at the readiness of his obedience.

I must not be unjust. Vernon had many faults, but coldness of feeling was not among them. Vehemence and passion were his characteristics, though he could unite them to a deliberation in design, and a wiliness in execution, without example. He had determined before he saw me to win me and my fortune; but such was the violence of his disposition, that he was unavoidably caught in his own toils; and the project that was founded on self-interest ended in making him the slave of love—of a girl whom he despised. He went when I bade him eagerly; but he fulfilled his aim better by so doing. My letters were to be confirmations strong against me—in case that hereafter, as he too justly feared, I should wish to retract my vows. I heedlessly accomplished his ends, beyond his most sanguine expectations. My letters were those of a be-

trothed bride; and what they might want in tenderness was made up by their uncompromising acknowledgment of our relative position. Having obtained these testimonies, he returned. I was not sorry. I was too little pleased with myself to be in love with solitude. His presence kept alive the feeling of irresistible fate to which I had yielded; and his society enlivened the monotonous quiet of Beech Grove.

At length Christmas came, and my uncle returned and filled his house with visitors. Then the darker shades of Vernon's character became apparent. He was as jealous as an Italian. His disposition was sombre and averse to sociable pleasures. God knows grief sat too heavy at my heart to allow me to be very vivacious; still, I wished to please my uncle, and thought that I had no right to cloud the good-humour of the company; and added to this was the elastic spirit of youth, which sprung eagerly and spontaneously from the gloom and mystery of Vernon's artifices into the more congenial atmosphere of friendly intercourse. He saw me unlike anything he had ever seen in me before—sprightly, and ready to share the amusement of the hour. He groaned in bitterness of spirit. He reproached—reprehended—and became a very taskmaster. I was naturally timid and docile—in vain did my spirit revolt from his injustice: he gained and kept complete ascendancy over me. Yet my soul was in arms against him even while I submitted to his control, and dislike began to develop itself in my bosom. I tasked myself severely for my ingratitude. I became in appearance kinder than ever; but every internal struggle and every outward demonstration had unfortunately one result—to alienate my affections more and more from my lover-cousin.

Our guests left us. My uncle went up to town. He told me he hoped I would accompany him there as soon as Lady Hythe returned to chaperon me. But I was

more averse than ever to visiting London. Bound to Vernon by my promises, and wishing to keep my faith with him, I did not like to expose myself to the temptation of seeing others I should like better. Besides, the memory of my father was still unfaded, and I resolved not to appear in public till the year of mourning was expired. Vernon accompanied his father to town, but returned again to us almost immediately. We appeared to revert to our former mode of life; but the essence of it was changed. He was moody—I anxious. I almost ventured to accuse him of ill-temper and tyranny, till, reading in my own heart its indifference, I was inclined to consider myself the cause of his discontent. I tried to restore his complacency by kindness, and in some degree succeeded.

One day Sir Richard suddenly appeared at Beech Grove. He seemed surprised to find Vernon, and care and even anxiety clouded his usual hilarity. He told us that he expected Clinton daily, and should immediately on his arrival bring him down to Hampshire.

“To celebrate my birthday?” asked Vernon, with a sardonic smile; “I am of age on Friday.”

“No,” said his father; “he will not be here so soon.”

“Nor I so honoured,” said Vernon; “Clinton’s coming of age was celebrated by tumultuous rejoicings; but he is the Elder Son.”

Sir Richard gave Vernon, who spoke sneeringly, a quick glance—an indescribable expression of pain crossed his countenance.

“Have you been staying here since Christmas?” he asked at last. Vernon would have replied evasively, but Marianne said,—

“Oh yes! he is always here now.”

“You appear to have become very fond of Beech Grove of a sudden,” continued his father. I felt that Sir Richard’s eye was fixed on me as he spoke, and I was

conscious that not only my cheeks, but my temples and neck were crimsoned with blushes. Some time after I saw my uncle in the shrubbery; he was alone, and the want of society was always so painful to him, that I thought it but a mark of duteous kindness to join him. I wondered, as I approached, to see every token of haggard care on a face usually so smiling. He saw me, and smoothed his brow; he began talking of London, of my elder cousin, of his desire that I should conquer my timidity, and consent to be presented this spring. At length he suddenly stopped short, and scrutinizing me as he spoke, said,—

“Pardon me, dear Ellen, if I annoy you; but I am your guardian, your second father—am I not? Do not be angry, therefore, if I ask you, are you attached to my son Vernon?”

