

mined to force an interview, should the opportunity arise. But no such opportunity had yet arisen. He would do nothing to create a scandal.

Here at Stillmington he had new hopes. The little town was almost empty, and offered a depressing prospect to the speculator who was to give the two concerts. The hunting season was over; the water-drinking and summer-holiday season had not yet begun. Stillmington had assumed its most exclusive aspect. The residents—a class who held themselves infinitely above those birds of passage who brought life and gaiety and a brisk circulation of ready money to the place—had it all to themselves. Respectable old Anglo-Indian colonels and majors paraded the sunny High-street, slow and solemn and gouty, and passed the time of day with their acquaintance on the opposite pavements in stentorian voices, which all the town might hear, and with as much confidence in the splendour of their social position as if they had been the ground-landlords of the town. Indeed, the lords of the soil were for the most part a very inferior race of men, who wore dusty coats, shabby hats with red-cotton handkerchiefs stuffed into the crown, and had a sprinkling of plaster-of-paris in their hair, and a three-foot rule sticking out of their breast-pockets—men who belonged to the bricklaying interest, and had come into Stillmington thirty years ago, footsore and penniless, in search of labour. These in their secret souls made light of the loud-voiced majors.

The town was very quiet; the glades and groves in the subscription garden—where the young lilacs put forth their tender leaves in the spring sunshine, and the first of the nightingales began her plaintive jug-jug at eventide—were lonely as those pathless regions of brushwood at the mouth of the Mississippi where the alligator riots at large among his scaly tribe. To this garden came Geoffrey, on the second day of his residence at Stillmington. Mr. Shinn, the pianist, had dropped a few words that morning, which were all-sufficient to make this one spot the most attractive in the world for Geoffrey Hossack. Mrs. Bertram and her little girl had walked here yesterday afternoon. Mr. Shinn had seen them go in at the gate while he was enjoying a meditative cigar, and thinking out a reverie in C minor during his after-dinner stroll.

Geoffrey was prompt to act upon this information. What more likely than that his divinity would walk in the same place this afternoon. There was a blue sky, a west wind as balmy as the midsummer zephyrs. All nature invited her to those verdant groves.

Mr. Hossack paid his money at the little gate, where a comfortable-looking gatekeeper was dosing over a local newspaper, and went in. Nature had liberally assisted that benevolent medico who devised and laid out the Stillmington Eden. Capability Brown himself could not have imagined a combination more picturesque. Geoffrey followed a path which wound gently through a shady grove, athwart whose undergrowth of rhododendron and laurel flashed the bright winking river. Here and there a break in the timber revealed a patch of green lawn sloping to the bank, where willows dipped their tremulous leafage into the rippling water. Ferns, and such pale flowers as will flourish in shade—primrose, wild hyacinth, and periwinkle—grew luxuriantly upon the broken ground beside the path, where art had concealed itself beneath an appearance of wildness. To the right of this grove there was a wide stretch of lawn, where the toxophilites held their festivals—where the croquet balls went perpetually on certain days of the week, from the first of May to the last of September. But happily the croquet season had not yet begun, and the birds had grove and lawn to themselves.

Geoffrey went to the end of the grove, meeting no one. He strolled down to the bank and looked at the river, contemplated the weeds with the eye of boatman and of angler.

"It ought to be a good place for Jack," he muttered, yawned, and went back to the grove.

It was lonely as before. Thrushes, robins, blackbirds, burst forth with their little gushes of melody, now alone, how together, then lapsed into silence. He could hear the fish leap in the river; he could hear the faint splash of the willow branches shaken by the soft west wind. He yawned again, walked back to within a few yards of the gate, came back again, stretched himself, looked at his watch, and sank exhausted on a rustic seat under the leafy arm of a chestnut.

"I wonder if she will come to-day," he thought, wishing he had been at liberty to solace himself with a cigar. "It would be just like my luck if she didn't. If I had only seen her yesterday instead of that ass Shinn, with his confounded reverie in C minor. But there was I loafing at the other end of the town, expecting to find her looking at the shop windows, or getting a novel at the circulating library, when I ought to have been down here. And if I ever do contrive to speak to her, I wonder what she'll say. Treat me with contempt, no doubt; blight me with her scorn, as she has blighted my epistolary efforts. And yet, sometimes, I have seen a look in those gray eyes that seemed to say, 'What, are you so true? Would to God I could reward your truth!' A delusion, of course—mad as my love for her."

The mildness of the atmosphere, those little gushes of song from the birds, the booming buzz of an industrious bee, the faint ripple of the river, made a combination of sound that by and by beguiled him into forgetfulness, or not quite forgetfulness, rather a pleasant blending of waking thought and dreaming fancy.

