

shaken—my dear young lady; will, I fear, be fit for work no more," was his reply, as he mounted, and bowing, put his horse into a fast trot.

"Poor Ruth! she is not old, and that, to a woman in her station, is a hard sentence. I must ask papa to have the best advice for her."

After a luncheon, that was to do duty as a dinner, it was a great relief from the gloom that had settled on the inmates of the Hall for Gertrude to join the circle at the parsonage. There, she had the cheerful and pleasant thoughts, the interchange of innocent converse, suited to her age. The four young ladies strolled in the garden together, and thence to afternoon service. On their return there was the cheerful tea-table; and afterwards, as the twilight deepened into night, and Allan with Rupert joined them, their voices blended in sacred song. They needed no instrumental accompaniment, for they sang well in parts, and Rupert Griesbach's fine bass, and Allan's tenor were heard to the utmost advantage amid the clear sweetness of the ladies' voices.

Mr. Nugent was away, conducting a religious service at a neighbouring village; and when it was time for Marian and Mr. Hope (the latter having been wheeled there in a garden-chair) to return to Ferny Gap, Mysie and Gertrude walked to the river-side; and, of course, as Allan had come for Gertrude, and Rupert was always ready for an evening walk, they all accompanied them.

It was not until they had reached the gate of Mr. Hope's cottage, and Mysie was kissed and blessed by him with a fervour which indicated more than a mere nightly parting, that Allan learned Mysie would leave next day. Marian's words, "I shall go with you to the station, dear," explained this to him; so that, as they returned, these two, Allan and Mysie, fell rather behind Gertrude and Rupert in walking, the conversation naturally was on her approaching departure. Mysie frankly said—

"I am no longer to be a pupil, Mr. Allan Austwicke. I am to begin teaching others."

Something of a start was perceptible to his companion as the result of her words. He had, in truth, heard her spoken of as Mr. Hope's ward, and, in very awkward astonishment he said—

"Really a teacher at the school?"

"Yes; a teacher at the school—just that."

"Well, those who teach are sure to learn," continued Allan, in rather a bewildered way.

"I don't teach exactly for any such motive, but as a vocation—a pursuit in life."

There was a heightened flush on her cheek, and a touch of pride in her tone, as she spoke. The night was so bright with moonlight, that Allan could see her face. It was just of that blooming beauty which is softened by the silvery beams; and the young man, as he looked at her, was too full of admiration to trust himself to speak. But the silence of each was eloquent—dangerously so; each was half conscious of absorbing the other's thoughts, and yet the one was saying to himself, "I've offended her, no doubt. She's a noble creature. Most girls have no pursuit in life—only trifling and nonsense." The other was saying, "He despises governessing, no doubt; but it doesn't matter. His likes or dislikes are nothing to me."

Just then, by that strange complexity of the human mind, in which thoughts come we know not how, the memory of her lost brother rose to Mysie's recollection very vividly. "Where was he? Should she ever see him more?" involuntarily she sighed at these mental queries.

"Your undertaking is very arduous, Miss Grant. Do you think you shall be happy?"

"Yes—that is, not unhappy, Mr. Allan."

"Surely, that is not enough."

"It ought to be."

"Oh! you should know nothing but happiness."

"That is not a common lot, and, I am sure, cannot be mine."

"Why not, Miss Grant?"

"Because I've some things to prevent it. I had once a brother—an only brother, Mr. Allan,"—her voice shook; she meant to have told him more, but she was obliged to end with the words—"and I lost him."

Whether or not Allan would soon have had an explanation given him that might have pre-

vented his coming to the conclusion that her brother was dead, could not be known, for just then the curate joined them.

Gertrude and Rupert, who were in advance, had been both mutually interested. Their acquaintance was now of some weeks' duration, and they were quite old friends—indeed, rapidly becoming something more: not, perhaps that time has much to do with youthful love, except to test its durability.

"I think, Allan," said Mr. Nugent, "you should go over the foot-bridge and meet your aunt. I saw her in Wicke Copse, half an hour ago, and I meant to have spoken to her, but I feared it might be intrusive."

"Was she going to the village?" said Allan, in great surprise.

"I think so; perhaps a kindly visit to some poor person."

"Is that so, Gertrude?" said Allan, as if he thought his sister must know her aunt's charities.

It flashed into Gertrude's mind that Ruth's illness had perhaps prevented her aunt having a messenger for any special purpose; but she merely shook her head in answer to her brother, who, leaving his sister for the curate and Rupert to see home, hurried off down to where the river was crossed by a foot-bridge, that led into a copse of low-growing and tangled underwood. He could not understand his aunt having any business so urgent in the village as to call her from home, or to induce her to take that unfrequented way to the village; still he went on to meet her, never doubting that if she had set off in some sudden access of benevolence, she would be glad enough to see him come to accompany her return. He entered the little wood; crossed it quite to the other side, went down the village street, saw nothing of his aunt, and, wondering if Nugent had been mistaken, he inquired of a rustic whom he knew, and who was leaning over a gate, whether he had seen Miss Austwicke.

