

'He was a theologian and a philanthropist, and probably of an enthusiastic temperament,' replied Walcot, doubtfully.

'Well, I am neither one or the other, Ferdinand; you must grant to me an unbiassed, if not a logical, mind.'

'I will go further, Arden, and allow you to be logical; I never knew a man more open to reason. It is not my wish, you may be sure, to rob you of any source of consolation, and least of all of one which may proceed from kin of mine. If this thing be really as you conceive it to be, I should almost feel that I had a hand in it; that your friendship for me had at all events received the seal of approval from a quarter, which, in your eyes—'

'It does—it has, Ferdinand,' interrupted Sir Robert, eagerly. 'You are dear to me for your own sake; but ten times dearer because of the sacred tie that connects us—we cannot speak of that, however, before others. Lady Arden, for example, would not only fail to understand it, but would, perchance, resent it. I should be loth to give her cause of pain. You had better go to her, by the bye, and say that I am better, and will see her now.'

'I will.'

We have said Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had a mobile face. It changed its expression twice between Sir Robert's study and the breakfast room. In the former it implied tender assent; between the double doors it became like the mask of Grecian Comedy; grotesque in its satirical mirth; and then, in the presence of the family, it turned to cheerful contentment.

'Sir Robert would like to see you, Lady Arden; his giddiness, I am thankful to say, has passed away.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIRST BLOW.

IT was not very long after breakfast, and while Mr. George Gresham was completing on the terrace behind the Hall that second cigar which his new cares and dangerous position had rendered necessary—for without tobacco how would some people contrive to think?—when Milly Nicoll came out to him, not trippingly as usual, but gliding like a ghost, and with quite a serious expression of countenance.

'George, dear, there are plots in the air,' said she. 'And I don't think you will see your friend, Mr. Mayne, on this side of Christmas.'

'What do you mean, Milly? I have my uncle's permission to invite him?'

'You mean you *had* it. Mr. Walcot, however—'

'Confound his meddling,' ejaculated Gresham, prescient of what was coming.

'By all means,' said Milly, 'if that can be done. He has persuaded Mamma that Papa is not in a state of health to receive visitors, and you can therefore guess the next step.'

'He is the most impertinent wretch!' exclaimed Gresham, passionately.

'Oh, George, how can you use such words! If I had known you would be so angry, I would not have been the one to tell you this bad news. I was afraid it would annoy you.'

'Annoyance is no word for it, Milly. Of course it is a disappointment to me, but that is nothing to the indignation I feel against the person who has caused it. I will go to my uncle at once, and ask whether in future I am to consider him or Mr. Walcot the master of this house.'

'You would gain nothing by that motion, George. But if you are very anxious to see your friend at Halcombe—'

'Well, of course I am; but long