My natural frankness prompted one reply, but a thousand feelings, inexplicable but powerful, hung on my tongue. I answered, stammering: “No—I believe so—I like him.”

“But you do not love him?”

“What a question, dear uncle!” I replied, covered with confusion.

“Is it even so?” cried Sir Richard; “and is he to succeed in all?”

“You mistake,” I said; for I had a horror of confessing an attachment which, after all, I did not feel, and so of making our engagement more binding. But I blushed deeply as I spoke, and my uncle looked incredulous, and said,—

“Yet it would make you very unhappy if he married another.”

“Oh no!” I cried, “he has my free leave. I should wish him joy with all my heart.”

The idea—the hope that he was playing me false, and might release me from my trammels, darted through my

mind with a quick thrill of delight. Sir Richard saw that I was in earnest, and his countenance cleared.

“What a strange thing is maiden coyness,” he observed; “you blushed so prettily, Ellen, that I could have sworn you had given your heart to Vernon. But I see I was mistaken; I am glad of it, for he would not suit you.”

No more was said, but I felt conscience-stricken and miserable. I had deceived my uncle, and yet I had not. I had declared that I did not love him to whom I had pledged my hand; and the whole was a mystery and an entanglement that degraded me in my own eyes. I longed to make a full confession; yet then all would be over—we should both be inextricably bound. As it was, some caprice might cause Vernon to transfer his affection to another, and I could give him entire freedom, without any human being knowing how foolishly I had acted.

We had no guests at dinner; Sir Richard was to leave us early the next morning. After dinner I speedily retired to the drawing-room, leaving father and son together; they remained two hours. I was on the point of withdrawing to my own room, to avoid a meeting which alarmed me, I knew not why, when they entered. It seemed as if, in the interval of my absence, they had received sudden intelligence of a dear friend's death; and yet not quite so, for though Vernon looked absorbed in thought, his gloom was strangely interspersed with glances of swelling triumph; his smiles were no longer sneers—yet they did not betray a sunshine of the heart, but rather joy on a bad victory. He looked on me askance, with a kind of greedy satisfaction, and at his father with scorn. I trembled, and turned to my uncle; but sadness and confusion marked his features—he was stamped as with disgrace, and quailed beneath my eye; though presently he rallied, drew a chair near, and was kinder than ever. He told me that he was going up to town on the morrow, and that Vernon was to accompany

him; he asked me if there was anything he could do for me, and testified his affection by a thousand little attentions. Vernon said nothing, and took leave of me so coldly, that I thought his manner implied that he expected to see me in the morning. Thinking it right to indulge him, I rose early; but he did not come down till long after Sir Richard, who thanked me for my kindness in disturbing myself on his account. They went away immediately after breakfast, and Vernon's formal adieu again struck me with wonder. Was it possible that he was indeed going to marry another? This doubt was all my comfort, for I was painfully agitated by the false position in which I had entangled myself, by the mystery that enveloped my actions, and the falsehood which my lips perpetually implied, if they did not utter.

I was habitually an early riser. On the third morning after the departure of my relations, before I rose, and while I was dressing, I thought that pebbles were thrown at my window; but my mind was too engrossed to pay attention, till at last, after my toilette had been leisurely completed, I looked from my window, and saw Vernon below, in the secluded part of the park which it overlooked. I hurried down, my heart palpitating with anxiety.

"I have been waiting for you these two hours," he said angrily; "did you not hear my signal?"

"I know of no signal," I replied; "I am not accustomed to clandestine appointments."

"And yet you can carry on a clandestine engagement excellently well! You told Sir Richard that you did not love me—that you should be glad if I married another."

An indignant reply was bursting from my lips, but he saw the rising storm and hastened to allay it. He changed his tone at once from reproach to tender protestations.

"It broke my heart to leave you as I did," he said,

“but I could do no less. Sir Richard insisted on my accompanying him—I was obliged to comply. Even now he believes me to be in town. I have travelled all night. He half-suspected me, because I refused to dine with him to-day; and I was forced to promise to join him at a ball to-night. I need not be there till twelve or one, and so can stay two hours with you.”

“But why this hurried journey?” I asked. “Why do you come?”

