

MY LADY'S WALK.

(Continued.)

Sir Ughtred Norman, a tall, delicately-formed, aristocratic-looking man of seventy, sat in his arm-chair by the bright study fire, his white, nervous hands clasping the carved arms, his gray head slightly bowed, his brows contracted, his pale lips compressed as one suffering physical torture.

Before him stood Ethel, a death-like pallor on her cheek, but a feverish light in her beautiful eyes; her lips quivering, but her hands rigidly, determinedly clasped.

"What did you say this fellow said?" asked Sir Ughtred, huskily.

"As I stood in the Avenue he came out of the darkness towards me," answered Ethel, with quick, tremulous accents. "I thought it was 'My Lady,' and was about to run away, then I collected my courage, and resolved to remain, when I saw it was a man, and he spoke.

"He said?" queried Sir Ughtred.

"Miss Winkworth, for two days I have been watching about Melton Regis to see you alone. I bring you what I believe will be startling news."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"One who knew—I should say who knows—your unhappy father."

"That is impossible," I replied. "My father died before I was old enough to remember him."

"Died to you because Sir Ughtred Norman so willed it," he replied. "Ethel's eyes were on her companion, and she saw him shrink. "But alive to live and suffer yet."

"There," she broke in upon herself, excitedly, "I cannot rehearse that fearful conversation. I bade him tell me what he knew to prove his words. He demanded money. He owned that he had come for that purpose to traffic upon the secret he possessed. That secret I could obtain from none but him. That did I go on my knees to you—you, who had parted father and child, would never speak, would persist that my father was dead."

"And you gave him what he needed?"

"Yes; there rang such truth in his words, I could not refuse. I plucked the bracelet from my arm, the brooch from my throat; I thrust them in his hands with my purse, and cried—'Now keep your word, tell me of my father—prove that he lives.'"

"And did he?" he asked.

"He did. He said"—pausing, Ethel clasped her hands to her throat, she felt choking, yet she felt she must know the truth—"He said that my father had committed a great crime, such as had turned all men's hands against him—a crime that the law had punished. That you—you had taken me, had brought me up, grandpapa, on condition that my father would let me be made believe that he was dead. That he would never make himself known to me. For my sake, though the only being in the world he had to love, he consented. This is what the man said. Grandpapa, is it true?"

"If I were to say no, Ethel, you would not believe me?"

"I should ask for proof."

"You would seek it of this man's word?"

"Yes."

"If I refused, he told you of other means to confirm his tale?"

"He did. He told me where my father lives, an outcast from society, solitary, alone."

"And you would seek proofs of him, Ethel, if I decline them?"

"I must, grandpapa."

Her white lips formed, rather than uttered the words.

"Then," said Sir Ughtred, hoarsely, "it is true. He did this thing, and I parted you. The darkness of his disgrace should not fall on my daughter's child."

Ethel uttered a low, wailing cry, pressed her hands to her head. It was true—true—all that that horrible man had said! She was soon on her knees by Sir Ughtred's chair, her dilated eyes full of feverish light and pain, as she exclaimed:

"His crime, grandpapa?—his crime? Tell me my father's crime?"

"Child, be content with what you have learned."

"Grandpapa, impossible? I must know!"

"Reflect, Ethel; what will the knowledge entail?" he reasoned, in distress. "Think of Roland."

A great shiver seized the girl, she turned paler yet, but she answered firmly:

"I know. I have thought of that already. I know, if what that man said was true, Roland must never call me wife."

"Ethel!"

"Yes," she went on, "I am my father's daughter, and my disgrace is none the less because it is hidden. Grandpapa, what was my father's crime?"

Sir Ughtred hesitated; then whispered:

"That, Ethel, of Cain."

"Murder?" shrieked Ethel. "Oh, Heaven!"

For a second she crouched low on the rug, her face buried in her hands, her frame convulsed with emotion. Roland, the son of proud Squire Goldhurst's wife, now? Never—never! She loved him too well.

She raised her head abruptly. Some of her late companions were going to their dressing-rooms, chatting and laughing as they went. Her companions never again! How haggard, how hollow, did her glittering eyes already seem to have become!

"Grandpapa," she said, in low, monotonous, yet resolute tones, "tell me, what did my father do? You can understand. I must know all now."

Sir Ughtred recognized the necessity. He told her briefly of the mur-

der done; the punishment, commuted to a term of years; and how, also, upon what conditions he, Sir Ughtred, had brought his daughter's child home.

