

Mr. Fleming was at hand to rescue her from her perilous situation, and restore her to her friends. His conversation with Sophia that night greatly affected him, and awoke in his breast a painful interest for her future welfare. Whilst busily engaged in watching the movements of his youngest niece, he was not forgetful of Alice; and he often looked in upon her while employed in teaching her little scholars at the church; but Alice was too deeply engaged in her occupation to notice the stranger, who regarded her with such affectionate interest. Mr. Fleming was so much pleased with her personal appearance that he was very desirous of introducing himself to her acquaintance. For this purpose he visited the cottages of the poor, in the hope of meeting his little niece; but, unfortunately, his calls were made at an hour when Alice was generally engaged at home with her domestic duties. His patience was nearly exhausted when chance directed him to Michael Causton's cottage. The worthy peasant gave him such an account of the virtues and benevolence of his niece, that he resolved to remain a stranger to her no longer. The following day his curiosity was gratified. He no longer wondered at his son's admiration, but was as anxious to obtain Alice Linhope for a daughter as his son could possibly be to make her his wife.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

"DEAR uncle," said Alice, a few days after Mrs. Fleming's funeral, "I wonder I did not recognize you when you first spoke to me by the stile. You are so much like Arthur."

"I am sure you discovered the resemblance," returned her uncle; "when I raised my hat I observed you start, and you perused my features so attentively that I began to anticipate a discovery."

"What joy your unexpected visit to B— would have given us all, if it had not been clouded by the loss of our beloved grandmother," said Alice. "When you approached her bed, I wondered that I did not recognize you before; but I was too much affected by the awful scene, to welcome you then. Believe me, dear uncle, my heart was eloquent, though my lips were silent. From the first moment we met, I could not look upon you as a stranger."

"But one of my young relatives views me in that light still," said Mr. Fleming, turning to Sophia, who was leaning against the window frame, her eyes bent upon the ground, and bitterly ruminating on the past. She started at the sound of his voice, as he affectionately held out his hand to her. "Why do you shun me, Sophy? Come hither, dear girl, and tell me why I appear so formidable to you?"

This unexpected kindness on the part of Mr. Fleming quite overcame Sophia. She stepped forward, without uttering a word, and gave him her hand.

She trembled exceedingly. He drew her to him, and affectionately kissed her pale cheek. She burst into tears, and flinging herself upon his breast, hid her face upon his shoulder, and wept passionately. Mr. Fleming put his arm gently round her waist, and led her into the garden.

There was a pause of some minutes—no sound was audible but the deep sobs which burst from the oppressed heart of the agitated girl; and the merry ringing of the village bells, whose lively tones wafted by echo through wood and vale, seemed to mock the melancholy voice of grief. Mr. Fleming at length broke the painful silence.

"Sophia, are you sorry for the past?"

Her tears flowed faster than before, as she murmured, "Oh yes—I loathe and despise myself for my base and dishonourable conduct. I feel that I can never, never be happy again."

"I have forgiven the crime you committed against me, Sophia. Let this restore you to peace."

"Alas, dear uncle, this goodness from one whom I have so deeply injured, adds fresh bitterness to my grief. You may forgive me—but I cannot forgive myself. When I look back upon my misspent life, my mind is filled with despair."

"God has promised forgiveness and remission of sins to those who sincerely repent," said her uncle. "He who forgave the weeping Mary, and had pity upon her tears, will not despise the deep sighing of a contrite heart, or withhold his mercy from you."

"Uncle, I can only feel at present the horrible consciousness of guilt. It presses upon my heart. It sears my brain. It mocks my tears. You do not know me, uncle: you cannot imagine the depths of guilt that I have practised for the last six months, or the rapid progress I have made in wickedness. You have witnessed an act of great dishonesty; but that appears less heinous in my eyes than the dishonesty of my words and thoughts. There was a temptation—a strong temptation—which induced me to take your purse; but I have done acts, to which the appropriation of your money appears a mere trifle."

"Unhappy girl! whom else have you defrauded?"

"My sister! To gratify my selfish vanity, I basely traduced her to my cousin Arthur; and when, in spite of my cruel insinuations, I found that he preferred her company to mine, I assured him that she was engaged to Stephen Norton, though I well knew that he was betrothed to another; and thus I succeeded in robbing Alice of her peace of mind; for I knew that she loved Arthur, though she carefully concealed her attachment from us all. Yes, uncle, I was inhuman enough to feel a savage pleasure in the success of my stratagem; though I saw Alice declining day by day, I could actually witness her misery without a tear. Nay, I felt an—