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The Favourite Child.

(Continued from page 4.)

An agreement was now entered into between the mother and the daughter, that they should confess to each other whenever they gave way to what might justly be considered as the one paramount temptation with each: nor was this the only bond of intercourse and strengthening intimacy between them. All that was kind, all that was affectionate, in the character of Isabel Ainsworth, was now called into exercise, and rewarded by the gratitude of one, who felt it the more deeply, from the rarity with which such blessings had ever been bestowed on her.

Matilda was the first to confess having yielded to her besetting sin, and she did this with some degree of petulance; for the warmth of her temper had scarcely subsided, before the love of truth had prompted the confession.

Degraded as Mrs. Ainsworth was in the eyes of her own family, and humble as was the place she held in their esteem, it formed no part of the discipline of her husband to humble her before the rest of the world. She was therefore still treated, in the presence of his friends, in all respects as the mistress of the house; and when company had to be entertained, she was dressed with as much elegance, and stationed at the head of the table with as much ceremony, as if still an honoured wife and mother.

Isabel felt this mockery; yet she knew it was due to her husband's respectability that it should be so; and she was herself so humbled, and so broken in spirit, as to yield a passive assent to all his wishes. Perhaps we should scarcely say to *all*, for there was one wish, more imperatively enforced than all others, which she would not, or could not, yield to, on the only occasions when any possibility of deviating from it occurred.

It was on one of these occasions, when great preparations had been done for a dinner-party, that she first gave way to that reckless feeling of despair, which led her to look defiance at her husband as he sat, knitting his brows, at the opposite end of the table, and threatening, as far as a man of bland and polite manners could threaten, by look, and sign, and gesture, that she should be made to pay dearly for her present imprudence.

Alas, for poor Isabel! All the guests were eating and drinking to their hearts' content, and wine was pressed upon every one but her, by the master of the house. Delicate and exemplary ladies partook of it, and each one seemed to consider it as the wholesome, rational, and even necessary accompaniment, of hours of social enjoyment. How could it be, that she, the mistress of the table, was shut out from an indulgence so common to all—an indulgence so lawful, and so universally approved!

Her own will had not been consulted, her own consent had not gone along with her recent abstinence, and therefore it was not likely she should voluntarily make herself an exception to the general rule, when individuals so highly esteemed in society as those around her, and ladies of such unblemished character, were making themselves, what she and her maid had been accustomed to call, "comfortable." Yes, and too well did she remember the cheerful animation, the glow, the stimulus which these familiar means had been wont to diffuse throughout her frame, the careless independence of circumstances, the energy to look danger in the face, and the warmth of cordial feeling with which indifferent persons could then be met. Too well did she remember all this; and never did she seem to need it more than now. She had no intention of going farther—nay, not even so far, as some of the good ladies at the table; and while the conventional rules of society required them so often to refill their glasses, while they were pressed to do so even by the master of the house, how was it probable that his own looks directed to herself, should produce the desired effect, especially when they were so bland and sweet the moment he addressed himself to others, who were doing the very same thing, from which, with all the power of his lordly authority, he had so imperatively warned her to abstain? No, no, there

must be consistency in all systems of moral government; and the restrictions we would enforce for the benefit of those who need them, must also be the rule of our own actions—just as the code of laws by which the ignorant or rebellious part of the community are restrained, must be as binding on the judge who pronounces sentence of punishment upon the criminal, as they are upon the meaneast subject of the realm.

The company who met at Mr. Ainsworth's on the day alluded to, thought they had never seen the lady of the house more pleasant. At first they thought she was either ill, or out of spirits; but as the evening advanced, she became lively and animated, and finally parted from her guests with a cordiality of manner which made her, in their opinion, one of the most delightful of women.

None of them were made acquainted with the hours which succeeded the breaking up of that cheerful party—none of them beheld her on the following morning, when she shrunk from appearing before the suffering child, whose nurse, whose counsellor, whose mother, she had promised to be.

The fact was, while Mrs. Ainsworth sat amongst her guests, surrounded by the ceremonials of polished society, encouraged by the example of others of her sex, and protected from any open display of her husband's displeasure, her conscience was lulled to repose by that half excitement, which while it gently stimulates the body, diffuses a dreamy vagueness over all the moral perceptions of the soul. It was for the conviction of after-hours to impress upon her mind, that what was by others indulged in as the innocent enjoyment of social hours, was destruction to her peace—what was generally believed to be wholesome aliment to them, was nothing less than poison to her. It was destruction to her peace, for all her habitual, but then half-subdued cravings for false stimulus, came back with redoubled force; and it was poison, because it made her feel again in a state, to purchase at any price, the once familiar means of transient forgetfulness and repose.

Isabel Ainsworth was seated the following morning alone in her dressing-room, her aching temples resting on her hands, and her whole being lost in one vague feeling of despondency, when a gentle step was heard along the passage leading to her door, and an humble inquiry from a stranger's voice whether the visiter might come in.

It was Maria, the poor dress-maker: and finding the lady, as she had hoped to find her, alone and disengaged, she ventured to ask, in a modest and unobtrusive manner, if Mrs. Ainsworth was in want of any one as her own private maid.

"You have probably heard that Betsy has left me," said the lady.

"I have," replied Maria.

"It is not intended"—she continued, but suddenly corrected herself, and added—"I have no intention of keeping a maid now."

"And you have no want of any one in the house to do your plain work, or your dress-making?"

"Oh no! I want nothing. I do not wish to attach myself to any one, and no one wishes to do anything for me."

Maria looked earnestly in the lady's face, with an expression, in her own, of wonder, and deep interest. The words she heard were a perfect mystery, but the tone of voice in which they were uttered needed no explanation; and yielding to a natural impulse of compassion and sympathy, she spoke more freely than her wonted modesty would otherwise have allowed.

"Oh! yes, ma'am," she said, "I am sure you want somebody to wait upon you, to serve you, to be faithful and kind to you; for you know all want kindness, however rich and exalted they may be."

"Yes, Maria, you are right; and no one wants it more than I do. But if I am rich, I am not exalted; and it is possible to fall so low, as to be thought unworthy of any kindness."