He answered by pleading the vehemence of his affection, and spoke of the risk he ran of losing me for ever. “Do you not know,” he said, “that my father has set his heart upon your marrying my brother?”

“He is very good,” I replied disdainfully. “But I am not a slave, to be bought and sold. My cousin Clinton is the last person in the world whom you need fear.”

“Oh, Ellen, how much do you comfort—transport me, by this generous contempt for wealth and rank! You ask why I am here—it were worth the fatigue, twice ten thousand times told, to have these assurances. I have trembled—I have feared—but you will not love this favoured of fortune—this elder son!”

I cannot describe Vernon's look as he said this. Methought envy, malice, and demoniac exultation were all mingled. He laughed aloud—I shrunk from him dismayed. He became calmer a moment after.

“My life is in your hands, Ellen,” he said;—but why repeat his glossing speeches, in which deceit and truth were so kneaded into one mass, that the poison took the guise of the wholesome substance, while the whole was impregnated with destruction. I felt that I liked him less than ever; yet I yielded to his violence. I believed myself the victim of a venial but irreparable mistake of my own. I confirmed my promises, and pledged my faith most solemnly. It is true that I undeceived him as much

as I could with regard to the extent of my attachment ; at first he was furious at my coldness, then overwhelmed me with entreaties for forgiveness—tears even streamed from his eyes—and then again he haughtily reminded me that I forfeited every virtue of my sex, and became a monument of falsehood, if I failed him. We separated at last—I promised to write every day, and saw him ride away with a sensation as if relieved from the infliction of the torture.

A week after this scene—my spirits still depressed, and often weeping my dear father's death, which I considered the root of every evil—I was reading, or rather trying to read, in my dressing-room, but in reality brooding over my sorrows, when I heard Marianne's cheerful laugh in the shrubbery, and her voice calling me to join her. I roused myself from my sad reverie, and resolved to cast aside care and misery, while Vernon's absence afforded me a shadow of freedom ; and, in fulfilment of this determination, went down to join my young light-hearted cousin. She was not alone. Clinton was with her. There was no resemblance between him and Vernon. His countenance was all sunshine ; his light-blue eyes laughed in their own gladness and purity ; his beaming smile, his silver-toned voice, his tall, manly figure, and, above all, his open-hearted engaging manners, were all the reverse of his dark mysterious brother. I saw him, and felt that my prejudices had been ridiculous ; we became intimate in a moment. I know not how it was, but we seemed like brother and sister—each feeling, each thought, being laid bare to the other. I was naturally frank, but rendered timid by education ; so that it charmed me doubly when the unreserve of another invited me to indulge in the unguarded confidence of my disposition. How speedily the days now flew ! they contained but one drawback, my correspondence with my cousin—not that I felt myself unfaithful towards him ;

my affection for my new-found relation did not disturb my conscience—that was pure, undisguised, sisterly. We had met from across the ocean of life—two beings who formed a harmonized whole; but the sympathy was too perfect, too untinged by earthly dross, to be compared with the selfish love given and exacted by Vernon. Yet I feared that his jealousy might be awakened, while I felt less inclined than ever to belie my own heart; and with aversion and hesitation penned letters containing the formula of affection and engaged vows.

Sir Richard came down to Beech Grove. He was highly pleased to see the cordial friendship that subsisted between his son and me.

“Did I not tell you that you would like him?” he said.

“Every one must,” I replied; “he is formed to win all hearts.”

“And suits you much better than Vernon?”

I did not know what to answer; it was a tender string that he touched; but I resolved not to feel or think. Sir Richard's were all flying visits; he was to leave us in the evening. He had, during the morning, a long conversation with Clinton; and immediately after he sought for an opportunity to talk to me.

“Ellen,” he said, “I have not been a wise but I am a fond father. I have done Clinton many injuries, of which he, poor fellow, is wholly unconscious; and I have wished to compensate for all in giving him a wife worthy of him. His temper is generous; his spirit clear and noble. By my soul, I think he has every virtue under heaven; and you alone deserve him. Do not interrupt me, I beseech you; hear me this once. I confess that ever since you became my ward this has been my favourite project. There have been several obstacles; but the most serious ones seem to vanish. You have seen each other, and I flatter myself have each discovered and appreciated the good qualities of the other.

