

All the distance from the village to the beach, was now scattered with groups of people, who, some of them from mere curiosity, and some from feelings of deeper interest, had left their homes, to hear if there were any tidings of the body, or to learn if any thing more remained to be told than the melancholy story which had already circulated from house to house, with the usual number of variations and additions. Amongst these groups was many a poor mother with her children clinging to her cloak, all looking anxiously towards the sea, and yet all afraid to behold the object of which they were in search. There were men blessing and comforting themselves that their sons were not as this prodigal, who would never more return to his father's house.—There were young women, who looked and looked again, and all the while kept close together, calling back to remembrance the kindness, the freedom, and the generous-heartedness of him who was lost; and there were old fishermen, telling of their own escapes, and wondering at, and settling, and unsettling again, the manner of the young man's death. And still the hoary deep rolled on, telling its dark secrets to none.

Falkland and his cousin approached the scene of interest from one point; his mother and sister, with their household attendants, from another. Way was respectfully made for all, and they stood together for some time without uttering a word, except to ask and tell in what manner old Kennedy had born the intelligence of his loss. All looked towards the sea; and Grace Dalton, though she trembled violently, dashed away her hair from her eyes, and looked more intently than any of the watchers there.

"See, see," said Mrs. Falkland, "there is old Kennedy himself—and alone."

And there indeed he stood, the aged father, leaning on his staff, with his white hair floating in the wind. He stood alone too, except for a faithful dog, that never left his side. He stood alone, for he had held no fellowship with others in the common avocations and interests of life, and therefore it was the necessary consequence, that in his grief they should hold none with him. Yet there was something almost more than human nature could endure, to see a father alone on such an occasion, and Grace Dalton left her aunt and cousins, and stealing quietly up to the ridge of high ground on which he had stationed himself, stooped down, and patted his dog, that she might at least be ready, if he should wish for any one to be near him.

Encouraged by having escaped a direct repulse, Grace ventured at last to stand nearer, and from a natural impulse upon which she acted almost unconsciously, she said, in so meek and quiet a voice, that it could not have offended any one, "Sir will you not lean upon me, the wind is very strong?"

"Lean upon you, child?" said old Kennedy; "why should I lean upon you?"

And he turned half away from her, to look again at the sea without interruption.

Perhaps it was well that he had not accepted the offered aid of his young companion; for the next moment she was shooting like an arrow across the sands, straight on to a crag of black rock, which was just beginning to stand out above the shallow waves, and beside which some of the fishermen were now seen to be gathering themselves into a group.

"What can be the matter with Grace?" said Mrs. Falkland, observing the strange movements of her niece. "She seems to have quite lost her senses with this melancholy affair. You were wrong in taking her with you, George. She would have been much better at home. She has no spirits for such scenes as these."

"You are mistaken in Grace, I assure you," said Falkland. "She was of the greatest possible use to me this morning, and, really behaved like a heroine. But see! They have found him; they have found him at last. I am sure that is the body."

It was true, as Falkland had said. The wretched man had not been washed by the waves to any great distance from the spot where he perished, probably owing to his dress having become entangled amongst the rocks; and there he lay stretched out upon the sand, one of his cold hands still clenching, with an iron grasp, the shred of Falkland's coat, which he had torn off when they separated for the last time.

Nothing now remained to be done, for it was impossible that a spark of life should remain; and, while all stood around, uttering their different exclamations of regret, Grace Dalton remained on her knees beside him, stooping down with her head so low, that she could have heard the faintest breath had it passed his lips; though her hair fell down and shaded her face, so that none could see in what manner she was holding her strange communion with the dead.

It seemed as if the girl had forgotten the natural timidity—her aunt said, the natural modesty—of her sex: for, on first reaching the spot where the body had been dragged out and laid upon the smooth sand, she had torn open the vest of the drowned man, and laid her hand upon his heart, to feel if there was yet a throb, or a sense of human feeling left. It was in vain. The fishermen smiled, with melancholy meaning in their looks, to see her fruitless efforts, and the foolish hopes which none but a dreamer like herself could have entertained for a moment, but still she knelt beside him, and not the ghastly countenance, from which other women turned away; nor the crowds that gathered round her, nor the spray of the sea foam, nor the fierce wind that came with splashing rain, and drove half the idle concourse back to the village—had power to raise her from that lowly posture, until a bier was brought, and the body was placed upon it, and carried away before her eyes. Then she suddenly recollected herself, and, silently meeting the reproof of her aunt, she wrapped herself round with a shawl, and walked the last of all the party, as they returned to Mrs. Falkland's dwelling.

Our nearest relatives are sometimes the last to understand the real state of our feelings. The rude fishermen on the beach had seen at once, by the behaviour of Grace Dalton, in what relation she had stood to the deceased; and they had regarded her affection with that respect which unsophisticated nature is not slow to render to real suffering. How little of this respect would have been shown by those in a higher sphere of life, who had undertaken the support and guardianship of the poor orphan—how little of this respect would they have shown, had they known that she had so far deviated from the principles carefully instilled into her mind, as to dare to love a man whose life and conduct were like those of Ralph Kennedy.

And why had she loved him? Perhaps simply for these reasons—because he had been kinder than any other human being ever was to her; because she was lonely, and he had been her friend; because she was despised, and he had shown her respect; because she was an orphan, and he had promised to protect her.

It needs little philosophy to account for the origin of love.—There are human beings who cannot exist, of and by, themselves. Their very being is a relative one; and the more they are shut out from sympathy, and kindly fellowship, and the mutual interchange of thought and feeling with others—the fewer channels they find for the outpourings of natural affection—the stronger will the tide of that affection be when it does burst forth, uniting, as it were, in one living stream, all the pent-up and sealed fountains which lay beneath the sterile surface of their desert life.

Bitterly would Mrs. Falkland have reproached her niece, had she known why, amongst that crowd of strangers, she had stood the first—why she had approached the nearest to that awful spectacle—why she had been the only one to endeavour to unclench that cold hand—why she alone had hoped against hope, that there might still be life. Happily for poor Grace, the strangeness of her conduct met with no farther censure than its absence of decorum deserved, and this was even pardoned in consideration of the childish weakness with which she was so often charged; for, like most persons in her situation, she had often to bear the blame of a fault, and its direct opposite, at the same time.

No extenuation, however, ought to be offered for the chief fault of which Grace Dalton was guilty—that of loving a dissipated and unprincipled man. She felt that she deserved no pity, and therefore she asked for none. She had her punishment within herself; and the perpetual sense of condemnation which she bore about with her, made her still more meek, and humble, and submissive under reproof, than she would otherwise have been. Nor did she regard the errors of Ralph Kennedy with more toleration, in her own mind, than the rest of the world evinced towards them. In proportion to the high estimate of what she believed to be his virtues, was her fear, her sorrow, her hatred of his vices. These, however, she never spoke of, except to himself. There were others to do that, she thought; and when so many voices were against him, there was the less need of her's.

Thus she was often thought to look with too lenient an eye, both upon his conduct, and that of her cousin George. The fact was, she loved her cousin because she believed that he loved Kennedy; and, had those who charged her with indifference to their vices, only followed her to the little chamber which she occupied alone—had they watched her there, when every other member of the household was wrapped in sleep, they might have seen such tears, and heard such prayers, as would have convinced them that vice in any form, but particularly in those she loved, was no matter of indifference to her.