

"Dear father! leave this dismal room, it's too much for you. Oh, that face," she added with a shudder. "Father, I've seen it before. I'm sure I have. Why, it's the poor woman whose child died in the hospital. Oh, poor, poor soul!"

Strangely enough, the scene on the bridge of the preceding day flashed on her mind.

"Oh! did she drown herself?" she continued, as with a gentle force she tried to lift the head from her father's knee.

"No, girl! no," groaned Alterton. "She's been starved to death. Yes, starved! Look at her; and at my very door! Think of these wet rags being the shroud of our dear Annie!"

"Annie!" Mabel comprehended it all, the more that her eyes fell on the floor where her father had dropped the cigar case, and the name of Edward Boon arrested her attention.

By that time Tom Horncastle, and Susan, and all the household had crowded in, and Mr. Alterton was forced from the body. Mabel asked if the dead might be removed, but that, until an inquest was held, was refused. With her own hands poor Mabel spread a sheet over the victim, and then returned to the task, not an easy one, of restoring her father to composure.

Mr. Alterton's nature was of that ordinary kind, quick to receive, rather than firm to retain an impression. He had certainly a feeling of pride, as well as affection for his wife's young sister, whose beauty had been the means of establishing the prosperity of the trade, and of her own ruin. He had mourned her loss, upbraided himself with having permitted her to be exposed to temptation, but it had at length suited his easy disposition to believe her dead—and he believed it.

But in this catastrophe it needed no explanation to him, remembering well that Annie in her young days was as high-spirited and wilful as she was handsome—that she had not made them acquainted with her sorrows. She would desire most of all to conceal, from the friends she had left, the humiliating fact that desertion and poverty were her lot. But when her heart and brain gave way at the death-bed of her child, her rejection of all aid from the Burnish family, her desertion of her poor lodging at the time of the funeral (that lodging where they afterwards learned she had earned a scanty pittance by shirt-making), her wandering about for days, were but the natural result of her distraction. A faint wish, like a glimmer in the darkness, to creep to the well-known home to die, seemed indicated by all the evidence that could be obtained of her movements, and was confirmed by a few fragments of papers in the cigar-case. There was a lock of her child's hair. A piece of a rent letter from Boon, dated two years previously, in which he had told her "prudential reasons, connected with his family, compelled him to part from her." It was evident this paper had been torn in passion and then retained in agony. Besides this, there were three letters begun in pencil, to her sister, Mrs. Alterton, whose death it seemed she had not heard of. These evidently had been recently written. One fragment ran thus:—

"DEAR SISTER,

"If you knew what I have suffered, you would forgive me. My punishment is greater than I can bear."

Then another—

"You are a mother, and can feel for me, your guilty sister. My child—my only one—my all in this world, was crushed before my eyes."

Then again, another fragment of paper—

"DEAR JANE,

I'm dying. It's a long time—I don't know how long since I ate or slept—a long time. I want to look in your face, and take your dear hand once more, for it's all over now. You wouldn't scold me I'm sure. If you saw me, sister, I think you'd shed a tear over—"

And there it closed, as if she either could not recollect her thoughts or satisfy herself. What she must have suffered, in the slow tortures of grief and want and neglect, Mabel dared not attempt to think. Suicide has ghastlier spiritual horrors—a more utter blackness of outer darkness and despair—for the contemplation of the living, but far less of mortal agony.

There was no delay and no mystery at the inquest. The surgeon pronounced "Inanition" as the cause of death, and the verdict was—"Found dead from want and exposure." As speedily and, as privately as possible, the funeral took place. Mr. Shafton Keen, who had called upon Mr. Alterton, having ascertained for him where the child was buried, the mother was placed in the same grave; and, to use the words of a hawker-woman, who remembered Annie in her early days, and who watched the whole proceedings of the burial—"There was an end of the beautiful barmaid of Racket Row."

This event had delayed Mabel's journey for four days. At the expiration of that time, she prevailed on her father, not only to go down with her, but to take lodgings in Bath, and by rest and quiet restore his health, which had been much shattered by the recent shock. Mabel had not seen Mr. Shafton Keen when he called, but she learned that Mr. Boon's lunacy was considered incurable; that he was wearing away; and yet, that, day and night, through every wakeful hour, he was moaning out an inquiry for "the good Samaritan."

