

"Why, what was that burning that I asked you about?"

"Nothing but a dirty bit of paper, ma'am. Yes, that was certainly just nothing but a bit of rubbish, left when the fire was kindled."

"A dirty bit of paper!" repeated Miss Austwick, in dismay; for the very description was so just, it assured her that her fears were right. "Woman! what have you done?"

Even as she spoke, she was vexed at having shown she was so moved, and uttered her words in such a tone.

"Indeed it was nothing, ma'am—nothing in the world but a dirty bit of paper."

"Bank-notes are nothing but dirty bits of paper."

"Dear me! is it a bank-note you have lost?" said the woman, gazing out of her round eyes in blank astonishment, almost ludicrous.

"No—no. There, go away. How very awkward! how very—"

The woman left the room, glad to escape; and Miss Austwick finished her sentence—

"Terribly perplexing—the most important paper of all—lost—burnt! Was ever anything so strange? If I was very superstitious—and certainly, in this little matter-of-fact age, a little superstition is a sort of duty we owe to the past—I should say that it was never meant that Wilfred's bad marriage, and worse conduct—poor fellow! that I should say so, and be lying dead a few paces off—I should say it was a proof that Providence never meant it should be known."

How readily we interpret Providence by our own wishes!

#### CHAPTER VII. WHO INTERRUPTED THE JOURNEY?

"Then into her being stole  
Sweetness, and imbued the whole,  
And illumined face and soul."

ALEXANDER SMITH.

On the Friday that followed that Sabbath summons to Southampton, Miss Austwick sat in her own small drawing-room at the old Hall, after the funeral of her brother, which had been very private, merely attended by his lawyer from London, Mr. Webley, and Dr. Bissle, of Southampton, Mr. Griffiths, the land steward, the two oldest tenants of the Austwick farms, and the servants, headed by Gubbins, who shed the most sincere tears that fell on the coffin. There were no guests very near the Chase, and Miss Honor had kept at a due distance all the upstart newcomers of the neighbourhood. Indeed, as her father's old friends, in the course of nature, had followed him to the grave, her brothers, being non-resident, had made no intimacies. The clergyman, as we have seen, did not preach Miss Austwick's ethics, so that the seclusion of the Hall was not likely to be much broken by visitors. Its lady, for the time being, was left alone in her dignity to bemoan the dead, and to prepare for the fulfilment of the promise that she began to consider had been extorted from her by surprise. Miss Austwick, nevertheless, required to stand well with herself, she could not face the thought of the long, lonely winter nights, and her dying brother's moaning voice in her ears, "My children," and thanking her in death gasps for her promise to succour them, and see them righted! "Cowardly and base!" yes, those were the condemnatory words he had uttered. She shut them up as resolutely in the unvisited depths of her mind as possible, but they vibrated at times, and pained her. The only way to silence them completely would be to make a journey in search of these orphans; learn all that was to be known of them and their surroundings, and of their mother—that terrible rock of offence; and then to see what was to be done as to acquainting the rest of the family with the facts.

Captain Austwick had left no will. It was evident that he had not thought his illness so dangerous, and that he had purposed going on without delay to Scotland, for his principal luggage, as Miss Austwick learned, was directed to the care of Mr. Webley, of Lincoln's Inn Square, the family lawyer, and one portmanteau alone was packed and directed to Glasgow.

Before Mr. Webley left the Chase the evening

of the funeral, he had an interview with Miss Austwick.

"I fear, madam," said the lawyer, "if the family—that is, Mr. De Lacy Austwick, who is the heir-at-law, or your brother, Mr. Basil—should have had any expectations as to the captain's property, they will not be realised. His life was insured for two thousand pounds, but money has been raised on the policy, and I think the other liabilities will scarcely be covered by the effects. However, my dear madam, I need not trouble you with these details. I merely thought it right to name the matter before leaving. I shall write to Zurich to Mr. Basil Austwick to-morrow; letters until the 11th October will reach him there."

"He returns about the 28th," said Miss Austwick, in a faint voice. She was thinking for the moment whether it would not be better to take the old lawyer into her confidence. A single sentence would have opened the matter: she need only have said, "De Lacy Austwick is not my brother's heir;" but she shrunk from the avowal, and the opportunity passed. The thought that there was nothing to inherit, that De Lacy would be no gainer, soothed her. After the interchange of a few courteous generalities, the lawyer departed on his way to town.

The next morning Martin was not a little amazed at hearing the unlooked-for intelligence that her mistress intended travelling into the North.