"Grandpapa, there were extenuating circumstances!" she pleaded, almost desperately.

"Extenuating circumstances for Cain!" exclaimed Sir Ughtred, with sudden anger. "I see none. The man who slays his brother is rightly cut off from his fellow-men."

"Possibly," said Ethel, softly, rising to her feet. "Of course I cannot judge like you. From his fellow-men, but not his child."

"Ethel, what do you mean?" cried the old man, gazing at the expression on her face.

"That my father being alive, my fitting place, whatever be his crime, is by his side."

She spoke very quietly, almost apologetically, yet very firmly too.

"Ethel," ejaculated Sir Ughtred, leaning forward, grasping his chair, "are you mad? Do you know what that decision means? Roland—"

"I am never to be his wife now," she put in. "My father must then be his father; and I could not ask it—I would not have it."

"You renounce Roland for—your father!"

"It is not my renouncing," she answered, with a sudden, passionate wring of the hands; "it is the crime. And yet," she added, "were it not, I feel I could not live now without knowing my father. Oh, think!—I, his child, never to have seen him!"

"You have seen him—once."

"I?" she asked, amazed. "Where? When?"

"Do you recollect, when in Oban, seated on a hillside, a man spoke to you?"

Ethel uttered a quick cry.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, eagerly. "An old man, poorly dressed, yet a gentleman, with hair white, that made him look older than his face declared he was, though that was so full of care and trouble that my heart was touched with pity. Oh Heaven! I remember how he looked upon me!—how his voice trembled as he spoke! Grandpapa was that he—my father?"

"It was."

"Thank Heaven!" cried the girl. "For in that sad face there was repentance if ever there had been sin. Grandpapa, he is alone—an outcast! He must be so no more. I must go to him. Oh, why—why did I not know, to comfort him sooner?" and she burst into tears.

"Ethel," said Sir Ughtred, "you will not persist in this folly, which will offend your father more than anyone?"

"If he say so I will leave him. If he sends me back I will come."

"No!" ejaculated the old man, passionately. "Arnold Winkworth brought bitter disgrace on my child's name, the wife he had wedded. He shall not shadow my hearthstone with it. I will have no communion with him or his. If you go to him, Ethel, you leave me for ever. All ties between us are broken. You must decide."

Ethel moved quickly to him, and, throwing her arms round his neck, laid her lips to his cheek, then, distress in her eyes, said:

"Dear—dearest grandpapa, I must decide as I should were you in my father's place. Then I would leave him to go to you, as I must now—loving you, oh, so dearly—leave you to go to him. Yes, go at once. Henceforth those I know here may not hold me fit company—I would meet none of them again."

Sir Ughtred, taking her wrists, removed her arms from about him.

"Go then," he said. "Henceforth we are strangers."

A moment Ethel stood, undergoing a violent mental struggle, then exclaiming, "May you yet forgive me, grandpapa. My love must be ever yours," she passed quickly from the study, returning to her own room. Just then the dinner-bell rang, and her maid tapped at the door. Dismissing her with a request to Sir Ughtred to excuse her absence from the meal, Ethel sat down to think what next she was to do.

She felt she was deciding rightly. It was not her place to renounce an erring father. Still, Sir Ughtred had been as a father one to her, and it required a severe struggle to remove herself from out his love. And Roland, "Oh, I dare not think of him. I dare not!" she moaned, writhing in agony. "Remain or go he must be nothing to me now, nor I to him. Oh, Roland—Roland, my love. So soon to have been mine!"

In a moment, conquering her grief, she rose up. There was much to do—much to plan. Better to act, not reflect, or her courage might fail. Let her one care as yet be for the two she was about to leave. Sitting down, after awhile, she wrote:

"DEAR, DEAR GRANDPAPA,

"Forgive me thus leaving you; but the more I reflect the more I feel my first duty is to my unhappy father; hence I go; but I dare not give you or myself the pain of another interview. How can I tell but you would refuse it me? That would break my heart. Believe me ever fondly, lovingly yours, though you pluck me from you affection. Pray tell me one my future address.

"Yours gratefully for ever,

"ETHEL."

The second letter was still harder to write. She dared not make it long. It was to Roland.

"MY DEAREST" (she wrote),

"When we last parted I knew, which you did not, that it was never to meet me again. For your sake, as yours, I dared not tell you so. Why I may not tell you now. But last night I learned that which made it impossible for me ever—ever to be your wife. Yet my love is yours. I cannot take it back. I shall never wed, never. God bless you, dearest. For my sake—for my happiness—forget me.