

short cut to Ferny Gap, instantly it came into Gertrude's mind that Miss Austwicke was intending to go to Marian Hope. As to the fact that her aunt had for years studiously avoided Marian, that no more appeared to Gertrude, in her excitement, to be an inconsistency, than if the whole scene was a tumultuous dream. On, on, through the clear starlight, now hidden by the trees, now emerging into the open, went the tall, dark, swift figure, until she neared the hollow in which lay the cottage. Then, as she was just by it, and Gertrude, from the upland, could see her more plainly, for the first time a dread, too terrible to be endured, of the purpose of that flight, darted into her mind.

Just before Ferny Gap there was a little tongue of land, with a tiny green knoll on it, jutting into the river, which at that spot was very deep. With straining eyes, Gertrude—rooted, for a moment, by awe, to the spot—noted that Miss Austwicke did not enter the wicket of the cottage, but shot past it. Terror then put a winged speed into the young girl's feet. She bounded forward wildly, leaping rather than running along the declining path, rushed through the thicket, tore past the cottage gate, and was just at the knoll, when she saw, in the bright starlight, Miss Austwicke on the knoll, give one wild look back, toss her arms high above her head, and with a cry that was less a scream than the pain-wrung yell of a creature in mortal agony, leap frantically into the deepest part of the river.

The sound of the splash seemed to beat against Gertrude like a torturing blow. She screamed aloud, again and again. Suddenly Mr. Hope's door was flung open, and a voice shouted; then came a vigorous step on the path through the gate, and rushed towards Gertrude, who, pointing wildly to the river, could but utter shriek upon shriek. Yes, there before them, in mid stream, was the bubbling agitation of the death-struggles distinctly gurgling in the quiet river. Norman—for our readers recognise that it was no other—instantly understood the exigency, and, fortunately, could swim; indeed, if he could not, his impulse would, just then, have been too strong to be resisted. He leaped into the river, striking out towards the drowning woman, whose head rose darkly to the surface, amid the quivering light tracks of the peaceful stars. Gertrude's emotion had thrown her to the ground, but she could not turn her eyes from the sight before her, and did not hear that other cries were added to her own, and that it was Marian who called distractedly, "Help! help!" It was little use, that cry at that hour, in that lonely place, though one of the keepers chanced to be in the preserves in the upland copse, and, hearing the cries continued for several minutes, came rushing down towards Ferny Gap, but not, indeed, before Norman, spent out, had reached the shore, bringing in his grasp a lifeless form, which, as he laid it on the grass, Gertrude and Marian instantly tended.

Mr. Hope, halting on his crutch, by this time had come to them, followed by the one maid-servant of the cottage. He was able to give directions as to the best methods of recovery; while Norman, after a few minutes' pause to recover breath and thought, regardless of exhaustion and his wet clothes, set off to run to the village and rouse the medical man.

Efforts at resuscitation were made for some hours. With the least possible delay, help of all kinds came. In vain—in vain. She was dead.

CHAPTER LXI. INVESTIGATIONS.

"The more the sufferer seeks for ease,
He finds the more distress and pain,
Who everywhere the loathed handwriting sees,
On wall, and door, and window. He would fain
Question all this, but holds his peace,
Fearing to make it all too plain,
This thing which he would ever shroud,
Wrapping it safe in dark oblivion's cloud."

—FROM THE ITALIAN.

Mr. Austwicke and his son had both been roused in about an hour after the awful occurrence recorded in the last chapter, to find the whole village astir, and Mr. Hope's cottage the scene of death in its most fearful form. As

father and son together entered the abode, neither could at once comprehend the whole fact. Death in any shape is appalling to poor humanity, even when God's hand is seen in the bereavement; but when that sovereign hand is hidden, and human violence, or, worse still, human despair is alone visible, what words can paint the horror?

Gertrude threw herself into Mr. Austwicke's arms, saying, "Oh, papa! she was distracted. I saw it all, though I knew not what it meant." And then, amid choking sobs, she tried to give him an account of the deed.

Allan interposed, with the words, "She has been strange for some time lately;" and then came the unuttered, but not less keen regret, how often felt by the survivors in such cases, that they had not given more heed to the indications of mental change. "Insanity" had been uttered only about a fortnight previously, to Mr. Austwicke's grave displeasure, by his wife, in reference to his sister.

"What could cause insanity?" was his wondering, involuntary question, not expecting a reply.

"Trouble," faltered Gertrude, without a moment's hesitation; and Marian added—"She has long seemed to have something on her mind."

This recalled Mr. Austwicke to Gertrude's recent statement, which he had come down to investigate. He was silent a moment; then rather abruptly took his leave, and, followed by Allan, returned to the Hall, having, in the confusion, scarcely noted the tall young man who had attempted Miss Austwicke's rescue, and gone to and fro amid the tumult and grief, with a help as ready as it was silent.

Not so, Gertrude: she had an interest in Norman, as Rupert's friend, and for his own sake, too—he was so brave, alert, kindly. He had lifted her from the ground in his strong arms, and, carrying her into the cottage, had laid her down as gently as if she had been an infant, while Marian, who had followed him, had said, in Gertrude's hearing—

"The poor lady you have tried to save, dear Norry, was the Miss Austwicke named to you—I'm sure of it. If there's been anything wrong, she knew of it. It has not broken her heart, but her brain."

