

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Lawton arrived in Devonshire, he found a change had indeed come over his friend. His once blooming cheek was pale; his countenance was haggard; his once light step was slow and heavy, and a settled melancholy had spread itself over his bright, joyous face.

"I will not obtrude my own annoyances upon him!" thought the youth, "his own are quite enough for him to bear."

Lord Frederick was little calculated to meet the storms of life. Instead of endeavouring to buffet with a strong arm, the billows of trouble, he sat down in meek submission beneath the overwhelming flood; and now, when removed from the influence of his more active sister, he was left to the guidance of his own will, he spent his time, either in wandering over his grounds, or shut up in solitary retirement, brooding over his unhappy fate. No wonder that the roses of health faded from his cheek, that the light of happiness no longer sparkled in his eye! Lawton resolved to divert his mind, to lead him to exert himself to shake off his gloom; but all his generous intentions were frustrated by the letters of lady Harriet, which reached their destination on the morning after the arrival of Lawton.

A new impulse was now given to the enervate mind of lord Frederick, who in one short hour after the reception of her ladyship's intelligence, was on his way to London, accompanied by his friend. With equal haste they passed the intervening distance, and the next day arrived in the great metropolis. Without waiting to partake of any refreshment they proceeded at once to the palace, and succeeded in gaining admission to the royal presence. Lord Frederick was now fully resolved to unite himself to Florence, if he could succeed in rescuing her from Sir James, and consequently he hesitated not to demand of the king the document presented to him by her mother. His Majesty complied; but the eye of the young lord had not passed over one half its contents, ere springing up, and calling on Lawton to follow him, he rushed from the presence of the monarch, who smiled good-naturedly at his unthinking impetuosity.

Before the altar of the village church, stood Sir James Wilmot, and his youthful bride; the ceremony which irrevocably united the lowly orphan and the once ruined baronet, was commenced; already had the solemn response passed the lips of the bridegroom, and the minister of Christ awaited the like response from the lips of the pale and trembling bride; but although with the effort of despairing anguish she strove to

speak, no sound proceeded from those corpse-like lips. At this moment the sound of approaching footsteps was heard, and Lawton, followed by lord Frederick, rushed into the church, exclaiming: "Stay, stay, I command you, this sacrilegious rite. If fear of the vengeance of an offended God, or reverence for the laws of man, dwell in your hearts, desist!"

"By what authority, rash boy," cried the earl, in a voice choked with rage, "do you presume to interrupt this sacred rite?"

"By the authority of my country and my God, which authorise us to prevent if possible the commission of evil, and by which I would save that misguided father, from becoming the husband of his own child!"

"What mean you?" exclaimed Sir James. "Speak, sir, and tell me that she is indeed my child! Tell oh! tell me, what you mean!"

"I mean that Florence Oakley is your daughter, the only remaining child of your deserted wife, the Donna Clara Talavera, daughter of the duke of Seville!"

"The proofs!" exclaimed the Baronet, in tones scarcely audible. "Where are the proofs of your assertion?"

"They are here;" said lord Frederick, turning from the now inanimate form of the lovely Florence, who had fainted at the commencement of the altercation, and presenting him the documents which he had received from the king.

Sir James took the papers from his hand, and while he is perusing them, as we will not abuse the already exhausted patience of the reader, by transcribing the whole, we will present a brief survey of the contents.

The now duke of Seville, while still the Don Ferdinand Talavera, having incurred the displeasure of the duke, his father, quitted Spain for a time, and after making the tour of France, presented himself in London. The young don had laid aside his Spanish gravity, and conformed to the gaieties of France, and on his arrival on English ground, he found himself well-fitted to conciliate the favor of a people, neither so sedate as the one, nor so gay as the other. But here a perplexing circumstance presented itself; he found his resources were getting low. At this juncture he became acquainted with the pretty daughter of a wealthy banker; she was his only child, the heiress of his immense wealth. The Spaniard was fascinated with her golden expectations, and was not long in teaching her to attach an equal value to his expected dukedom. The banker, however, did not regard his proposal so favorably as his daughter had done. Looking upon Don Ferdinand as an adventurer, he at