

CHAPTER XI.—THE PACKMAN.

"Something weird, not good to see,
Has to my threshold come:
A raven on a blighted tree,
Is croaking near my home." ASOS.

While these matters were occupying the attention of the Kensington household, the Austwicke woods were putting on their full autumnal splendor, and the little fairy, whose coming had drawn into a tangle the frail thread of her Aunt Honor's intentions, was enjoying their sylvan beauty like a wood nymph. Thus day by day passed, and found the lady of the Chace undecided as to her course, and therefore at times uncomfortable.

A state of doubt, with a restless conscience, is trying, yet the days sped fast enough; for what lonely life could resist the charm of having a companion who combined all that was winning in the grace of childhood with all that was fascinating in the intelligence of riper years? Whether the stately Miss Honoria was won to the woods by the little creature whom she loved, and gratified by allowing her to send presents of superabundant game, and who in her turn tripped daily at her aunt's side, uttering in the sweetest voice the prettiest fancies about the country sights and sounds, which she enjoyed with the keenest zest—so that it was her errand to see the tints one day, or to watch the sunset another, or to gather ferns on a third—always the staid lady of forty-five found herself allured forth by the little dryad. And at evening, when the logs were put on the old-fashioned hearths that no modern fire-grate in any room in the old Hall had been permitted to displace, and "True," as her aunt called her, was making the lengthening nights pleasant with her bird-like warblings, or even more musical poetic readings, time sped on; and the northern journey, for which the portmanteau had been packed, was more distant than ever from becoming a reality.

Perhaps, when people are undecided exactly as to what course to take, they are glad of an interruption that postpones the necessity for action.

To resort to writing, as a substitute for more active effort, had more than once occurred to Miss Austwicke; for when she retired to her chamber, then her unfulfilled promise troubled her, and every night saw a resolution formed that every morning dissipated.

Several times had Gertrude asked her aunt about the uncle whom she had never seen, and whose death seemed, to her young imagination, so sad.

"To land only to die! To come home only to find a grave!" was her comment, that would no doubt have been enlarged on, but her fine tact told her it was distasteful to her aunt. However, as Gertrude was a great letter-writer, she sent pages of feelings and fancies on the subject to her parents, who, if they read her epistles—which is doubtful—were more likely to be amused than affected; certainly Mrs. Basil made no pretence to great kindred sympathies. She regulated the degree of her emotion as a well-bred person should, and resented, as a culpable eccentricity, Captain Austwicke coming unexpectedly from India. Still, neither parent checked "the child," as they called her, for writing as she did. "True was a clever creature, and, with pen or tongue, would have her say." Moreover, they quite approved her having gone to the Chace. Some idea that Miss Austwicke

might be induced to ask for Gertrude *en permanence* had occurred to the young lady's mamma, who was far more interested about her three great comely boys than her tiny daughter, pretty and clever as she was. All the love that Mrs. Basil had ever felt for her feminine offspring had been concentrated on a sister, three years the junior of Gertrude, who inherited so completely the features of the maternal ancestry—was a Dunoon in complexion, growth, high-cheek bones included—that, while she lived, little True had been quite cast into the shade. But the mother's idol was broken, while as yet unblemished by the influence of favoritism. A baby boy, the third son, came soon after to soothe the mother; and as this, the youngest, was now seven years old, Gertrude had a certain consideration, as the only daughter of the family, none but her mother retaining any unpleasant recollections in connection with the child. It was not likely Mrs. Basil Austwicke could entirely forget that the autumn which first gave little Gertrude to her arms had been a time of such danger to her own health that she had been obliged, by her physician's advice, to resort to a milder climate, and had wintered in Madeira, taking her eldest boy with her, and leaving her baby, Gertrude, in the charge of an old and valued Scottish nurse—a circumstance to which some observers, and it may be the child herself, attributed a certain kind of indefinite coldness felt, rather than outwardly shown, between daughter and mother. Nothing would have shocked Gertrude more than any comment on this coldness—she shut out the thought from her mind; but the very effort that she made, when at home for the holidays, to win her mother's approval, and the long, enthusiastic letters she wrote when away from them, differed from the sweet, unconscious trust of undoubting filial love.