Is it so, Ellen? I know not whence my fears arise, and yet they intrude themselves. I fear, while I have been endeavouring to secure my boy's happiness, I may have been adding to the ruin already heaped on his head by my means. I have talked with him to-day. He has no disguise in his nature, and he avows that he loves you. I know that this confession would come better from himself; but your fortune, your beauty, make him fear to be misinterpreted. Do not mistake—he is wholly unaware of my intention of speaking to you. I see your distress, dear Ellen; have patience but for one word more—do not trifle with Clinton's feelings, as sometimes—forgive me—it has appeared to me that you have trifled with Vernon's—do not foster hopes not to be fulfilled. Be frank, be honest, despite the bashfulness and coquetry of your sex.”

After these words, fearful of having offended—overcome by more agitation than I could have imagined him capable of feeling—my uncle drew me towards him, pressed me convulsively to his bosom, and then rushed from the room.

I cannot describe the state in which he left me—a spasm of pain passed through my frame; I became sick and faint, till a flood of tears relieved my bursting heart. I wept long—I sobbed in agony—I felt the veriest wretch that ever trod the earth.

My uncle had rent the veil that concealed me from myself. I loved Clinton—he was the whole world to me—all the world of light and joy, and I had shut myself out from him for ever. And he also was my victim. I beheld his dear face beaming with hope; I heard his thrilling voice harmonized by love; and saw the fearless cordiality of his manners, which bespoke his confidence in my sympathy; while I knew that I held a poisoned dagger which I was about to plunge into his heart. Sometimes I thought to treat him coldly,

sometimes—oh! I cannot tell the various imaginations that haunted me—some self-sacrificing, others wicked and false—all ended in one way. My uncle departed; we were left together, our full hearts beating to respond to each other without any division or reserve. I felt that every moment might cause Clinton to open his soul to me, and to seek in mine for a feeling too truly and too fondly alive there, but which was sinful and fatal to both. To prevent his confession, my own preceded it. I revealed to him my engagement to Vernon, and declared my resolve not to swerve from my faith. He commended me. I saw despair at losing me painted in his countenance, mingled with horror at supplanting his brother; and alarm that he, the elder born, gifted by fortune with every blessing, should be suspected of the intention of stealing the sole remaining good, which Vernon had won by his diligence, perhaps by his deserts. Forbid it, Heaven! I saw in the clear mirror of his expressive countenance the struggle of passion and principle, and the triumph of honour and virtue exalted over the truest love that ever warmed man's breast.

Our gaiety was flown; our laughter stilled. We talked sadly and seriously together, neither lamenting our fate nor acknowledging our sufferings; tamed to endurance, and consoling each other by such demonstrations of affection as were permitted to our near relationship. We read clearly each other's hearts, and supported each other in the joint sacrifice; and this without any direct acknowledgment. Clinton talked of returning to the Continent; I of my seclusion and tranquillity at Beech Grove. The time was distant—two years was an eternity at our age—before Vernon could claim my hand; and we did not advert to that fatal consummation. We gave up each other; and that single misery sufficed without a more cruel addition. I was calm, pale, and tearless. I had brought it all on myself, and must

submit. I could not cast aside the younger son to select the elder; and if in my secret thoughts I cherished a hope to induce Vernon to forego his claims, that very circumstance would the more entirely divide me from Clinton. As my brother-in-law, I might see him—in some sort, our fortunes were shared; but as a rival to Vernon, a stream of blood separated us for ever.

The hours of sad sympathy which we passed were very dear to us. We knew that they were brief. Clinton had fixed the day and hour of his departure—each moment it drew nearer. We should never meet again till after my marriage; but till the hour of separation, for two short days, we were all in all to each other, despite the wall of adamant which was raised between us. We tried each to pretend to think and talk of indifferent subjects; and we *never* spoke of that nearest our hearts;—but how superfluous are words as interpreters between lovers! As we walked or rode, and spent hours in each other's society, we exchanged thoughts more intimately during long periods of absolute silence, than Vernon with his vehemence and eloquence could have conceived. Had we spoken folio volumes, we could have said no more. Our looks—the very casting down of our eyes and mutual tacit avoidance, told our resolve to fulfil our duties and to conquer our love; and yet how, by a glance or a faltering word, when the future was alluded to, did we promise never to forget, but to cherish mutual esteem and tenderness as all that was left of the paradise from which we were so ruthlessly driven! Now and then a playful expression on his part, or a blush on mine, betrayed more feeling than we considered right; the one was checked by a sigh, the other by an assumption of indifference.

