

which proposal was hailed with enthusiasm.

Judge Merlin, in another little speech, returned thanks to the company and begged leave to propose the bridegroom's health, which was duly honoured.

Then it was Lord-Vincent's turn to rise and express his gratitude and propose Judge Merlin's health.

This necessitated a second raising of the judge, who after making due acknowledgments of the compliments paid him, proposed—the fair bridesmaids.

And so the breakfast proceeded.

They sat at table an hour, and then, at a signal from Mrs. Middleton, all arose.

The gentlemen adjourned to the little breakfast parlour to drink a parting glass with their host in something stronger than the light French breakfast wines they had been quaffing so freely.

And the bride, followed by all her attendants, went up to her room to change her bridal robe and veil for her travelling dress and bonnet; as the pair were to take the one o'clock train to Baltimore on route for New York, Niagara and the lakes.

She found her dressing room all restored to the dreary good order that spoke of abandonment. Her rich dresses and jewels and bridal presents were all packed up. And every trunk was locked and corded and ready for transportation to the railway station, except one large trunk that stood open, with its upper tray waiting for the bridal dress she was about to put on.

Ruth, who had been very busy with all this packing, while the wedding party were at church and at breakfast, now stood with the brown sash and mantle that was to be Claudia's travelling costume, laid over her arm.

Claudia, assisted by Mrs. Middleton, changed her dress with the feverish haste of one who longed to get a painful ordeal over; and while Ruth hastily packed away the wedding dress and closed the last trunk, Claudia tied up her brown silk bonnet and drew on her gloves and expressed herself ready to depart.

They went down-stairs to the drawing-room, where all the wedding guests were once more gathered to see the young pair off.

There was no time to lose, and so all her friends gathered round the bride to receive her adieux and to express their wishes.

One by one she bade them fare well.

When she came to her cousin, Bee burst into tears and whispered:

'God forgive you, poor Claudia! God avert you from all evil consequences of your own act!'

She caught her breath, wrung Bee's hand and turned away, and looked around. She had taken leave of all except her father and Ishmael!

Her father she knew would accompany her as far as the railway station, for he had said as much.

But there was Ishmael!

As she went up to him slowly and fearfully every vein and artery in her body seemed to throb with the agony of her heart. She tried to speak; but could utter no articulate sound. She held out her hand; but he did not take it; then she lifted her beautiful eyes to his, with a look so helpless, so anguished, so imploring, as if silently praying from him some kind word, before she should go, that Ishmael's generous heart was melted and he took her hand and pressing it while he spoke, said in low and fervent tones:

'God bless you, Lady Vincent. God shield you from all evil! God save you in every crisis of your life!'

And she bowed her head, lowly and humbly, to receive this benediction as though it had been uttered by an authorized minister of God.

CHAPTER LXVII.

BEA'S HANDKERCHIEF.

'I would bend my spirit o'er you.'

'I am humbled, who was humble!'

Friend! I bow my head before you!'

—M. E. Browning.

But a mist fell before Ishmael's eyes, and when it cleared away Claudia was gone.

The young bridesmaids were chattering gayly, in a low, melodious tone, with each other, and with the gentlemen of the party, filling the room with a musical hum of many happy voices.

But all this seemed unreal and dreadful, like the illusions of troubled sleep. And so Ishmael left the drawing-room and went up into the room to see if perhaps he could find the key.

He found the bundle of papers tied up with red tape, the open books that he had consulted the day before, and the letters that had come by the morning's mail.

He sat down wearily to the table, and began to open his letters. One by one he