

as well as astonished her listener. Still, versed from boyhood in the traditional lore of his family, a study to which he had always been passionately devoted, he was able to tell many little incidents and anecdotes, which a less skilful narrator than himself, would have forgotten, and which were all entirely new to Nina. Gradually the frigid impassibility of her countenance vanished, the deep eyes brightened, and the same look of living, speaking intelligence and feeling, which had animated her features when his glance first fell upon her, again stole over them. Though the earl was more unembarrassed, more at ease, with the humble, quiet Nina, than with any one else, Florence herself not excepted, still, a little timid, fearing to weary his listener by too profuse details, he passed briefly over some circumstances, only touched upon others which were really interesting, but the rapt eagerness with which she hung on his words, her occasional remarks betokening her deep interest and curiosity, reassured him, and every storied event, every poetic fable, which had entranced the boy, and still charmed the man, was poured forth on her ear with an eloquence he himself was unconscious of. At length they arrived before a portrait executed with rare and masterly skill, but still, possessing little attraction in itself. It was the likeness of a girl who had not evidently numbered more than sixteen summers, yet notwithstanding the efforts of the gifted artist, the aid of ornament, the charm of youth, she possessed not one single claim to beauty, unless indeed the look of melancholy softness which reigned over her countenance, might have been titled as such. The clear complexion and auburn hair, alone betokened she belonged to a family whose daughters were famed, with but few exceptions, for their surpassing, though evanescent loveliness. The story of the young girl was a sad one. An orphan in infancy, dependant from her cradle on a proud relative, who had adopted her for his heiress, but in truer language his slave, her lot was mournful indeed. Unloved, and uncaressed, her childhood unbrightened by the sunny mirth of that age, her girlhood a gloomy period of austere seclusion and joyless dependance on the will of her harsh, stern ruler; the springs of youth and hope were soon an earth on which she had never known one hour's happiness, to the heaven her uncomplaining submission had won her. Her guardian regretted his harshness when too late. He would have raised her from her dying bed, to seek the sunny climes of the south; he lavished gifts, caresses, attentions on her, one half of which would have ensured her health and happiness,

had they been earlier hers, but all was unavailing. She died. He erected a sumptuous monument to the poor victim of tyranny, and had her portrait copied from a simple original, by the first master of the age. Before this picture Nina paused but a second, and then with a hasty movement, turned away.

"Pray do not pass this one unnoted, Miss Aleyn," said the earl, totally unconscious that his companion had traced a striking resemblance between her own fate, and that of the neglected, obscure being it imaged. "Do you not think poor Winifred's story very affecting? but, perhaps you have not heard it."

"Yes, I know it well, and few can compassionate her desolate, lonely lot, as well as myself, but I love not to dwell on it."

St. Albans saw that he had touched a painful chord, and unwilling as he was to inflict a moment's pain on any human being, much less on one so unprotected as Nina Aleyn, a certain generous curiosity to know the cause of her sorrow, that he might, if possible, find a remedy, prompted him to retain the conversation in the same channel.

"If you do not think the question presumptuous, Miss Aleyn, might I ask why Winifred's story is displeasing to you? True, 'tis a sad one, but it contains a beautiful example, a sublime lesson. Certain I am, it is not caprice which inspires your repugnance to dwelling on it."

For once, Nina forgot her cold, self-command, and murmured, her lip convulsively quivering, as she spoke:

"'Tis because her fate resembles my own too closely."

"Nay, Miss Aleyn, say not so," he gently returned. "Winifred St. Albans had not one being who loved or cared for her, whilst you have many devoted friends." He felt even at the moment the mockery of his own words, but his companion merely sighed, as she rejoined:

"Tell me one of those devoted friends. I know of none, save Miss Murray."

"Well! without speaking of her, or Florence, who is I know fondly attached to you, Mr. Clinton regards you with a feeling of sincere esteem and regard, and I need not say that the friendly feelings of Sydney St. Albans equal his."

"I believe you," returned the young girl, raising her clear, truthful eyes to his face. "I believe you. Yes, from the first you have been to me a kind, a generous friend, and if fervent gratitude might be considered any recompence, I might offer you a rich reward, the only one alas! that Nina Aleyn has in her power to bestow."