

papers. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he could not have been more utterly astounded. Springing up, he continued gazing upon her as if unable to collect an idea, to utter a syllable. Ida essayed to speak, but the words died away in silence. At length, gathering courage, she murmured.

"You seem surprised, Mr. Vernon,—you may well be so,—nor will that surprise be diminished when you learn that I am here to request a favor, yes, though the terms on which we are at present would seem to preclude such a thing, I come with the hope I shall not be disappointed."

"Speak, Miss Beresford," rejoined her companion, who had now somewhat recovered from his overwhelming astonishment. "Speak, and if it lies in the compass of my power, you shall be obeyed."

"I wish you then," she rejoined, extending the letter, "to deliver this for me, before day-break to-morrow."

"To whom?" he interrogated.

"The Marquis of Pemberton," she answered, whilst a vivid scarlet replaced her hitherto marble paleness. She knew well the suspicions that name would excite in the mind of Claude, suspicions she could not, dared not dispel. For a moment he was silent, and then repeated in a surprised tone.

"The Marquis of Pemberton. This letter is for him? Pardon me, Miss Beresford, if I seem presumptuous, but might I dare to ask, have you consulted my mother, or Lady Stanhope, on the subject?"

"No, no," she hastily interrupted. "They above all must know nothing of it; 'tis a secret entrusted to you alone."

"And shall be faithfully kept," he respectfully rejoined; "but do not think I am presuming on the confidence you have deigned to repose in me, if for once, I assume the privilege which the world assigns me, that of an adopted brother, and implore of you to pause, to reflect, ere you finally decide, unless indeed there are engagements subsisting, which would sanction such a step."

Though the latter supposition would have tended greatly to exculpate her in the mind of Claude, her natural candour would not permit her to leave him one moment undeceived, and she murmured:

"I understand you, but there are none such. Neither promise nor betrothment exists between us."

"Claude started; but to spare her feelings, quickly subdued his surprise, and exclaimed in a gentle tone:

"Then, Miss Beresford, even as I would entreat,

admonish Lucy, so shall I do to you. You are young, inexperienced yet, and if you will not consent to consult Lady Stanhope, take another day to reflect, ere you decide, upon an act which may influence your future life more than you would imagine."

The gentleness with which he spoke, a gentleness she had so little expected, and which was in such vivid contrast with his usual unbending haughtiness; the chivalric respect and delicacy pervading his every look and word, touched her beyond measure, and too much moved to speak, she remained silent. Claude guessed the cause, and resumed.

"You will then take the advice I have presumed to offer you, your silence is eloquent enough;" and as he spoke, he half extended the epistle, but matters had gone too far. Ida was exasperated with herself for the emotion she had exhibited; emotion which she feared Claude might attribute to the influence of his own eloquence, a supposition disagreeable to her beyond measure, whilst his allusion to her silence, or rather agitation, had annoyed her still further. "And all this," whispered her besetting sin, Pride, "all this, from one who has ever treated you with coldness and indifference!" Drawing up her queen-like form to its full height, she said:

"I take back my letter, Mr. Vernon, not from any change in my wishes or sentiments, but solely, because I fear you are unwilling to charge yourself with it." The change in her manner communicated itself to her companion like magic. His cheek flushed, and raising his head, he exclaimed in his usual cold, but respectful tones.

"I entreat your pardon for the presumption which led me to forget that 'twas not my sister I was addressing. But 'tis my first, and it shall be my last offence." What a pang did not his words inflict upon his listener's heart! He continued, "'Twere superfluous to say how readily I undertake your commission, nor how faithfully I shall execute it. Before dawn tomorrow I shall be on my way. It only remains for me to add that the confidence you have deigned to repose in me shall be held inviolably sacred, and that any further commands you may have at any future period, I shall ever willingly, faithfully execute."

Ida did not trust herself to speak, but merely inclined her head as she turned away. Claude sprang forward to open the door, and bowed profoundly as she passed out. With what agonized feelings did she fling herself on her couch, to which she had retired, not to rest, but to think. Every conflicting feeling that could add bitterness to her cup of misery, thronged upon her, as she