

## CHAPTER XIX.

## MR. HALFDAY HEARS THE NEWS.

BRIAN drew his chair so close to his father's that their knees touched, and William Halfday leaned back, as if away from him and afraid of him. The son was a mystery, a something that he had not expected to find, a being who had thrown him out in his calculations for the future. He was weak himself—he had been always weak and fretful and irresolute—where did this pale-faced, beetle-browed young man get his iron will from? For this son was of iron, and therefore merciless. Still let him hope on to the last, and put up with his son's reproaches and exordiums; he was wholly helpless and must bear the burden, and if Brian would not stare so fiercely at him, he should get on better in good time.

"I don't know what you are, or what your life has been, or what it is likely to be," Brian began, more sadly than sternly now. "You sit before me a riddle hard to guess at, and the past sheds no light upon you."

"We have the present to consider, Brian," William Halfday delicately hinted, and without returning his son's gaze. He could not look at him, he could not do anything but evade that uncomfortable stare which seemed endeavouring to read his life in spite of him—to read through him, and get at all the history of his unprofitable existence—as if that would do any good—as if it mattered—as if the days ahead of them both were not the most important!

"I will tell you my share of the past," Brian continued; "and we will leave to times more fitting, the explanations which I have a right to demand from you. I will say now, that years ago, when I began too early in life to act and think for myself, it was you who troubled me. Your character was at stake, and your own fate attributed to you and one James Westbrook the ruin of his career. After you had left England, it was supposed by one or two in the secret—for it was always kept a secret—that you and Westbrook had decamped with various securities that were negotiable abroad, and which the firm—always a weak one—was unable to replace. It seemed a fair and noble story as regarded the partners, the history of two men preferring ruin to the

acknowledgment of their sons' dishonesty, but as I grew up I doubted it, for your sake."

"Thank you, Brian," said the father, extending his shaking hand towards his son, but with the same averted gaze; "you did me justice. I never saw the securities."

"Neither had Caspar Westbrook stolen them," said Brian, lightly touching his father's hand, and then setting it aside, "or James Westbrook, or any one save that poor warped mind above there."

"My father!" exclaimed Mr. Halfday; "was it the old man then?"

"Yes—God forgive him!"

"I say that too, with all my heart, Brian," said the father. "And let me add, it is a comfort to me to see a pious vein running through your discourse. It speaks well for your character."

"I am not a pious man," cried Brian. "Don't interrupt me."

"I beg your pardon. Excuse the liberty I have taken, Brian; but I thought you possibly might be," replied his father. "Pray, proceed."

"I grew up with a suspicion of foul play, and I planned and schemed for years to solve the mystery. I succeeded. I proved at least your honesty in the matter, and I was very glad."

"Thank you," murmured William Halfday again.

"If I could have done it before the mother's death, I should have been happier," said Brian. "But that was not to be. I proved, at least, that you left England an honest man. What you have come back, Heaven only knows. But I believe you honest still, and will do the best for you that my means allow."

"You will not send me to the union; you will take care of me; you *will* do something for me, after all?" the father cried with excitement.

"Did you doubt my helping you, then?"

"You did not meet me kindly," was the answer. "I could not make out what you thought of my return to England."

"I suppose not."

"And I am honest, Brian," he said, speaking with great volubility now. "I have been an unlucky fool all my life; but I have never done an action of which I am ashamed. I have been horribly honest; I have resisted no end of temptations to be-