How long this pleasant respite from the cares of actual life lasted he knew not; but after a while the sweet voice of his enchantress, which had mingled itself with all his dreams, seemed to grow more distinct, ceased to be a vague murmur responsive to the voice of his heart, and sounded clear and ringing in the still afternoon atmosphere. He woke with a start, and saw a tall slim figure coming slowly along the path, half in sunshine, half in shadow—a lady with a face perfect as a Greek sculptor's Helen, dark chestnut hair, eyes of that deep gray which often seems black—a woman about whose beauty there could hardly be two opinions. She was dressed in black and gray—a well-worn black-silk dress of the simplest fashion, a loose mantle of some soft gray stuff, which draped her like a statue, a bonnet made of black lace and violets.

She was talking to a little girl with a small round face, which might or might not by and by develop into some likeness of the mother's beauty. The child carried a basket, and knelt down every now and then to gather primroses and violets on the uneven ground beside the path.

"Sweet child," said Geoffrey within himself, apostrophising the infant, "if you would only run ever so far away, and leave me quite free to talk to your mamma."

He rose and went to meet her, taking off his hat as she approached.

"I would not lose such an opportunity for worlds," he thought, "even at the risk of being considered a despicable cad. I'll speak to her."

She tried to pass him, those glorious eyes over-looking him with a superb indifference, not a sign of discomposure in her countenance. But he was resolute.

"Mrs. Bertram," he began, "pray pardon me for my audacity: desperation is apt to be rash. I have tried every means of obtaining an introduction to you, and am driven to this from very despair."

She gave him a look which made him feel infinitely small in his own estimation.

"You have chosen a manner of introducing yourself which is hardly a recommendation," she said, "even were I in the habit of making acquaintances, which I am not. Pray allow me to continue my walk. Come, Flossie, pick up your basket, and come with mamma."

"How can you be so cruel?" he asked, almost piteously. "Why are you so determined to avoid me? I am not a scoundrel or a snob. If my mode of approaching you to-day seems ungentlemanlike—"

"Seems!" she repeated with languid scorn.

"If it is ungentlemanlike, you must consider that there is no other means open to me. Have I not earned some kind of right to address you by the constancy of my worship, by the unalterable devotion which has made me follow you from town to town, patiently waiting for some happy hour like this, in which I should find myself face to face with you."

"I do not know whether I ought to feel grateful for what you call your devotion," she said coldly; "but I can only say that I consider it very disagreeable to be followed from town to town in the manner you speak of, and that I shall be extremely obliged if you will discontinue your most useless pursuit."

"Must it be always useless? Is there no hope for me? My letters have told you who and what I am, and what I have dared to hope."

"Your letters?"

"Yes; you have received them, have you not?"

"I have received some very foolish letters. Are you the writer?"

"Yes; I am Geoffrey Hossack."

"And you go about the world, Mr. Hossack, asking ladies of whom you know nothing whatever to marry you," she replied, looking him full in the face, with a penetrating look in the full clear gray eyes—eyes which reminded him curiously of other eyes, yet he knew not whose.

"Upon my honor, madam," he answered gravely, and with an earnest warmth that attested his sincerity, "you are the first and the only woman I ever asked to be my wife."

That truthful tone, those candid eyes boldly meeting her gaze, may have touched her. A faint crimson flushed her cheek, and her eyelids drooped. It was the first sign of emotion he had yet seen in her face.

"If that be true, I can only acknowledge the honor of your preference, and regret that you have wasted so much devotion upon one who can never be anything more than a stranger to you."

Geoffrey shot a swift glance after the child before opening the floodgates of his passion. Blessed innocent, she had strayed off to a distant patch of sunlit verdure carpeted with wild hyacinths—"the heavens upbreking through the earth."

"Never?" he echoed; "never more than a stranger? Is it wise to make so light of an honest passion—a love that is strong to suffer or to dare? Put me to the test, Mrs. Bertram. I don't ask you to trust me or believe in me all at once. God knows I will be patient. Only look me in the face and say, 'Geoffrey Hossack, you may hope,' and I will abide your will for all the rest. I will follow you with a spaniel's fidelity, worship you with the blind idolatry of an Indian fakir; will do for you what I should never dream of doing for myself—strive to win reputation and position. Fortune has been won for me."

"Were you the Lord Chancellor," she said, with a slow sad smile, "it would make no difference. You and I can never be more than strangers, Mr. Hossack. I am sorry for your foolish infatuation, just as I should pity a spoiled

child who cried for the moon. But that young May moon sailing cold and dim in the sky yonder is as near to you as I can ever be."

