

Oxford, most probably, and tried to find your rooms, if you had not appeared this evening."

"You had better not attempt that," he says, decisively.

"But you neglect me, Eric: even old Margaret remarks it: and the Vicar said—"

"The Vicar!"—starting. "When did you see the Vicar?"

"The day before yesterday, when he called here."

"Who let him in?"

"I did!"—rather defiantly. "Old Margaret was out."

"And what communication passed between you?"

"He asked if my name was Mrs. Hamilton?"—and I said "Yes."

"What on earth made you say so?"

"Well—haven't you always called me Mrs. Hamilton? Isn't it the name I go by in the village?"

"Not through my means, Myra. I have never mentioned you to anybody, in Fretterley or out of it. And pray, what had the Vicar to say to Mrs. Hamilton?"

"He asked if you were Mr. Hamilton: he has seen you riding through the village, and—"

"Don't tell me that you connected our names together before him!" interrupts Keir, with a look of anger.

"Well!—what was I to say?"

"What were you to say? You knew well enough what to say to get yourself or me out of a scrape, a few months back. But I see through your design, Myra—you want to force me to do that against which you know I am determined."

"I cannot bear this continual separation," she replies; "it is killing me. I cannot live without you."

"Listen to me, Myra," he says, approaching closer to enforce his argument. "You say you cannot bear this separation; but if you attempt to elude it by any devices of your own, you shall never see me again. You cannot say that I have deceived you: you threw in your lot with mine of your free consent; more than that—you urged me to the step which has brought, God knows, its retribution with it. But if you make our position public, you will do me an irreparable wrong, and injure your own cause. So I warn you!"

"Of what?"

"That suspicion has already fallen upon me for being foolish enough to visit you so openly; so much so, that I had decided, before coming here to-day, to move you as soon as possible from Fretterley; and if the rumor is not stopped by that means, I shall go away till it is forgotten."

"Where?" she inquires, breathlessly.

"In the country, or abroad;—anywhere to baulk the gossips."

"And without me, Eric?"

"Without you? Of course. What good would it do if I took you with me? Why, if the least hint of such a thing were to reach my father's ears, he would ask me all about it, and I should tell him the truth. I have never told him anything but the truth," adds the young fellow, simply; "and I believe it would kill him."

"And you would give me up for your father?" she says, quickly.

"A thousand times over! My father is everything in the world for me; and I can't think how I ever could have permitted myself to do that which would so much grieve him."

A dark flush overspreads her handsome features as she hears the unpalatable truth, and her full breast heaves and her lips tremble with the deep pain it causes her. She is passing through the greatest agony a woman is capable of feeling: coming gradually, but surely, to the conviction that her reign is over, her empire overthrown—that she has lost her place in her lover's heart.

And she loves him so passionately: she has always cared for him far more than he has done for her, and his increasing coldness drives her mad.

"You said that I was everything in the world to you, three months ago," she answers, with set teeth.

"I know I did; and at the time I believed it to be true. But I have told you, Myra, what a proud, high family mine is, and how seldom their escutcheon has been tarnished with dishonor. And—forgive me for saying so—I know it is my own fault, but I cannot help being conscious of the fact that I have tarnished it now. And my poor father thinks so much—too much of me; I feel as though I should never be able to look him in the face again." And with that, Eric Keir buries his own face in his hands.

She laps the floor impatiently with her foot.

"You are ashamed of me, Eric."

"I am bitterly ashamed of myself, and of all that has passed between us."

"It would have been better if we had never met."

"Far better—both for you and for myself. Who could think otherwise?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if I were dead."

"It would be better if we were both dead," he exclaims bitterly; "or had died before we saw each other. Oh, Myra—Myra! why will you wring such cruel truths from my mouth? you have been the death of all good things in me."

He lifts his face to hers, and she is shocked to see the pain portrayed there. She is an illiterate, low-born woman, with nothing to recommend her beyond her beauty and her fierce love for him, which, yet, is like the love of an unreasoning animal, overpowering when encouraged, and apt to turn the first time it is thwarted.

But she has one indomitable passion—pride, and it is stirring and working in her now.

"Would you be happy if you could undo the past?" she says in a low voice; "if there had been no such person as me in the world, and had never fancied that you loved me?"

