

weigh down his eyelids, and spread over his features. "If he can sleep a little while, he may, perhaps—who knows?—yet rally—he may get home."

So she stood hushed at the bedside, and presently, as the hands slowly relaxed their clasp, leaving the letter in her palm, she gently withdrew herself from a posture that was becoming painful, and sat down holding the letter, and looking vaguely at it with mournful eyes.

Her anxiety that her brother should not be disturbed made her unwilling either to summon Martin or to leave the chamber. So she sat, leaning back in the chair, for some little time motionless. Suddenly she drew herself up erect and listened. Everything was strangely, awfully still. How was it that she no longer noticed her brother's laboured breathing?—How was it? He had reached home—he was dead!

CHAPTER IV. RECORDS, PAST AND PRESENT.

"Thou norest from thy safe recess
Old friends burn dim, like lamps in noisome air."
WORDSWORTH.

If Miss Austwicke had been familiar with the sick room and the symptoms that precede death, she would not have been surprised at what seemed to her the awfully sudden termination of the interview with her brother. He had been dying all the day, and his faculties, gathering up for a last effort, had just sustained him through it, and then yielded. Her terror was quite equal to her grief when, on calling loudly for help, Martin and the landlady rushed in to her assistance, and going direct to the bed, proclaimed the fatal fact she at first refused to believe.

Never had Miss Austwicke actually witnessed the departure of a spirit, and the mental sufferings that had preceded her brother's death were so terribly present to her mind, that they added to the horror. She was borne fainting from the room, and during the night that followed, Martin thought it incumbent to call in Dr. Bissle, who prescribed complete quiet for at least two days—a decision that it fretted the lady to obey, for her spirit was defiant; and her previously calm, uninterrupted life had ill prepared her to sustain the shock she had received. After a few hours, when she had partially rallied, her mind, in that unaccustomed place, had one resource, and that was, to ruminate on the strange history revealed in her brother's last words; and before any legal adviser reached her, or any of the rest of the family were apprised, she had to decide for herself what had best be done. It was not in Miss Austwicke's nature to distrust her own judgment, still less to doubt that any course she took would not be morally right.

Captain Austwicke's words, so recently uttered, "There never was much love among us, Honor—never enough, I now think," contained a truth which, however, did not reflect so much as might be supposed on the hearts of the Austwicke family. Miss Austwicke and her three brothers had suffered from the loss of their mother in their childhood. The golden links of maternal love had not bound the young people together, and they therefore grew up a separated household. Honoria, the second-born in the family, had been reared by a very aged lady, her father's mother, who occupied a jointure house on the banks of the Thames, which, for twenty years before her death, she seldom left. The education of her grand-daughter, carried on under her supervision, had been the amusement of her old age; and the aim of the stately old lady had been to imbue the child with all the opinions and feelings that she herself had entertained in a long life passed in a circle as narrow as it was high, in the days when whalebone and Queen Charlotte ruled in the upper region of feminine fashion. To teach rigid etiquette, rather than Christian principle, was the aim of the instructors, and the scope of the education bestowed. Not that there need be, in reality, anything antagonistic in the two—nay, they may, and do often, admirably blend; but then the Christian life, like an odorous balsam, filters through and is distinctly recognised as combining in one whole all the elements of the

gentle life—religion refining manners, and not manners elevating religion. The pupil was apt to learn what her instructors taught, and caught the spirit of the teaching; so the antiquity of the Austwicke name and lineage, the fact that it was a family of influence generations before many of the highest titles in the realm had been conferred, was the one thought of her mind.

Meanwhile Squire Austwicke, the father of the family, was amusing himself according to the fashion of his ancestors, living the life of a country magnate. Hunting, racing, field sports, keeping up his pack of beagles, and a rough bachelor sort of hospitality, after his wife's death, among men like-minded—these were his pursuits, diversified by a few magisterial duties and a good deal of hard drinking. His sons had their education at Winchester. Edmund, the eldest, grew up a fine gentleman, whose breakfasts at college were the admiration of his friends, as afterwards was the cut of his coat and the tie of his cravat when he mingled with those who would now be called "fast men" in London, and were then described as "young bloods," or "dandies." Wilfred, the second son, had a commission in the Honourable East India Company's service; and Basil, the younger, and the most industrious, on leaving college, was entered at Gray's Inn, and, in due time, was called to the bar. Fortunately he married Gertrude Dunoon, a lady of ancient family, and, what was even more to the point, whose kinsmen were all high in the law, and able to advance the interests of Basil Austwicke, who, without any very great talent, maintained a respectable position, which it was sometimes whispered he owed much to family influence.