I had been spending many hours in tears and anguish, when, resolved to overcome my weakness, and to recover an appearance of serenity before my cousin returned from his ride, I went into Marianne's schoolroom and took up

a book. The exhaustion of weeping had calmed me ; and I thought of my kinsman—his endearing qualities, and of the tie between us, with softened feelings. As I indulged in reverie, my head resting on my hand, my book falling from my fingers, my eyes closed, I passed from the agitated sense of life and sorrow into the balmy forgetfulness of sleep. Clinton had wished to make a portrait of me, yet had not ventured to ask me to sit—he came in at this moment ; Marianne, whispering, told him not to disturb me. He took her drawing materials, and made a hasty sketch, which genius and love united to render a perfect likeness. I awoke and saw his work ; it was beyond our contract ; I asked him for it ; he felt that I was right, and gave it. This sacrifice on his part proved that he did not palter with his sense of right. On the morrow we were to part ; and he would preserve no memorial beyond a remembrance which he could not destroy.

That morrow came. Clinton asked me and his sister to walk through the park with him, to join his chariot at the farther lodge. We consented ; but, at the moment of going, Marianne, who knew nothing certainly, but who darkly guessed that all was not right, excused herself. I joined him alone. There was something in his person and manner that so promised protection and tenderness, that I felt it doubly hard to be torn from him. A dignified reserve, foreign to his usual nature, founded on a resolve to play only the brother's part, checked me somewhat ; yet I loved him the more for it ; while I would have laid down my existence so that it had only been permitted us to throw aside the mask but for one short hour, and to use the language of nature and truth. It could not be ; and our conversation was upon indifferent subjects. When we approached the lodge, we found that the chariot had not come, and we retreated a little, and sat down on a turfy bank ; then Clinton said a few words,

the only ones that at all revealed the agitation he was enduring.

"I have a little more experience than you, Ellen," he said; "and, besides, I am haunted by strange presentiments; we seem to know what we ought to do, and what we are to do, and act accordingly—yet life is a strange, wild thing. I wish to ensure for you a friend more willing and active than Sir Richard. I have a sister to whom I am fondly attached; she is now on the Continent, but I shall hasten to her, and entreat her to afford you a friendship you so richly deserve. You will love Lady Hythe for her own sake as well as for mine."

I was desirous of thanking him for this mark of kindness, but my voice failed me, and I burst into tears, overcome by the excess of anguish that deluged my heart. I tried to conceal my tears—I could not.

"Do not, Ellen, dear Ellen, I beseech you—command yourself."

Clinton spoke in a voice so broken, so full of misery, that he inspired me at once with fear and courage. The tread of a horse roused us—a horse at swift gallop. I raised my eyes, and uttered a shriek; for, reining in the animal with a sudden strong pull, Vernon halted close to us. The most violent passions convulsed his countenance. He threw himself from the horse, and, casting the bridle from him, came up. What he meant to say or do I cannot tell; perhaps to conceal the workings of his heart—and the quick departure of Clinton would have smoothed all; but I saw the barrel of a pistol peep from the pocket of his coat. I was seized with terror—I shrieked aloud. Clinton, terrified at my alarm, would have supported me, but Vernon pushed him rudely away.

"Dare not to approach or touch her, as you value your life!" he cried.

"My life! you talk idly, Vernon. I value her security—one moment of peace to her—far more."

"You confess it!" exclaimed Vernon; "and you, too, false and treacherous girl! Ha! did you think to betray me, and be unpunished? Do you think, if I so chose it, that I would not force you to look on till the blood of one of the brothers flowed at your feet? But there are other punishments in store for you."

The expressions of menace used towards myself restored my courage, and I exclaimed, "Beware that you do not break the tie that binds us—at least, that bound us a moment ago—perhaps it is already broken."

"Doubtless," he cried, grinding his teeth with rage, "it is broken, and a new one created to bind you to the elder son. Oh yes! you would fain cast aside the poor, miserable beggar, who has vainly fawned on you, and madly loved—you would take the rich, the honourable, and honoured Sir Clinton! Base, hollow-hearted fool!"

"Vernon," said Clinton, "whatever your claims are on our cousin, I cannot stand by and see her insulted. You forget yourself."