On the same October evening that Mr. Hope was pondering the future with apprehension for others more than himself, the echoes of Austwicke Chace were resounding to the measured tread of a man carrying a pack. He was a thin, bronzed, elderly man, with what is called a "wizened face." His scanty, ash-colored hair, flecked with grey, that blew about freely, was the only thing that looked free about that countenance, for his features were all pinched together, as if to economize space; and the puckered skin round his mouth and eyes, which drew them up to the smallest compass, seemed meant to impose caution in the one case, and to increase keenness in the other: though, as the small, peering eyes were as restless as they were furtive, and the man had a habit of passing the back of his hand across his lips when he was speaking, it was not easy to get a view of these features. The voice, like the man's skin, was dry and hard: and from his brown leggings and rusty fustian garb to the summit of his wrinkled forehead, the words that best indicated his look were those by which he was often called, "Old Leathery."

As this personage came down the wooded glade that led to the open Chace, he saw before him two ladies—the elder sauntering leisurely, the younger flitting about among the heathery knolls, and, making little runs and circuits, tripping back again, with head aside like a bird. The man stepped behind a large tree, put down his pack, and laying the back of one hand across his screwed-up mouth, arched the other over his sharp eyes, and

scanned them unobserved. He lingered a while as the ladies, whom our readers recognize for Miss Austwicke and little True, quickened their pace homeward. They walked so completely along the setting sunbeams' track, that he could trace their figures darkly flecking the brightness until they entered the grounds of the Hall, and then, shouldering his pack, he started off at a quick pace by a short cut, and went to the back entrance round by the stables, and thence across a yard to the door of the servants' hall.

A believer in the Eastern superstition of the Evil Eye might have been pardoned for a feeling of fear, if he had seen this man's stealthy approach, his wily glance all around, and then the gathering up of his puckered visage into an obsequious leer, as he softly lifted the latch. What but evil could such a visitor bring?

CHAPTER XII.—GOSSIP.

"The hawk poised himself for a sudden spring,
While the strutting sparrows kept twittering." ASOS.

Gubbins was seated in the servants' hall, yawning a little over the old newspaper that he was drowsily spelling out. The entrance of the stranger startled him; but, seeing the pack, in a half slumbrous voice the old butler growled out, "No, no, you're too late wi' your pack; I lets no one inner doors arter—"

"Late! 'tis no fault o' mine. Blame the rail, and not me, my good sir. My good friend—I've reason to call you so—I'd have stayed at the station hotel, or gone on direct to Winchester; but I thowt Mistress Martin, or maybe yourself wad be glad to see the very best goods I've had this one whiles."

"Martin's in mourning; but you can come in. I didn't at first just chance on who you was; you've been a precious long while away from these parts. Why you looks much the same—Old Leathery by name, and Old Leathery by natur'; and no offence—no offence!"

The ancient butler, chuckled out a hearty plethoric laugh as he invited the packman in, who, sidling along and letting his pack down, said, insinuatingly, "You don't look much the same; you look wonderfully better."

"Ay, ay! you and I, maybe, 'll last out a good fewish of the young uns, thof they're that up in the stirrups, a many on 'em there's no keeping 'em in their places. But they hant done yet with the likes o' you and I."

"No, no; not they, sir," said the packman, giving his mouth a back-handed wipe, and peering all round the hall. "And so good Mistress Martin is in mourning—no near friend?"

"Was nor that—that is, I don't know as she've any own friends; it's one o' the family—the best on 'em's gone. Leastways, between you and I and the post, and to go no furler, I may say so. Muster Edmund was always outlandish, and I doubt Muster Pe Lacy, his son, be the same, and Muster Basil's nought of a country gentleman; but the captain was a Haustwicke every bone on him. He'd a been the one to kep' up the old place, if so be as he'd been born at the right time. He oughter a been the hare. But there comes Martin. I say yere's a pretty go, Mistress M.; a strange gentleman's a wanting of you."

(To be continued.)