

turned to angry defiance in his gaze, and like one awakening from a perturbed dream, drew a heavy sigh that broke the spell, and, turning her head, she looked so absently at Gertrude, that that young girl, alarmed, exclaimed—

"Are you not well, aunt?"

"Yes; that is—it's nothing—nothing. Pray do not be alarmed. Thank you. It's a mere sensation—nothing more."

The youth, with a hasty bow, had left the room; Mysie followed him, and returned in a few moments with a glass of water, which she handed to Miss Austwick, wholly unconscious of the pang she was inflicting. Not for worlds, at that moment, could Miss Austwick have taken the glass from her hand. Her brother's words, with the dying guttural in them, "My children—mine," rang in her ears. The room swam round with her, she leaned back in the chair, and fainted.

In that house there were not so many strong arms that they could, in an exigency, dispense with any, and the boy's retreating footsteps were arrested by Gertrude's cry. He returned to the room, and helped Miss Hope to turn Miss Austwick's chair round, so that she faced the bow-window, which he then threw open, just as an old man with a pack was resting his load on the doorstep, and could now see the whole interior of the parlour. The youth warned him off impatiently, and even Marian's gentleness was irritated, as the man lingering and beginning to say:

"Pray look at my choice assortment—shawls, ladies, and—"

"No, man—no. Be off, I say," cried the youth.

The wrinkled visage drew together like a shrivelled leaf, and with one keen look darted into the room, he shouldered his pack, and retreated a little way up the lane, sheltering himself within the wicket-gate of the market-garden opposite.

Meanwhile, the cold air soon restored Miss Austwick, whose faculties seemed to come back unclouded from their momentary overthrow. She rose to her feet, and with her white lips still a little numbed and twitching, apologized to Marian for giving trouble, and signed to Gertrude to leave; expressing a wish that Marian would come some morning, soon, and that Mr. Hope would speedily be able to resume his professional engagements.

Miss Hope and Gertrude both opposed Miss Austwick's attempting to walk home, and Norry was dispatched to fetch a cab—for, though Miss Austwick tried to make light of the attack, and was both astonished at and mortified with herself, her knees were trembling, and her heart fluttering in a way that was quite unusual to her healthy constitution.

She resolutely kept her eyes from looking at Mysie, preferring to occupy herself with Marian, whose calm sweetness still like a cool hand on a feverish brow. In a little time the cab came—not unnoted by the peering eyes of the watcher behind the wicket-gate—and the ladies entered. The youth's clear voice, as it gave directions to the driver, was borne so well on the frosty air, that even if Old Leathery, in his ambush, had not before known the address of Mr. Basil Austwick in Wilton Place, he could not have failed to learn it.

#### CHAPTER XVIII. GERTRUDE'S REQUEST.

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough how them how we will."

SHAKESPEARE.

Gertrude's innocent questionings of "Did you feel cold, aunt? Had the walk inconvenienced you?" as they proceeded homewards, were so embarrassing, that Miss Austwick answered peevishly—

"Is it, Gertrude, because I never faint, or have any of the ailments of modern fine ladies, that you expect me to account for this sudden attack?"

"No, dear aunt; but—"

"But—it's over, child. Dwelling on ailments, and talking about hydropathy, and homœopathy, and what not, may be very scientific, but it's not my way. I was trained before ladies were divided into an army of nurses, quack doctors, and invalids."

Gertrude was certain of one thing, that her aunt's temper was ailing, and therefore was not sorry, on reaching home, that she signified her wish to be alone.

Once in her chamber, her walking-dress changed, and Martin dismissed, Miss Austwick began to revolve the incident of the morning. She recollected that she had never heard the surname of these young people, that it was only the mention of their being twins that had startled her. No, it was not only that. Something in their looks had made assurance doubly sure. She had not, indeed, so particularly observed the girl beyond noticing the general height, complexion, colour; but the boy's face had brought back the playfellow of her own childhood; the very same look that passion, always easily roused used to send to her brother Wilfred's dark eyes, she had seen shoot out in a tawny light from the depths of the boy's. How often, in their childish rivalry, had she and her other brothers called Wilfred "copper eye." Yes, yes, there is no mistake; nature had both by this peculiarity, as well as the twinning of two opposite sexes, revealed the identity of these as her brother's children—his legal children.

What was she now to do? Strange to say, the first unendurable terror was lest Mrs. Basil Austwick should know of it. It never occurred to her that there was but one life between the boy she had seen that morning, and the heirship of Austwick Chace. At present there was next to nothing for these children, so that to keep them in poverty was no fraud. To keep them from their father's name certainly was. Yet, as fraud is a very ugly word, Miss Austwick never breathed it to herself. Brought up in obscurity, yet, assuredly, not without education, she argued that they already had received some advantages. They might for the future be helped forward in accordance with the views in which they had been reared. Where was the harm of that? Oh, specious subtlety of the deceitful human heart, weaving its webs that one touch of the finger of truth would annihilate! How was it this proud woman, ever boasting of her name, and thinking herself an embodiment of all that had dignified her ancestry, could descend to such wiles? Simply because extremes meet, and human pride often rests on, or blends with human meanness.