"The forgetfulness, sir, is on your part; proud in your seniority, to rival your brother, to drive him from his all, has been a May-game for you; but know, proud fool, or villain—take which name you will—your hour is passed by—your reign at an end! Your station is a fiction, your very existence a disgrace!"

Clinton and I both began to think that Vernon was really mad—a suspicion confirmed by his violent gestures. We looked at each other in alarm.

"Stay!" exclaimed the infuriated man, seizing my arm with a fierce grasp; while, fearful to induce Clinton's interference, I yielded. "Stay, and listen to what your lover is—or shall I wound your delicate ears? There are soft phrases and silken words to adorn that refuse of the world—a bastard!"

"Vernon, dare not!—beware, sir, and begone!"

Clinton's face crimsoned; his voice, his majestic indig-

nation almost forced the ruffian to quail; he threw my arm from him.

“Take him, fair Ellen! it is true you take what I say—a natural son. Do you think that my information is not correct? Ask our father, for he is yours, Clinton, and our mother is the same; you are the first-born of Richard Gray and Matilda Towers; but I am the eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Gray.”

It could not have been that Vernon would have acted this cowardly and foolish part had he not been driven by a kind of madness. In truth, Sir Richard had, to quench his hopes for ever, with that carelessness of truth—his fatal propensity—affirmed that Clinton and I were acknowledged lovers; and he came goaded by worse than jealousy—by a spirit of hatred and revenge. Seeing us together, obviously engaged by the most engrossing feelings, his temper, which had been worked into fury during his journey, burst forth beyond the bounds he had prescribed for himself. I have called him a serpent, and such he was in every respect; he could crawl and coil, and hide his wily advance; but he could erect his crest, dart out his forked tongue, and infix the deadly venom, when roused as he now was. Clinton turned alternately pale and red.

“Be it as you will,” he said; “my fortunes and yours are of slight moment in comparison to Ellen’s safety. If there is any truth in this tale of yours, there will be time enough to discover it and to act upon it. Meanwhile, dear cousin, I see they have brought my chariot to the lodge. You cannot walk home—get into it; it will drive you to the house, and come back for me.”

I looked at him inquiringly.

“Do not fear to be deserted by me,” he said, “or that I shall do anything rashly. Vernon must accompany me to town—to our father’s presence, there to expiate this foul calumny, or to prove it. Be assured he shall not

approach you without your leave. I will watch over him, and guard you."

Clinton spoke aloud, and Vernon became aware that he must yield to this arrangement, and satisfied that he had divided us. Clinton led me to his carriage.

"You will hear soon from some one of us, Ellen," he said; "and let me implore you to be patient—to take care of yourself—to fear nothing. I can make no remark—affirm, deny nothing now; but you shall not be kept in suspense. Promise me to be patient and calm."

"And do you," I said at last, commanding my trembling voice, "promise not to be rash; and promise not to leave England without seeing me again."

"I promise not to leave England for any time without your leave. Oh, trust me, my dear cousin; it is not in such storms as these that you shall be ashamed of me; one sentiment may subdue me, but poverty, disgrace, and every angry passion I can master."

Vernon did not dare interrupt us. He felt that he had destroyed his carefully woven web through his own rashness, and gnawed his lips in silent rage. I looked at him once, and turned away my eyes in contempt. I got into the chariot; it drove me to the house, and went back to take Clinton up to town. Thus we were separated, as we intended; and yet, how differently! Hope was reborn in my heart, out of the very ashes of its despair.

Two mortal days passed, and I was still in my solitude, receiving no intelligence, except, indeed, such as was contained in a letter from Vernon. In this he demanded me as a right, and fiercely insisted that I should keep my faith with him; but he did not allude to the scene in the park, nor to his strange assertions there. I threw the letter from me as unworthy of notice or thought. The third morning brought me one from my uncle. I tore it open with uncontrollable impatience: these were the contents:—