"Happy!" he answers, with a sad laugh. "I should be happy if I could wipe out the remembrance with a free conscience at the expense of everything that I possess. But come, Myra, let us talk no more of impossibilities. The past is past, my child, and nothing you or I can say will ever undo it. Let us think of the present. It is necessary you should leave Fretterley;—where you would like to go?"

"I don't care. You may choose for me."

"Very well, then; I will think the matter over, and let you know. I shan't be able to come here to-morrow, as I have an engagement in the town; but the day after you may depend on seeing me. Do you want any money?"—taking out his purse.

But she shrinks from the note he offers her as though it had been a serpent.

"No—no! I am not in want of it: I have plenty to serve my need."

"All the better for me," he says, laughing. He has recovered his spirits again; clouds are not long in passing with the young.

"Well—good-bye," he continues, as he takes the girl in his arms and kisses her, in a fraternal manner, on the cheek. "It's a shame of me to have made those pretty eyes so red! Don't think twice of what I have said, Myra; you urged me on to it with your cross-questioning, and you know I lament this business for both our sakes; but the dark mood will be gone to-morrow. It's nothing unusual, after three months of honeymoon, my dear."

She clings to him frantically close, but she says nothing.

"Why, won't you say good-bye? Then I must go without it, for I have no more time to lose."

He is moving towards the door, when she flies after him, and almost stifles him in her embrace.

"Oh! goo—bye, my love!—my darling!—my own, own, dearest love!"

She showers kisses, almost roughly on his mouth, his eyes, his brow; kisses which he accepts rather philosophically than otherwise, and from which he frees himself with a sigh of relief.

Alas! for the love of one-and-twenty, when it begins to temper its enthusiasm with philosophy!

As, with a cheerful nod, he turns out of the wicket gate, the woman stands gazing after him as though she has been turned to stone; and when he has finally disappeared, she gropes her way back to the sitting-room, and c.a.s herself headlong on the floor.

"Gone—gone!" she moans; "all gone, and my life gone with it! Oh! I wish that I was dead—I wish that I was buried—I wish that I could neither feel nor think—I am nothing to him now—"

She lies there for, perhaps, an hour, sobbing and moaning to herself; and is only roused by the entrance of the old woman she calls Margaret, with the preparations for her tea, and whose grunt at perceiving her attitude is half of compassion and half of contempt.

"Lord ha' mussy!" she exclaims, "and whatever are you a-lying on the boards for?"

This woman, who is clothed and kept like one of gentle birth, and by whom she is fed and paid her wages, is yet not addressed by Margaret in terms befitting a servant to use towards his mistress. The poor are ever keenest at detecting a would-be lady from a real one.

The familiar tone affronts Myra; she reads in it, not sympathy, but rebellion against her newborn dignity, and she rises and sweeps out of the room, without deigning to notice the presence of her factotum.

But the bed-room is solitary and full of sad remembrance, and in a few minutes she emerges from it, dressed for walking, and saunters in the garden.

It is a queer little nest that Eric Keir has chosen for her, being originally intended for the gamekeeper's cottage on an estate which has long since been parted with, acre by acre, and its very name sunk in the obscurity of three or four small farms; so that the cottage stands alone in the midst of wheat and barley fields; and it is through one of these, where the grain, young, and green and tender, and not higher than a two years' child, spring up on each side of her, that Myra, still burning as under the sense of a deep outrage, takes her way. A resolution has been growing up in her heart during the last hour which, betwixt, its pride and stubbornness, it will not easily relinquish—the resolution to part with Eric Keir.

It wrenches her very soul even to think of such a thing, and as she resolves impossible ways and means for its accomplishment, her breath is hardly drawn; but she has a will of iron, and he has wounded her in her most vulnerable part. As she paces slowly up and down the narrow field-path, the jealous, angry tears scarce dried upon her cheeks, she hears a rustle in the corn behind her, and the next moment some one touches her upon the shoulder.

Myra is not chicken-hearted but she is quick to resent an insult.

"How dare you?" she commences, angrily; but as she turns and faces the intruder, her tone is changed to one of consternation.

"Lord above!" she continues faintly. "How did you ever find me, Joel?"

She is so taken by surprise that she had turn-

ed quite pale, and the hand she offers him is fluttering like a bird.