"I won't believe it!" he exclaimed passionately, feeling very much like that spoiled child who will not forego his desire for the moon. "Give me only a chance. Do not be so cruel as to refuse me your friendship; let me see you sometimes, as you might if we had met in society. Forgive me for my audacity in approaching you as I have done to-day. Remember it was only by such a step I could cross the barrier that divides us. I have waited so long for this opportunity, for God's sake do not tell me that I have waited in vain."

He stood bareheaded in the fading sunlight—youthful, handsome—his candid face glowing with fervor and truth; a piteous appealing expression in those eyes that had been wont to look out upon life with so gay and hopeful a glance,—not a man to be lightly scorned, it would seem; not a wooer whose loyal passion a wise woman would have spurned.

"I can only repeat what I have already told you," Mrs. Bertram said quietly, as unmoved by his appeal as if beneath her statuesque beauty there had been nothing but marble; no pitiful impulsive woman's heart to be melted by his warmth, or touched by his self-abasement. "Nothing could be more foolish or more useless than this fancy."

"Fancy!" he repeated bitterly. "It is the one heartfelt passion of a lifetime, and you call it fancy!"

"Nothing could be more foolish," she went on, regardless of his interruption. "I cannot accept your friendship in the present; I cannot contemplate the possibility of returning your affection in the future. My path in life lies clear and straight before me—very narrow, very barren, perhaps—and it must be trodden in solitude, except for that dear child. Forget your mistaken admiration for one, who has done nothing to invite it. Go back to the beaten way of life. What is that Byron says, Byron who had drained the cup of all passions? Love makes so little in a man's existence. You are young, rich, unfettered, with all the world before you, Mr. Hossack. Thank God for so many blessings, and—with a little laugh that had some touch of bitterness—"do not cry for the moon."

She left him, with a grave inclination of the proud head, and went away to look for her child—left him planted there, ashamed of himself and his failure; loving her desperately, yet desperately angry with her; ready, had there only been a loaded pistol within reach, to blow his brains out on the spot.

CHAPTER VII.

SORROW HAS NEED OF FRIENDS.

Geoffrey went to the concert at the Stillmington Assembly Rooms that evening, his disappointment notwithstanding. Granted that he had comported himself in a mean and cad-like fashion; granted that this woman he loved was colder than granite, unapproachable as the rocky spurs of Australian mountains, whose sheer height the foot of man had never scaled; granted that his passion was of all follies the maddest,—he loved her still. That one truth remained, unshaken and abiding, fixed as the centre of this revolving globe. He loved her.

The audience at the Assembly Rooms that evening was not large; indeed, Stillmington spent so much money upon gentility as to have little left for pleasure. The Stillmingtonites visited one another in closed files, which were solemnly announced towards the end of each entertainment as Colonel or Mr. So-and-so's carriage. The distance that divided their several abodes was of the smallest, yet he was a daring innovator who ventured to take his wife on foot to a Stillmington dinner-party, rather than immerse her during the brief journey in one of Sparks's files. Concerts, however, the Stillmingtonites approved, as a fashionable and aristocratic form of entertainment—not boisterously amusing, and appealing to the higher orders, for the most part, through the genteel medium of foreign languages. There was generally, therefore, a fair sprinkling of the *élite* of Stillmington in the Assembly Room on such occasions, and there was a fair sprinkling to-night—a faint flutter of fans, an assortment of patrician shoulders draped with opera-cloaks of white or crimson; an imposing display of elderly gentlemen with shining bald heads and fierce gray whiskers; and, on the narrower benches devoted to the vulgar herd, a sparse assemblage of tradesmen's wives and daughters in their best bonnets.

Geoffrey Hossack sat amongst the *élite*, sick at heart, yet full of eager longing, of feverish expectancy, knowing that his only hope now was to see her thus, that the fond vain dream of being something nearer to her was ended. Nothing was left him but the privilege of dogging her footsteps, of gazing at her from among the crowd, of hearing the sweet voice whose Circean strains had wrought this madness in his mind, of following her to the end of life with his obnoxious love.

"I shall become a modern Wandering Jew," he thought, "and she will hate me. I shall provoke her with my odious presence till she passes from indifference to aversion. I can't help it. My destiny is to love her, and a man can but fulfil his destiny."

She sang the old Italian song he loved so well—that melody whose pathetic tones have breathed their sad sweetness into so many ears—recalling fond memories and vain regrets,

thoughts of a love that has been and is no more, or lives only beyond the grave.

