

into the warm regard he entertained for Nina? Alarmed for himself, for her, he turned an uneasy glance upon her, but the quiet unconsciousness, the innocent calmness of her look, removed a weight heavier than iron from his heart, whilst it increased his deep respect and admiration for the childish simplicity of her character. Warned of his danger, however, he resolved to escape it in time, and whilst revolving the best mode of bringing the interview to a speedy close, a rapid step was heard on the stairs, the door burst violently open, and with a joyous exclamation, Percival Clinton bounded into the room. Suddenly his brow angrily contracted, for his glance had fallen on Nina, as she leant upon St. Albans' arm, with a familiarity, a friendliness, she had never yet vouchsafed to himself. The expression too, of the earl's face, which he had momentarily caught, and the perfect confidence which seemed to reign between them, added fresh fuel to his angry fears. Subduing his irritation by a violent effort, he quickly advanced, and exchanged courtesies with them. Warmly was he received, and the calm self-possession with which Nina welcomed him, still retaining the earl's arm, dispelled at once and entirely his jealous doubts. Her glance could not have met his so openly, so unflinchingly, had there existed any cause of jealousy for himself or Florence.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER some moments of lively conversation, they all three returned to the saloon, where the time passed pleasantly enough, till the silvery chimes of the clock told they might expect the truant.

Lord St. Albans had parted that morning from Florence with anger in his heart, but he now awaited her return with gentler feelings. He had learned a short but forcible lesson during the passing interval, of human frailty, of his own weakness, and it had filled him with the generous resolution of being additionally forgiving to others. It required some effort on his part to remain faithful to his resolve, when the gay cavalcade at length rode up to the porch in which he stood to welcome them. Foremost of the party rode Florence and Sir Edward Westover, conversing with the same sparkling animation they had displayed during the morning. As the latter reined in his horse, he exclaimed in a mirthful, though subdued tone:

"I hope, for your sake, Miss Fitz-Harding, that the lord of the manor has recovered his serenity. A companion in the sulks is anything but agreeable."

"Hush!" she playfully returned. "You are

on forbidden ground. Know you not, that I, like the subjects of the celestial Empire, must be blind to my liege's faults? I must not dare to see the spots on the sun."

Irritated by the freedom with which she spoke of one who should have been so sacred in her eyes, and the encouragement she bestowed on her companion's disrespectful levity, the earl impatiently turned away, but, as he did so, a secret voice whispered: "And thou, too, St. Albans, art thou faultless?" It prevailed, and with a kind smile he advanced, welcomed the guests, and approaching Florence, assisted her himself to alight.

"I have atoned for my involuntary fault now," he thought, as he compelled himself to listen kindly, cheerfully, to their glowing account of their delightful expedition, in which as he well knew, though she did not confess it, young Westover had been her constant companion. For that evening, Florence, thinking she had ventured far enough, behaved herself admirably—and amiable, lively, attentive, she almost succeeded in making her betrothed forget the morning's scene in the picture gallery, and the comparisons so unfavorable to herself, resulting from it; whilst Nina, no longer an isolated occupant of a solitary corner, was most flatteringly attended on by Percival Clinton. The arrival of the latter had caused quite a sensation at the castle, and dark locks were smoothed with additional care, and unbecoming toilettes replaced with others more suitable in his honor. Miss Westover, who had already met him once, though he had almost forgotten the meeting, entertained a feeling of warm admiration for his handsome person and careless independence of character, which admiration was not diminished by the knowledge that he was wealthy and well born. Conscious of her own handsome person, her sparkling wit and fashionable manners, she saw none save Florence who could compete with her; Miss Clifton was handsome, but silly; her cousin, the lady Jane Gordon, the reverse, clever but ordinary; Lady Jacintha Stanton, a most insipid companion, whilst lady Cecilia, her younger sister, was a mere hoyden. True, there was the really beautiful heiress, Miss Dashwood, but she, not content with the advantages nature had bestowed on her, was ambitious of shining among the literati, and professing a profound contempt for all the graceful accomplishments of her sex, would converse of nothing save metaphysics, theology, politics—besides quoting Latin occasionally, a language of which she had but a very imperfect knowledge. The latter personage, Miss Westover well knew would render herself perfectly hateful to Clinton, from her own absurd pretensions, and the field was thus