That evening excusing herself from the dinner-table on the plea of headache, as she sat in her room, a letter was brought to her. It contained but a few words:—

Miss Austwick's agent has succeeded in his search. Before he takes any further steps, he waits Miss Austwick's commands.

Direct A. B., Post Office, Sloane Street, Chelsea.

"Miss Austwick's agent!" It grated at first on her nerves to read the phrase, and she threw down the letter as she would cast off a loathsome insect. But in a few moments it was picked up, and re-perused. And then she looked at her banker's book. It had never before given her so much comfort. Not that she had a very good balance to contemplate though her simple, secluded life had brought her expenses within her income; but what she saw there promised her a pecuniary solution of her difficulties, and some sort of compromise with her feelings. "I'll provide for them," silenced the inward voice that said—"Why not acknowledge and do justice by them?"

It occurred to her that another interview with this man Burko would be both less dangerous and more conclusive, than writing her instructions to him. She would appoint him to come to some place that would be both private and frequented. She was of an age and station to justify her speaking, if she chose, at some length, to an inferior, without being the subject of remark. She would therefore meet this man in Kensington Gardens. Nine o'clock of a winter morning was earlier than any one she was likely to know walked there. The gardens were then in the possession of children and their attendants. A line was therefore soon penned to the effect—

The person who applied to Miss Austwick is informed that she walks in Kensington Gardens, by the gate nearest Rotten Row, every morning from nine to ten.

She could not bring herself to particularise farther. She argued that this man—whose assumption of intimacy with her late brother she rightly considered to be mere insolent boasting, based on money transactions—would be eager to have his claims satisfied, and perhaps to make some profit, as she shrewdly concluded he had done. At all events, she would hear what he had to communicate, and act accordingly. She did not trust this note to any one to post for her, but, on the following morning, rising early, and taking, as was her wont, her breakfast in her own room, she went out at nine o'clock, silencing Martin's remonstrances with the remark—

"I was attacked in a way so unusual yesterday, that I shall resume, as far as possible, in this smoky London, my early habit of getting a walk, before the family are up."

In pursuance of this plan, she both found means to deposit her letter in a local post-office that she had before observed, and to take a preliminary walk that familiarised her with the route along the south side of the park to the gardens.

On her return, the first member of the family that she encountered was Gertrude, whose morning greetings were supplemented with—

"Oh, aunt, and you did not take me! I should so enjoy being your companion in your morning walks."

Miss Austwick looked as she felt—annoyed; and something of greater coldness than usual was infused into her manner as she replied—

"No, Gertrude; I prefer my walk alone."

Her niece, surprised looked up—a pleading tenderness in her sweet frank eyes, that Miss Austwick, even, could not resist.

"Oh, aunt, are you angry with me? What have I done?"

"Nothing—nothing, little True; but I'm used to my own ways. We'll walk and talk enough at other times."

Hardly satisfied, the little tender heart yearned for some greater response of love, but she walked meekly away, leaving her aunt to her solitude.

Whether during the day Miss Austwick wished to make the amende by doing something that would gratify her niece, or that her approbation of Miss Hope was very genuine, certain it was she took an opportunity of an interview with her brother, as they waited in the drawing-room before dinner, of so highly praising her, that Mr. Basil said—

"Would it not be well to ascertain whether she is sufficiently advanced in the branches her father teaches to assist Gertrude in her studies, particularly?" as, at present, you say Mr. Hope, cannot come? I have my doubts about girls applying very regularly when they are left to themselves. Better some fixed plans—a morning governess, or literary companion, or something of that kind."

"You are right; it gives an interest, brother; and a young girl may be too much alone, particularly when her mamma has a large circle of friends."

Miss Austwick emphasised the latter part of the sentence; and Mr. Basil having a shrewd guess at the state of feeling between his wife and sister, wisely resolved on no account to quote the opinion of the latter, much as he was impressed by it himself. He took another and far more successful course. As soon as Mrs. Basil Austwick joined them, he began murmuring his fears that True was wasting her time; that it would be a lost winter to her; and when his wife spoke of masters, he inquired—

"Who is to stay with her when she is receiving her lessons? Do you, my dear, mean to give up your mornings to Gertrude? That would certainly be the most suitable."

"How can I, Mr. Austwick? I'm astonished you hint it, when you know how you devolve on me all the duty of seeing people, and keeping up our circle, which I only do on your account. It's a daily annoyance—I might say, martyrdom—to me. Poor Gertrude will have studies as short as her stature, if she depends on me, with all I have to do."

Miss Austwick took no part in the discussion; and as any suggestion that she, in the utility character of maiden aunt, should give her time to her niece, could not be hazarded, and most certainly would not have been complied with, Mr. Austwick's mention of what Gertrude—not