CHAPTER XVII.

Fair Weather.

"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
Are all but ministers of love,
And feed his sacred flame."

—Coleridge.

When Mabel reached Bath, and settled herself once more at Miss Germaine's, the first interruption her quiet met with was a call from Mr. Delamere Burnish.

"He came here three days back, when I expected you," said Miss Germaine, evidently troubled. "Your letter informed me," she continued, "how matters stood, and I told him I approved of your refusal of him, as the right course under the circumstances. He answered, that 'he came to apologize for the way you had been treated, and that he yet hoped to make himself worthy of you, and to induce you to alter your decision.' I told him that if you came under my care, I could not, with my obligations to his family, be a party to an intercourse whatever. He asked for one interview, to receive a final decision from yourself; but I would rather, my dear, that you refused to see him."

With a great swelling of heart, poor Mabel acquiesced; and she heard the well-known tread in the hall, and the close of the outer door, with a nervous sensation, as if her brain throbbed to his footsteps.

But it must be confessed, Delamere Burnish was one of those obstinate men who will not easily take "No" for an answer. He managed to find out through the medium of his shrewd cousin, Shafton Keen, that Mr. Alterton was living in Bath, so he called on him, and, to the astonishment of the father, made a proposal for his daughter. But such an offer seemed then very ill-timed, for Mr. Alterton's anger against Boon was hardly appeased, even by hearing how great was the affliction under which the broken-down drunkard and libertine was suffering. When people are not free from blame themselves, they always are anxious that others shall have their full share.

"Are you mocking my child, sir?" said the father, angrily, to Delamere, in reply to his proposal. "Have a care; don't come on the sly to ask for Mabel Alterton as if she was your inferior."

Delamere's open countenance and manly words, however, had their effect in soothing this irritation, and he listened, in some surprise, to the explanation that followed.

"I am not the rich man I was thought to be, Mr. Alterton. I have entirely given up all thoughts of having anything to do with the brewery. My dear father at present is offended with me for my determination, and refuses to have anything to do with me and my concerns for the future. I hope to prove to him that I am right, and not wanting either in duty or affection to him."

"Then what do you mean to do?" said Mr. Alterton; "for my daughter's bringing-up won't fit her for a poor man's wife."

"I'm not sure of that. If talent, activity, and good sense are a needful dower for a poor man's wife, Miss Alterton has those." He then proceeded to explain his intention of engaging in agricultural pursuits, and that his small fortune, inherited from his mother, was to be expended on land in Ireland, near a family of English settlers, whom he knew.

"Why, you'll be shot, like enough," was the father's comment; "and do you expect me to consent to such a scheme for my daughter?"

"I am in no condition to marry yet," said Delamere, sadly; "I only ask your approval, your permission, if I can get that of Miss Alterton, to my being considered her suitor."

Just at that moment Mabel called on her father, and had been let in without her knock being heard in the little parlor, opening into a garden, where her father and his visitant were conversing. She entered the room as Delamere finished his sentence.

"We write not for that youth or maid
To whom in words it need be said."

how warmly Delamere apologized for the unworthy treatment Mabel had received from his family; how he told her he had made it his own injury; how he pleaded; and, best of all, how he explained that he loathed a fortune made out of the waste of nature's best productions, and the sins and sorrows of myriads, and would have none of it.

At these words the color flushed warm and glad on Mabel's cheek. These were her own sentiments. It was not Delamere Burnish, the rich brewer, but a young man, with his way to make in the world, proving the sincerity of his good principles by making a pecuniary sacrifice. Mabel looked round to seek consent in her father's face. He had somewhat strolled into the garden, and so it happened that she in return told Delamere that "she meant to live by her talents for a while, that she had just engaged herself as teacher at Miss Germaine's; but she would"—yes, he heard the whisper—"wait for the realization of his plans."

There was much more, dear reader; that sounded very sweet, no doubt, to them; but having no essence to write it in, we need not put it down in common ink.