Of these three brothers, the one whom Honoria had known the best was Edmund; Wilfred and Basil, respectively three and five years younger than their sister, she saw very seldom, and the few letters that at intervals passed were mere formal interchanges of inquiries. At the death of her grandmother, Miss Austwicke returned home, to find herself rather in her father's way. She could not nurse him in his gout so well as Mrs. Comfit, the old housekeeper; she did not read his paper to him so well as his man Ripp—or, at least, he could not ask her to read racing, and sporting news, and those it was that alone interested him. Her presence was a sort of check on the carousals he indulged in, and, in short, they did not suit each other. The old squire was truly glad when his youngest son made a very early marriage; and gladder still when an invitation to Honoria to spend the spring in London with the newly-married pair followed. He did, indeed, hope that another marriage might perhaps occur: for Honoria was then a stately, attractive woman; and though eight-and-twenty, a calm life had kept the bloom of seventeen upon her cheek. But Honoria did not marry. Edmund, the eldest son, did—a lady, a ward in Chancery, with a good fortune, who had been introduced to him by his brother's wife; and on this union with Miss de Lacy, her husband's spirits were so elated at being able to pay off most of his debts—far heavier than his father suspected—that he launched out into yet greater splendour. In this his wife assisted him, believing, like a giddy girl, in the Austwicke acres as being able ultimately to yield a compensating harvest, or perhaps, believing in nothing but pleasure. She had what she wanted—a gay, butterfly life. Poor thing! it was very short. She died a year after her marriage, leaving her husband with a son three weeks old, and the wreck of a squandered fortune, which it was found the Austwicke property could not repair; for at the old squire's decease, which happened soon after that of his daughter-in-law, it was made manifest that he had long lived beyond his means, and the estate was terribly encumbered.

Hitherto the Austwicke family had presented this peculiarity—that one generation had been miserly, and the next spendthrift; but in this case the son of Squire Wilfred the profuse had from boyhood imitated his father rather than his grandfather, and the equilibrium was destroyed which had kept matters pretty well hitherto, so the estate had suffered both by the squandering of the occupant and the post-obits of his heir.

Sorrowful, for he had loved his wife, and bit-

ter, for he was angry with the world, with his father, with every one but himself, Edmund Austwicke went on the Continent. His little son, on whom the residue of his mother's fortune was settled, became the charge of Miss Austwicke until he was nine years of age.

When, at her brother's request, the boy De Lacy Austwicke was to be sent to his father at Bonn, she bitterly resented an heir of Austwicke being educated on the Continent, instead of at Winchester. She, indeed, half suspected that the true reason was not her brother Edmund's fatherly affection, but that De Lacy's allowance of £200 a year out of the small fortune he inherited from his mother would go further abroad, and might be an object with his father in his exile.

Miss Austwicke was not wrong in this supposition. Her brother Edmund indulged on a small scale abroad the same tastes that he had manifested in his hot youth at home. His crop of wild oats had yielded him the usual harvest of shattered health, nerves, reputation, circumstances; and when, at the age of forty-six, just a year before our narrative commences, and when his son was about fifteen years of age, he died suddenly by the breaking of a blood vessel, while engaged at the *rouge-et-noir* table at Homburg, there was no one to shed a tear for him; no, not his sister in her lonely life, that he had made more lonely by his neglect; not his son, whom he had placed with a German professor's family at Bonn, and rarely either inquired after or saw. He died as he had lived, unesteemed and unregretted. The crackling of thorns under a pot is the Divine symbol of such a life—a little unsatisfactory blaze, and then the blackness of darkness.

Miss Austwicke had hoped that De Lacy Austwicke would come to England, and pass the rest of his minority near what was now his estate; but the youth preferred to stay abroad—a determination that so offended his aunt she never wrote to him afterwards.

She shut herself up in the wing of the hall that her father had long ago assigned her, and which the small property left her by her grandmother enabled her to live in with something of the state and consideration that became her birth and breeding. At all events, the degradation of letting the old dwelling to a stranger—a terror that more than once had menaced Miss Austwicke during her brother Edmund's life—had now passed away. She remained here in peace to ponder on the past, and to soothe her disappointments of the present by hoping for the future distinction of her family by the young heir De Lacy.

CHAPTER V. THE LETTERS.

"Dare to be true:
Nothing can need a lie;
A fault which needs it most,
Grows two thereby."
GEORGE HERBERT.

We left Miss Austwicke lying on the sofa in the darkened drawing-room at the "Royal Sturgeon," as she revolved these circumstances of household history which we have sketched, while naturally reverting to the intelligence so recently and painfully received—of there being some most objectionable Austwicks, not merely born in humble life, but actually reared in the station of their mother's birth—altogether beyond the range of her knowledge, and, it must be owned, of her sympathies.

Not that Miss Austwicke was hard to the poor. No; she simply regarded them as a race apart. Yet her brother, an Austwicke, whose race stretched back to the dim old Saxon times, had married—actually married into this low class. Her code of social morals would assuredly have been less outraged by crime than by weakness, for a low marriage was altogether intolerable. Still, there was her promise, made, as she muttered to herself, "as an Austwicke" "she must keep her word to her dying brother," and seek out these low children and their mother. Where were they to be found? what would the papers in the envelope, that she had in her hand as she lay on the sofa, tell her? She had never let the packet a moment from her possession, through all the night of faintness or the day of dreary re-