

Morton, almost tempted by her earnestness into believing her. "Is he not handsome, witty, and refined? Certainly, he would not suffer by being put into comparison with any one present that night, or even with any one *absent*."

The tone in which the last word was uttered, jarred on Amy's feelings, and she somewhat coldly replied:

"Sir George may indeed possess all the qualities you have mentioned, yet still they do not command esteem, and his very name would perhaps be forgotten when those of less gifted individuals would ever be remembered."

"Doubtless, the less gifted person alluded to, whom you remember with such fidelity, is your cousin, Mr. Delmour?"

Unheeding the deep, angry flush, that passed over her companion's face, the stepmother gravely continued—

"But, believe me, Amy Morton, he is unworthy of you, and you will yet repent the delusion that leads you to cherish as warmly as you do, a being who will never repay you."

"I know my cousin's character well, by this time," said Amy, bitterly; but Mrs. Morton little imagined how unfavorable to him was that knowledge.

"And I knew him well too," said the latter, while her cheek flushed, and an expression of pain shadowed her features. "I knew him at a period, when, uncontaminated by intercourse with the world, his better feelings, if he had any, were in their first strength, when, if ever worthy of a heart's devoted love, he should have been worthy of it then, and yet how did he repay my affection?"

Amy involuntarily started.

"Nay! you need not look so surprised, Miss Morton; you have long ere this heard the whole story, and you cannot but acknowledge, even prejudiced as you may be, in his favour, that his conduct was unpardonable. Be frank! is it not so?"

"If I must speak, to judge from what I have heard, I should be tempted to say he acted as he should have done."

"And you believed all he said? Think you, foolish girl! he would not exaggerate my coquetry, and diminish his own base jealousy and inconstancy, when he said that the ardent affection he once entertained for me was but a boyish fancy? I appeal to your own judgment."

But Amy was silent; Mrs. Morton adjusted round her the rich folds of her cashmere shawl, and fell back on the couch, with quiet disdain. An embarrassing pause ensued, which she was the first to break, by exclaiming:

"I tell you, Amy, you are deceiving yourself.

Awake from your idle dreaming, which may destroy the happiness of your future life; banish the remembrance of this boy lover, whom you fondly imagine devoted to yourself, but who loves rather the rich dowry that you would bring him."

"Nay, Mrs. Morton," rejoined Amy, firmly; "as I have once before said, you do him great injustice there. Accuse him, if you like, of inconstancy, of heartlessness; but not of interested views,—of that he is incapable."

"Have I not cause to know him?"

"Perhaps so; but, be that as it may, I entreat that this subject may be dropped between us, never to be resumed again. I fear," she continued, rising, "that I have exhausted your patience by my long stay."

The dark shade that had rested on the fair brow of her young stepmother, during the latter part of the preceding conversation, vanished, and with the same bright warm smile with which she had greeted her on her entrance, she thanked her for her kindness, in thus devoting part of her morning to wile away the tedious hours of illness. And thus they parted, seemingly good friends, but, in reality, more estranged than ever.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

It was night; a perfect stillness reigned throughout the large saloon of Mr. Morton's abode, and yet, there were two occupants in it, who were formerly wont to wile away every lonely hour, by affectionate and cheerful intercourse. What a change had one short year effected in the sentiments of that father and daughter! The warm confidence and love that once existed, were changed to restraint and fear on one side,—to self-reproach and coldness on the other. Mr. Morton held a book in his hand, but it was not difficult to see, it interested him but little. Once he spoke, and that was to ask where was his wife. On Amy's replying that she was in her dressing-room, trying on her new dress for Mrs. Sutherland's ball, he relapsed into silence. His daughter silently worked on, yet from time to time the glistering tears fell on her embroidery, dimming its bright hues. Yet this was a scene now too often repeated, and to which she should have been accustomed, still it had not lost its bitterness for her sensitive heart, and it but caused her to revert the more frequently to the happy period when she was indeed the first, the only object of her father's love. But she now well knew that that time had passed away forever, and he could never again be to her what he once had been. Her sad reflections were diverted by the entrance of her stepmother, who was splendidly attired.