During the gloomy day that followed, Mr. Austwicke, shut up from all, gloomily looked over his sister's papers, and found not only those entrusted to her by her brother Wilfred, but her correspondence with that crafty old wretch, Burke, and a brief summary, written by herself, in some moment of compunction, and addressed to Mr. Basil Austwicke, of the promise she had made to Wilfred—how she had postponed its fulfilment, until she could not bring herself to the task; how the then heir, De Lacy, having died, plunged her into the guilt of defrauding the rightful heir. The narrative was of the briefest—a mere fragment—and so blotted and interlined, that it was evident she meant to have copied it fair, and finished it, but never could bring herself to the completion. Many scraps begun, and then torn or scored out, proved that her mind had wandered as she wrote, and revealed the pangs of a spirit sufficiently enlightened to know the wrong she did, and not faithful enough to duty to forsake or undo that wrong. One delusion seemed strong above all the rest—what she did had been done to preserve the family honour.

Mr. Austwicke had at length called his son to aid him in searching through the papers, and the impression made upon both was profound. What a mockery, employed as she had used it, was this term, "family honour!" In her pride, she had inflicted family disgrace of the deepest kind.

"Gertrude not my sister!—Gertrude one of twin children of my father's elder brother!" said Allan.

"An heir of Austwicke in existence, who can displace us," said Mr. Austwicke, moodily. "You, my boy, I feel for. As for me, I'm but where I was; but you, Allan, I had hoped, would have held on here a country gentleman, as the elder branch has always been; and you were so well fitted for that."

Yes, Allan felt, if he was now to have to study for his father's profession, it would add double bitterness to his naturally great disappointment.

"I'd rather be a sheep-farmer in Australia than brook the change," he said, impetuously.

"Well, but this heir has yet to be found," said Mr. Austwicke, catching, like a drowning man, at a straw. It seemed to him, that if young De Lacy Austwicke perished, this unknown claimant might not, by a cruel malignity of fate, be yet alive to injure him and his. But any such cogitations were dispelled by Allan saying—

"At all events, father, he must be sought. It will be tough work, giving up the old place to some underbred scamp, perhaps; but it would be dastardly to finesse about it. There's been tragedy enough." Tragedy enough! There rose to the mental vision of both father and son the ghastly spectacle they had recently beheld, making the summer night hideous, the rigid face bearing in death the impress of both pride and anguish—the face of one who had pursued a crooked policy to her own destruction—in self-will had followed the mocking phantom, worldly honour, and neglected the pure and straight path of simple truth. How miserable now seemed the delusion! How impotent before man! how insolent before God!

"There shall be no more of this paltering, as far as far as I am concerned," reiterated Allan. "Living or dead, this unknown claimant must be sought."

While they were thus discussing, the sound of carriage-wheels was at the door, and, just as Mr. Austwicke's hand was on the bell, to give orders for being left undisturbed, the welcome voice of Dr. Griesbach struck on his ear. The order was instantly suspended, Allan merely putting his father's thought into words as he exclaimed, "Dr. Griesbach! Has he heard of our trouble? has he come to offer us counsel?"

"No friend in trouble like an old friend," said Mr. Austwicke, as the Doctor entered; and then, as their hands met in a mutual clasp, for the first time the lawyer's eyes filled, and he turned away his head, not trusting himself to speak.

No wonder he was overcome, for his house seemed and his hopes appeared, just then, all wrecked around him. The favourite child, whose gentleness had been his solace, proved a changeling; the estate, which he had chiefly valued as being able to transmit it, no longer his; his son beggared; his wife both wronged and humiliated; his sister ending a series of concealments by an awful death; the family honour laid in the dust. Enough to overwhelm him. Indeed, as a heavy blow stuns while a slighter stings, the very weight of trouble which had befallen Mr. Austwicke made him calm; while Allan, to whom the words poverty and toil expressed no appreciable idea, was excited and incoherent.

It is vain to analyse the strange complexity of the human mind at times of great excitement, for strange as such a thought might be, if it must be owned, some feeling of Mysie, as being far more within his reach by parental permission, now that he was landless and moneyless, than as the heir of Austwicke, did, like a sunbeam, flicker on the troubled depths of his mind. How he was ever to reconcile duty and inclination, by getting his parents'—especially his mother's—consent, had been no small perplexity, since he had discovered that Mysie Grant, when she left Austwicke parsonage to commence her vocation as a teacher, had taken his heart with her. Somehow, he made no end of excuses to go to Elm Grove. Mrs. Maynard, as Mr. Nugent's sister, became wonderfully interesting to him. As we have seen, only on the previous day he had been there, and brought back from thence, as his ostensible errand, some wedding presents of needlework for Marian. So to him, dark as the present was, it could not wholly obscure the distant light.

Dr. Griesbach's presence was not a mere expression of sympathy: he came to help; and, though at first he did not mention him, Rupert accompanied him down, but, out of delicacy, had not come to the Hall, but awaited his father