"Why, yez; I do think, if ever I see the squire's sister, I see her a putting of a letter in the post-office half an hour ago, as ever was; but she seemed skeered like—anyhow, I thought so."

Allan, when he heard that, returned homeward, marvelling at his aunt's increasing eccentricities. He met Gertrude walking on the path that bounded the lawn, waiting for him. She pointed to her aunt's drawing-room as Allan approached, and said—

"See, Aunt Honor is at home. You had your walk for nothing. But how she came in I know not, any more than why she went. I fancy she returned through the churchyard, and in at the private gate."

"She went herself to post a letter! with a houseful of servants, and the general letter-bag, think of that, Gertrude! What mighty State secret can Aunt Honor have? How strange, dear True, she grows!"

"She does indeed, Allan. All things seem strange just now to me."

"And not the least strange is it that Miss Grant should be, as she told me to-night, commencing as a teacher in a school," responded Allan.

"Oh! as to that, Marian is a teacher, and all the better—at least, I wish I had some pursuit, something that made me feel less in the way, more of use to some one."

"Somehow, Gertrude, that lovely Mysie is different to Miss Hope—at least, I think so."

Gertrude looked for a moment curiously at her brother as they entered the house, and said, rather slowly, "I do not know, Allan, that you are called to make any comparisons between them."

CHAPTER L. DRIFTING ON.

"The voice may fail,
And the lips grow white and the cheeks grow pale;
Yet will ye know that nought but sin
Chafes or changes the soul within." W. M. PRAED.

The following morning brought a letter to the Hall of more importance to Mr. Nugent than any one else. It was the tidings of the death of the Rev. Mr. Craven, the non-resident Vicar of Austwicke, who had been so long an invalid, and yet whose death, as is often the case in chronic maladies, had at last been sudden. The living,

which was in the gift of the squire, had never been promised to Mr. Nugent, but there is no doubt both that gentlemen and the parishioners expected he would succeed to it.

It was, too, a something that rather relieved the anxiety which just at present had crept over the squire, that he could show his respect for a worthy young clergyman, by giving him the living.

A servant was despatched to the parsonage to ask Mr. Nugent up to the Hall. The man met the curate at the lodge-gate on his way to visit Ruth, at Gertrude's request, and also with a proposition of his own to submit. On entering the breakfast parlour—where Allan and his father were still lingering over the morning meal, and, as the ladies were not present, leisurely discussing newspapers and letters, as well as coffee and eggs—Mr. Nugent, as soon as the customary salutations were over, was the first to speak.

"I have to tell you, Mr. Austwicke, that Dr. Griesbach, who was summoned yesterday to a consultation at Winchester, has just sent us a telegram to announce his coming to spend a few hours with his son to-day, and it occurred to me he might benefit your poor servant. You know he is much consulted for fits."

"If he would see the poor woman it would, indeed, be very kind, and I should take it as a favour," said Mr. Austwicke; "and it is like you, my good friend," he continued, "to think of it—very like you—and all you have done, and are doing for the parish. But there, I need make no speeches about it. Here's a letter you must look at. Poor Craven has gone! He has been so far dead as to anything he could do here for years, that there's nothing to sorrow over in the actual fact having occurred. Austwicke could not have a better or more justly-valued vicar than you."

Mr. Nugent was silent a moment. It scarcely comported with his principles to flatter, any more than to solicit, an earthly patron; but he wrung Mr. Austwicke's offered hand in eloquentsilence. And as a good man lives in the atmosphere of prayer, there is no question his unuttered thanksgiving went up to the Great Head of the Church, that he was not to be removed from a people between whom and himself true affection and confidence subsisted. That was his first thought. No doubt he was not insensible to other considerations; for many that involved his future circumstances were comprehended in his having the salary, as he had long had the duties, of vicar. Marian would be his: a blessing he had not ventured to appropriate while his means were so small. His sister Harriet would realize her wish in joining Mrs. Maynard in her now well-established school.

Though all these considerations thronged his mind, he was yet anxious to see the sufferer, of whose mental state Gertrude had informed him. But she, on Martin naming that the clergyman was there, showed such agitation and reluctance, that it was judged best to postpone his visit until after Dr. Griesbach had been brought. Mrs. Austwicke, to whom the intelligence of the Doctor's coming to the Chace was announced, expressed her satisfaction, as she declared herself suffering under great prostration—a plea which Gertrude hoped would, in some measure, account for the strange and increasing coldness, amounting to aversion, with which her mother had treated her since her arrival. Even that morning, when Gertrude had made breakfast for Mrs. Austwicke in her dressing room, and striven with gentle, daughterly attentions to render her services acceptable, that lady appeared too absorbed in a book she was reading to notice her, and seemed greatly relieved when Gertrude timidly proposed leaving her to pay a visit to Miss Austwicke. Her words, "Well, yes, Gertrude, you can go to her at once, and then you may employ yourself with Miss Hope; we shall meet at dinner," were more cheerfully spoken than any that she had before addressed to her.

The singularity of Miss Austwicke's solitary walk the previous evening dwelt in Gertrude's mind painfully. She went into the little east drawing-room, and found Miss Austwicke leaning over an embroidery frame, so lost in thought