To Geoffrey those pensive strains spoke of love in the present—love dominant, triumphant in its springtide of force and passion.

"Vol che sapete che cosa è amor," he repeated to himself bitterly; "I should rather think I did. It's the only thing I do know in the present obfuscation of my faculties."

Their eyes met once in the look she cast round the room. O God, what regretful tenderness in hers! Such a look as that maddened him. Had she but looked at him thus to-day in the garden, he would surely have done something desperate—clasped her in his arms, and sworn to carry her to the uttermost ends of the earth, if thereby he might be sure of his prize. Could she look at him thus, she who had been colder than the icy breath of the polar seas when he had pleaded with all the force of his passion two short hours ago?

His eyes never left her face while she sang. When she vanished, the platform was a blank. Other performers came and went; there was other music, vocal and instrumental—to him it seemed no more than the vague murmur of the far-off waterfall in the ears of slumber. She came back again, after an interval that seemed intolerably long, and sang something of Bulfinch's—a poem by Longfellow, called "Daybreak"—mournful, like most of her songs, but full of music.

During the interval between the two concerts Geoffrey paced Stillmington and its environs with an indefatigable industry that might have shamed the local postman, for he at least was weary, but Geoffrey knew not weariness. Vainly did he haunt that aristocratic High-street, vainly the linger by the door of the circulating library, the fancy repository, the music-shop where somebody was perpetually trying pianos with woolly basses and tinkling trebles; vainly did he stroll in and out of the garden where he had dared to molest her with his unwelcome adoration,—she was nowhere to be met with.

One comfort only remained to him, a foolish one, like all those fancies whence love derives its consolation. He knew where she lived, and in the quiet dusk, when the gentle hush of evening enfolded Stillmington like a mantle, he would venture to pace the lonely street beneath her window; would watch her taper gleaming faintly in that gray nightfall which was not yet darkness; would, as it were, project his spirit into her presence, and keep her company in spite of herself.

The street where she lodged was on the outskirts of the town, newly built—a street of mean-looking dwellings of the speculative builder's pattern; a row of square boxes, with not a variation of an inch from number one to number thirty; sordid, unpicturesque, common; habitations which even love could not beautify. Mrs. Bertram occupied the upper floor above a small haberdasher's shop, such a shop as one felt could be kept only by a widow—a scanty display of poor feminine trifles in the window, children's pinafores, cheap gloves, cheap artificial flowers, cheap finery of divers kinds, whose unsubstantial fabric a spring shower would reduce to mere pulp or rag useless even for the paper-mill.

Here, between seven and eight o'clock, Mr. Hossack used to smoke his after-dinner cigar, despairing, yet deriving a dismal pleasure from the sense of his vicinity to the beloved, like those who, in the gloaming, pace a churchyard within whose pale their treasure lies. The twinkling light shining palely athwart the white blind cheered him a little. Her hand had perhaps kindled it. She was there alone—for Geoffrey, in whom the parental instinct was unawakened, did not count a child as company—amidst those humble surroundings, she whose loveliness would enhance the splendor of a palace. Thus, with all love's exaggeration, he thought of her.

One evening he was bold enough to penetrate the little shop. "Had they any gloves that would fit him?—eights or nines he believed required." As he had supposed, the shopkeeper was a widow. She emerged from the little parlor at the back, dressed in rusty weeds, to assist a young woman with a small pinched visage and corkscrew ringlets, who was feebly groping among the shelves and little paper packets with hieroglyphical labels.

"Lor, Matilda Jane, you never know where to find anything! There's a parcel of drab men's on the top shelf,—I'm sorry to keep you waiting, sir. We have a large selection of cloth and hosiery gloves. You'd like hosiery thread, perhaps, as the weather's setting in so warm?"

"Yes, hosiery thread will do," answered Geoffrey, who had never worn anything but Jouvain's best, at five shillings a pair.

He seated himself, and looked round the stuffy little shop. Above this gloomy den she lived. He listened for her light step while the drab men's gloves were being hunted for.

"I think you have one of the ladies who sang at the concert lodging with you?" said this hypocrite, while he made believe to try on the thread gloves.

"Yes, sir; Mrs. Bertram: a very sweet young person; so mild and affable."

"But not chatty, mother," interjected the damsel in ringlets. "It's as much as one can do to get half-a-dozen words out of her; and it's my belief she's as proud as she can be, in spite of her soft voice."

"Hold your tongue, Matilda Jane; you're always running people down," remonstrated the matron.—"I think that pair will fit you nicely, sir," as Geoffrey thrust his strong fingers into the limp thread. "Poor dear lady, there wasn't