"Find you!" exclaims the new-comer (who, it may be as well at once to state, stands in the relationship of cousin to her), "I would have found you Myra, if you had been at the furthest end of the whole world."

"Aunt's not here, is she?" inquires Myra, with the quick fear that a woman in her equivocal position has of encountering the reproaches of one of her own sex; "you're sure you're alone, Joel?"

"I'm all alone, Myra. Mother has enough to do to get her living, without coming all the way from Leicestershire to look after you. But I couldn't rest till I'd seen you: I couldn't believe what I've heard, except from your own lips. You've most broke my heart, Myra."

He is an uncouth, countryfied-looking fellow, without any beauty, except such as is conveyed by his love and his sorrow; but as he stands there, sheepishly enough, looking down upon the hand he still holds between his own, he commands all the respect due to the man who has done nothing for which he need blush.

His earnestness seems to touch the girl, for she is silent and hangs down her head.

"When we heard that you had left the situation in the hotel where father placed you, and without a word of warning, we couldn't credit it. But some words as the master wrote to mother made us think as all wasn't right with you; and when weeks and months went by and we didn't hear nothing, I began to fear it was true. So I travelled up from home, little by little, doing a job here and a job there, till I got to Oxford, and could speak with the master myself; and though he couldn't satisfy me as to your whereabouts, I came to it by constant inquiry, and reached Fretterley last night. And now, Myra, come home with me. I don't want to make no words about it: I don't want to hear nothing of what you've been doing—'twould only cut me up—but say you'll come back to the old place in Leicestershire, and then I shan't think my journey's been took in vain."

He looks her in the eyes as he concludes, and she, unable to stand his scrutiny, drops her head upon his rough velvet shoulder, and begins to cry.

"Oh, Joel! if I could only tell you."

"Tell me, my poor lass! where's the use of your telling me: can't I read the signs you carry about you? What's the meaning of a purple silk gown with lace fripples upon your back, and a pair of gold drops in your ears, if it don't mean shame?"

"No! no! not that!" she cries recoiling from him.

"I shall think less of you, Myra, if you call it by any other name. But the old home's open to you, my dear, all the same—open to receive and shelter you whenever you choose to come back to it, though you can't never bring the joy to it now that I once thought you would."

The old home! How little she has thought of it of late! yet she can see it in her mind's eye, as she stands pondering his words. It was not a particularly happy home to her: the homes of the poor seldom are. She had known hunger, and thirst, and cold, and occasionally the sound of harsh words within its limits, yet the memory of the dull life she led there seems very peaceful now, compared to the excited and stormy scenes through which she had passed since leaving it.

The old home! It was not a paradise, but it was more like home to the low-born girl than daily association with a companion who is as far above her in birth as an intellect, and has grown but too conscious of the gulf that lies between them.

Joel Cray takes her fit of inusing for hesitation, and recommences his persuasion.

"I darsay he, whoever he may be—for I know there's a man at the bottom of all this, Myra, (cure him)," he adds *par parenthèse*— "I darsay he does all he can to persuade you that he loves you better than himself, and will be constant to you till death, but—"

"He does not," she interrupts eagerly, in defence of the absent.

"What!" replies Joel, lost in astonishment, "he's sick of you already! He steals you away from an honest family and an honest employment to make a—"

"Stop!" cries Myra, in a voice of authority.

"What am I to stop for?"

"You shall not call me by that name: it is a lie."

"I wish to God you could prove it, Myra. What are you, then—his wife?"

"Of whom are you talking?" with passionate confusion. "How do you know that there is any one? What right have you to come and bully me in this manner?"

"Myra! we were brought up together from little children; my mother was like your mother, and my home was your home; and long before you saw this chap, you knew that I loved you and looked to wed you when the proper time came—that's my right! And now, as we stand in God's sight together, tell me the truth. Are you married to the man, or are you not?"

At this point-blank question, she trembles, and grows red and white by turns, shrinking from the stern glance he fixes on her.

"Joel! don't look at me after that fashion, for I can't bear it! O, Joel! you used to love me. Take me back to aunt, and the old place, and the children, for there's no one wants me here."

"My poor lass! is it really as bad as that—only three months, and tired of you already? Well, well! you'd better have taken me, perhaps after all—you've made a sorry bargain, Myra."