“ Clinton, my dear Ellen, insists that I should join you at Beech Grove ; but I cannot persuade myself to do so till I have your leave—till I have confessed my villainy, and besought your forgiveness, in addition to that of my noble-hearted boy, whom I devoted to ruin before his birth, and who has pardoned me. It is a hateful subject—unfit for your ears, my gentle, virtuous girl, and I must hurry it over. When I first knew Miss Towers, I had no idea of marrying her ; for she was poor and of humble birth. We loved each other, and she was willing to become mine on my own terms. Our intercourse was betrayed to her parents ; and to appease them, and please Matilda, I declared that we were married. My assertion was credited ; Matilda assumed my name, and all the world, all her little world, was deceived ; while at the same time I declared to my father that she was merely my mistress. He did not believe me. Thus I became entangled. A little before the birth of our second boy my father died, and my grandfather offered me two thousand a year on condition that I would secure the whole estate to my eldest son. I loved Matilda ; my fears were dissipated by my father’s death, and by this acknowledgment of my union by my grandfather. I married her ; and, three days after Vernon’s birth, signed the settlement of entail. Such is my story. Lady Gray’s character necessitated the concealment from every human being of the period when the marriage was celebrated. My noble, beloved Clinton assumed the elder son’s place. I dared not reveal the truth ; nay, I fancied that I benefited him by allowing him to fill this false position till my death. He has undeceived me ; but he has not cursed me. From the moment I saw you, I designed that you should repair my faults towards him, as you alone could. I believed that you were formed for each other ; I was not mistaken there. I meant to acknowledge all before your marriage, but I believed that

if once your affections were engaged, you would not reject my son from base and worldly-minded considerations. Am I not right also in this? Meanwhile, Clinton was abroad, and I became uneasy at observing the pains which Vernon took to ingratiate himself with you, and the intimacy which you encouraged. I forbade him to remain with you at Beech Grove—he defied me. Then I tried to entice him away from you; and, as a last bribe, disclosed the secret of his birth: he, in return, promised to leave the field open to Clinton. You know the rest. He never meant to give you up; he was my heir, and he grasped at your fortune besides—shall he succeed? Clinton is all kindness, and soothing angelic goodness—but he insists on no longer filling a situation to which he has no claim, and—is gone abroad. He fears to leave you exposed to Vernon’s violence, and has made me promise to go down to Beech Grove, and to prevent his brother from seeing you without your free and entire consent. As I have said, I cannot prevail on myself to visit you till you are in full possession of all the facts. Now they are in your hands. You may expect me tomorrow. Do not fear Vernon; I will take care that he shall not commit further outrage on you, nor injure the interest which I fondly trust that you preserve for my godlike, my beloved Clinton.”

I read and reread this letter a thousand times; my soul was in tumults. At first I could only think of the facts that it contained, and proudly and joyfully determined to compensate to Clinton, as I believed I could, for every evil; and then again I read the letter, and many parts of it filled me with wonder and dismay. Clinton was gone abroad—against his promise—without a word; and there was something so indelicate in the way in which my uncle espoused his cause. It was strange—unlike any conduct I had expected on my dear cousin’s part. Of course he would write—and yet he

was gone, and no letter came! And then I dreaded to see Sir Richard, the wrongful, penitent father: the total indifference which he displayed to moral principle—not founded, like Vernon's, on selfishness, but on weakness of character and natural callousness to truth—revolted me. Where was my own dear father? He had thrown me from the sacred shelter of his virtue into a system of dissimulation and guilt, which even Clinton, I thought, deserting me as he did, did not redeem. I struggled with these feelings, but their justice confounded and overcame me. Yet, even in the midst of these disquieting reflections, a deep sense of happiness pervaded my soul. The mystery, the tyranny which had enveloped me, was brushed away like a spider's web. I was free—I might follow the dictates of my feelings, and it was no longer sin to love him to whom my heart was irrevocably given. The hours of the day flew on, while I lived as in a dream, absorbed by wonder, hope, doubt, and joy. At length, at six in the evening, a carriage drove up the avenue; a kind of terror at the expectation of seeing my uncle seized me, and I retreated hastily to my own room, gasping for breath. In a few minutes my servant tapped at my door; she told me that it was Lady Hythe who had arrived, and delivered me a letter. The letter was from Clinton; it was dated the same day, in London. I pressed it passionately to my lips and heart, and devoured its contents with eagerness. "At length, dear Ellen," he wrote, "I am satisfied; I was long uneasy on your account. I besought my father to go down to you, yet even that did not content me—for you did not so much need protection as sympathy and true disinterested friendship. My thoughts turned towards my earliest and dearest friend, my sister Caroline. She was on the Continent—I set out immediately to meet her, to tell everything, and to ask her advice and assistance. Fortune befriended me—I found her at Calais—she is now

with you. She is my better self. Her delicacy of character, her accurate judgment and warm heart, joined to her position as a woman, married to the best and most generous fellow breathing, render her the very person to whom I can intrust your happiness. I do not speak of myself—fortune cannot overcome my spirits, and my way is clear before me. I pity my father and family; but Caroline will explain to you better than I can my views and hopes. Adieu, dear cousin! Heaven bless you as you deserve! Your fortitude, I am sure, has not deserted you; yet I am very anxious to hear that your health has not suffered by my brother's violence. Caroline will write to me, and rejoice me by telling me of your well-being."

