

Other words, too, were spoken—words of guileless, pure affection, too sacred even for Guy to breathe to Maddy; and then Lucy had left him, her bounding step echoing through the hall and up the winding stairs, down which she never came again alive, for when Guy next looked upon her, she was lying white and still, her neck and dress and golden hair stained with the pale life-blood oozing from her livid lips. A blood-vessel had been suddenly ruptured, the physicians said, adding that it was what he had been fearing for some time, and now it had come—and there was no hope. They told her she must die, for the mother would have them tell her. Once for a few moments, there was on her face a frightened look, such as a harmless bird might wear when suddenly caught in a snare. But that soon passed away as from beneath the closed eyelids the great tears came gushing, and the stained lips whispered faintly:

‘God knows best what is right. Poor Guy!—break it gently to him.’

At this point in the story Guy broke down entirely, sobbing as only strong men can sob.

‘Maddy,’ he said, ‘I felt like a heartless wretch—a most consummate hypocrite—as, standing by Lucy’s side, I met the fond, pitying glance of her blue eyes, and suffered the poor little hand to part my hair as she tried to comfort me, even though every word she uttered was shortening her life; tried to comfort me, the wretch who was there so unwillingly, and who at this prospect of release hardly knew at first whether he was more sorry than glad. You may well start from me in horror, Maddy. I was just the wretch I describe; but I overcame it, Maddy, and Heaven is my witness that no thought of you intruded itself upon me afterwards as I stood by my dying Lucy. I saw how good, how sweet she was, and something of the old love came back to me, as I held her in my arms, where she wished to be. I would have saved her if I could; and when I called her “my darling Lucy,” they were not idle words. I kissed her many times for myself, and once, Maddy, for you. She told me to do so. She whispered, “Kiss me, Guy, for Maddy Clyde. Tell her I’d rather she should take my place than anybody else—rather my Guy should call her wife—for I know she would not be jealous if you sometimes talked of your dead Lucy, and I know she will help lead you to that blessed home where sorrow never comes.” That was the last she ever spoke, and when the sun went down death had claimed my bride. She died in my arms, Maddy. I felt the last fluttering of

her pulse, the last beat of her heart. I laid her back upon her pillows. I wiped the blood from her lips and from her golden curls. I followed her to her early grave. I saw her buried from my sight, and then, Maddy, I started home; thoughts of you and thoughts of Lucy blended equally together until Aikenside was reached. I talked with Mrs. Noah; I heard all of you there was to tell, and then I talked with Agnes, who was not greatly surprised, and did not oppose my coming here to-night. I could not remain there, knowing you were here alone, even though some old fogies might say it was not proper—God knows what is in my heart. In the bridal chamber I found your bouquet, with its “Welcome to the Bride.” Maddy, you must be that bride. Lucy sanctioned it, and the doctor, too, for I told him all. His own wedding was, of course, deferred, and he did not come with me, but he said “Tell Maddy not to wait. Life is too short to waste any happiness. She has my blessing.” And, Maddy, it must be so. Aikenside needs a mistress; you are all alone. You are mine—mine forever.’

The storm had died away, and the moonbeams streaming through the window told that morning was breaking, but neither Guy nor Maddy heeded the lapse of time. Theirs was a sad kind of happiness as they sat talking together, and could Lucy have listened to them she would have felt satisfied that she was not forgotten. One long bright curl, cut from her head by his own hand, was all that was left of her to Guy save the hallowed memories of her purity and goodness—memories which would yet mould the proud, impulsive man into the earnest, consistent Christian which Lucy in her life had desired that he should be, and which Maddy rejoiced to see him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FINALE.

It is the close of a calm September afternoon, and the autumnal sunlight falls softly upon Aikenside, where a gay party is now assembled. For four years Maddy Clyde has been mistress there, and in looking back upon them she wonders how so much happiness as she has known could be experienced in so short a time. Never but once has the slightest ripple of sorrow shadowed her heart, and that was when her noble husband, Guy, said to her, in a voice she knew was earnest and determined, that he could no longer remain deaf to his country’s call—that where the battle steam was raging he was needed, and he must not stay at home. Then for a brief season her bright face was overcast, and