

CHAPTER XL

Man's uncertain life.

So like a rain-drop, hanging on the bough,
 Amongst ten thousand of its sparkling kindred,
 The remnants of some passing thunder shower,
 Which have their moments dropping one by one,
 And which shall soonest lose its perilous hold,
 We cannot guess.

—*J Baillie*

HE tired, spent moments of the old year's midnight, were crawling into eternity, the fierce December wind was sighing out its wearied farewell over the frozen streets; the thick white frosts were gathering on the window panes, in crystal shrubs and icy forests; December was howling, in a spectral voice, the ominous cry of the "Banshee," in anticipation of the old year's death. It was well nigh the hour of another day's dawn, but in the house of Henry Rayne everyone was astir. In the old, familiar home, where we have intruded so often upon happy inmates in their joy, we now steal an entrance, to witness the gloom, the stillness, the oppressive silence of an awful grief. There is a wasted hand lying over the neat counterpane: it is clammy and feeble, there is a feverish brow, tossing on a downy pillow. parched lips, dim eyes, shadowy features, are now what we recognize, instead of the good-natured, smiling face of Henry Rayne, there is labored breathing, causing the weak breast to heave and fall in heavy sobs, there is the sound of stifled weeping and half-muttered prayers from those who kneel around his bed. Honor is kneeling at the head, with blanched face, clutching her clasped hands nervously, while her pale lips repeat a supplication for him who is dying before her. Guy, on the opposite side, stands peering eagerly into the face of the doomed one he loves, watching and waiting for the last terrible change that will ever come. Jean d'Alberg, kneeling at the foot, with her face buried in her hands, is stifling the tears and sobs that burst from her weary eyes and breast, and at a little distance away, the two faithful servants are weeping and