I hurried down immediately to welcome Clinton's sister; and from that moment my perplexities and sorrows vanished. Lady Hythe was a feminine likeness of Clinton; the same active kindness of heart, gentleness of temper, and adorable frankness. We were friends and sisters on the instant, and her true affection repaid me for every suffering; none of which I should have experienced had she been in England on my arrival. Clinton had told her of his love, but left me to reveal my own sentiments, detailing only the artifices and jealousy of Vernon. I was without disguise, for we were all one family, with the same objects, hopes, and pleasures. We went up to town immediately, and there I saw Clinton, and we exchanged our reserved, sad intercourse for a full acknowledgment of every thought and feeling.

The only piece of prudence that Sir Richard had practised was placing Clinton in the army, and purchasing promotion for him. He was so beloved by his fellow-officers that, on the discovery of his unfortunate birth, they all united in giving him the support of their friendship and good opinion. Clinton resolved, therefore, to

enter at once on active service, and to follow up his profession with energy. Two years were to elapse before I could marry, and he expressed a wish that we should neither of us consider ourselves under any engagement. How vain are such words! Heaven designed us for each other, and the mere phrase of engagement or freedom could not affect a tie founded on affection, esteem, or, beyond this, the passion that caused us to find happiness in each other only. He went with his regiment to Ireland, and we were a good deal divided during the two years that elapsed before I was twenty-one. I continued to reside with Lady Hythe, and enjoyed with her that peace of mind which true friendship affords.

At length the day came when I completed my twenty-first year. Sir Richard had wished to be present at our nuptials, but was unable from ill-health. I went to him, and saw him for the first time since the fatal discovery; for, on finding that I was happily placed with his daughter, he had carefully avoided seeing me. His character, indeed, was wholly changed. While carrying on a system of dissimulation, he had appeared gay; he was extravagant; given up to pleasure, and spending even beyond his large income, despite the ruin in which he knew that his son would be involved on his death. He made him indeed a princely allowance, as if that was to compensate to him; while, in fact, Clinton was only thus habituated to expense. As soon as the discovery was made, Sir Richard, by one of those inconceivable changes which sometimes occur in the history of human nature, set his heart on saving a fortune for his beloved boy. He thought that I might be fickle; he feared his own death and the loss of power to benefit him. He gave up his establishment in town—he let Beech Grove—he saved every farthing that he could, and was enabled to settle twenty thousand pounds on Clinton on the day of our marriage.

I went to see him in a little lodging at Camberwell, whither he had retreated. He was emaciated and ill; his eyes brightened a little on seeing Clinton and me together.

"I would fain live a little longer," he said, "to increase my son's fortune; but God's will be done—you will make him happy, Ellen."

We were inexpressibly shocked. He had concealed his penurious style of life and declining health all this time; and nothing but his illness, and our insisting upon seeing him, caused him to betray it now. Our first care after our marriage was to oblige him to take up his abode with us; and we devoted ourselves to calming his remorse and smoothing his path to the grave. He survived only four months; but he had the comfort of knowing that Clinton was satisfied and happy; and that we both from our hearts forgave the errors which he at last expiated so dearly.

We never saw Vernon again; nor can I tell what has happened to him, except that he lives the life of the rich in England, apparently attended by prosperity. Lady Hythe stood between me and him, and screened me from his violence and reproaches. He has never married. I have never seen him since the day when, in the park at Beech Grove, he unawares conferred on me every blessing of life, by releasing me from the ties that bound me to him.

The happiness of Clinton and myself has been unclouded. I at last persuaded him to give up his profession, and we live principally abroad. Lord and Lady Hythe frequently visit us; and every event of our lives—the unimportant events of domestic life—tends to increase our prosperity, and the entire affection we cherish for each other.