"O, Joel! I love him beyond everything in the world. He is so clever, and so handsome, and so good to me. But I ain't fit for such as he is: I feel it at every turn. I can't talk, nor behave, nor look as he would wish me to do, and"—in a lower voice—"he is ashamed of me, Joel."

Poor Joel has been silently writhing under the mention of his rival's attributes, but the last clause is too much for him.

"Ashamed of you! the d—d villain! he ain't worthy to touch you. Oh, how I wish I had my fingers this moment at his wizen!"

"Hush, Joel! don't say such awful things, but—but—" with a choking sob, "I'm nothing but a worry to him now: he wishes we had never met: he wishes I was dead, and he was rid of me."

"Will you come home with me, or will you not?" shouts Joel, whose patience is thoroughly exhausted. "If you stand there, Myra, a telling me any more of his insults, I swear I'll hunt him down like a dog, and set fire to every stick and stone that he possesses. Ah! you think, perhaps, that I don't know his name, and so he's safe from me; but it's 'Amilton—there's for you—and if you disappoint me, I'll soon be upon his track."

"O, Joel! don't be hard on me; you can't tell how I feel the parting with him."

She turns her streaming eyes upon the cottage, whilst he, unable to bear the sight of her distress, paces up and down uneasily.

"Then you mean to come back with me, Myra?"

"Yes—yes—to-morrow."

"To-morrow you'll have changed your mind."

"What will there be to change it?" she answers, passionately. "How can anything undo his words? He says I have been the death of all good things in him: that if it was possible he would wipe out even the memory of me with his blood; with his blood, Joel, think of that!"

"Well, them's insults, whatever they may mean, that you've no right to look over, Myra; and if you won't settle 'em, I shall."

"You would not harm him, Joel!" fearfully.

"I'd break every bone in his body, if I'd the chance to, and grateful for it. But if you'll promise to give him up without any more to do, and come back home with me, I'll leave him to Providence. He'll catch it in the next world, if not in this."

"I have promised—I will do it—only give me one more night in the place where I have been happy."

He is not very willing to grant her this indulgence, but she exacts it from him, so that he is obliged to let her have her way, and passes the next twelve hours in a state of uninterrupted fear, lest he should appear to interpose his authority, or, after a night's reflection, she should play him false, and decide to remain where she is.

But Joel Cray need not have been afraid.

Myra spends the time indeed no less perplexed than he does; but those who knew her innate pride and self-will would have had no difficulty in guessing that it would come off conqueror at last.

"He would give me up a thousand times over for his father," she keeps on repeating, when she finds her strength is on the point to fail; "he said so, and he means it, and sooner or later it would be my fate. And I will not stay to be given up; I will go before he has the chance to desert me. I will not be told again that I tarnish his honor, and that we had better both be dead than I live to disgrace him."

"I cannot bear it. I love him too much to be able to bear it. Perhaps when he hears that I am gone, and comes to miss me (I am sure that he will miss me), he may be sorry for the cruel things he said, and travel England over till he finds me, and asks me to come back to him again."

The soft gleam which her dark eyes assume as the thought strikes her, is soon chased away by the old sore memory.

"But he will never come; he only longs to be quit of me that he may walk with a free conscience through the world, and I am the stumbling-block in his way. O! he shall never say so again: he shall know what it is to be free: he shall never have the opportunity to say such bitter truths to be again."

And so, with the morning light, the impetuous, unreasoning creature, without leaving sign or trace behind her to mark which way she goes, resigns herself into the hands of Joel Cray, and files from Fretterley.

When, according to promise, Eric Keir pays another visit to the gamekeeper's cottage, there is only old Margaret to open the door and stare at him as though she had been bewitched.

"Where is your mistress?" she says, curtly: the expression of old women's faces not possessing much interest for him.

"Lor, sir! she's gone."

"Gone! where—into the village?"

"O! deary me! I knows nothing about it: she never spoke to me. How could I tell but what she'd left by your orders?"

"What do you mean? Has Mrs. Hamilton left Fretterley?"

"Yes, sir—I suppose so. I haven't seen nothing of her since yesterday morning."

"Impossible!—without leaving a note or any explanation?"

"I don't know if you'll find a note amongst her things, sir! they're just as she left 'em: I haven't touched nothing; I know my place better; and I'd rather you'd find out the truth for yourself, though I has my suspicions, of