In her latest manner, in the hope of checking the torrent of inquiries on Martin's part, she gave her directions; and that functionary, having served Miss Honor from her childhood—mistress and maid growing old together—had a very great affection for her; so that, when the lady said, "I am doubtful, Martin, whether I had not better leave you here, and take Betsy Confit, who has travelled, she told me, in her last place, and who certainly knows also how to be quiet and unobtrusive," Martin understood an implied censure in those last words, and knuckling those resolute eyes—that certainly were like Cornish waders in standing their ground—she sobbed out, "Try me, Miss Honor. Me not know and not able! Why, if you please to remember, you was good enough to spare me, and I was sent once by Mrs. Basil to fetch Miss True home from Lord Dunoon's, at Glower O'er, and I brought the dear child—the young lady leastways—and myself as cosy as kittens in a rug flying through the hurr, home to London. If Betsy Confit, as knows nothing that ever I could see, but doing 'air, had been fit to go, and worth trusting, would Mrs. Bresil have asked you, Miss Honor, to spare me? Betsy! Why her aunt have said times and again—that's Mrs. Confit, I mean—'Martin,' she says, 'she's just now full of nothing but getting married; and all the wits she ever had is at that Eastup Mill, a grudging with Nat Nixon's corn.'"

"Well, well, Martin; too many words—too many words, that's your fault, your great fault," said Miss Austwick, not unimpressed by the fact, which she had overlooked, that Martin had made the journey.

"I humbly ask pardon, Miss Honor; it's my feelings can't stand more than flesh and blood. And when I think of your going to bed, and getting up, and traveling in outlandish parts, where the woods and ways is dreadful, naked feet and oatmeal flying about everywhere, and no one that ever saw the like of it with you, it so flustered me, I couldn't but up and speak. But if it's silence you want, see if I won't be as mum as—"

Now it happened that on Miss Austwick's mantleself there was a vase, with a device more quaint than elegant, common enough at Winchester: an odd figure in livery, with a swine's face, ass's ears, and deer's feet, called "The Faithful Servant." This piece of ancient honour had formed the text of many homilies which Miss Austwick had given to her household, how servants should be swift of foot and slow of speech; and Martin, to show that the lesson had not been lost, put her finger on her lip, and stretching her other hand out like an ear at one side of her head, nodded to the symbol, and made a low curtsy.

There was something at once ludicrous and appealing in the gesture, and Miss Austwick—who was pretty certain that no one but Martin would care so for her comfort, was content, after a few more cautions, to give consent for her faithful waiting-woman to share her journey.

If any curiosity as to the purpose of this unwonted and great undertaking did enter into Martin's mind, she was careful to conceal it; and whatever might be her own infirmities of that kind, she was faithful enough not to encourage or satisfy the inquiries of others. She merely supplemented Miss Austwick's announcement of a journey to Gubbins and the rest of the household with the brief explanation, "Mistress wants a change; I hope she'll go on a tower. When any one's spirits is low—leastways, any one of the quality—it's the best way to raise 'em."

However, Miss Austwick was not destined to try the process her woman recommended, for even while she was speaking, the sound of wheels on the drive that led to the east porch were audible; and the loud clangour of the door-bell, at that late hour, caused a commotion in the quiet household. As quickly as his age permitted, Gubbins answered the summons, and Martin ensconced herself in a recess of the Hall, behind a statue of some memorable Austwick, from whence she could see the arrival.

"Don't be scared, Gubbins, and don't let my aunt be frightened," said a sweet, winning voice; and a little sprite, about the height of a child of ten years, came tripping into the Hall, followed by a female companion or attendant.

"Why, Miss Gertrude, can it be you?" said Martin, rushing forward in eager surprise.

"Bless my eyes alive, it's mysis!" said old Gubbins.

"Ah, Miss Morris, it is as I thought: the letter has not arrived," said the bright little creature—for she was indeed an elfin-looking visitor—addressing her companion in a tone of vexation. She took off her crape-trimmed hat as if it had wearied her, and a quantity of shining fair hair fell in soft waves, like a veil, round her lithe little form. Was she a child? Not nearly so young as her stature indicated, that could be seen at a glance; for the little face had an air of intelligence and command, and the delicate features were, in their fine tracery, past the first dimples of childhood. Indeed, as she shook back her rippling hair, and, speaking to Martin, asked, "How is my aunt? I hear she has had great trouble lately," she glanced down at her black dress with an air and manner that were womanly, adding, "You must announce me carefully, Martin; I should be sorry to alarm her."

"Our coming," said Miss Morris, speaking to Martin in an explanatory tone, as the servants ushered them into the nearest parlour—"our coming was a case of necessity."

"We will explain all that to my aunt," interrupted the young lady.

In a very few minutes they were both conducted to that lady's dressing-room, where her portmanteau was lying open and half packed.

"Why, whatever, Gertrude, has brought you? How do you do, Miss Morris?" said Miss Austwick.

"Well, aunt, evil has brought us—though, I think, it's a good to me to come to Austwick in the autumn, and see the dear old woods in their splendour."

"It's soon explained, Miss Austwick," replied Miss Morris. "Gertrude has been visiting her friends at Kensington, during the Michaelmas holidays, and the younger children at Pentreal Lodge fell ill with scarlet fever. Dr. Griesbach said that it would not be right for Miss Gertrude to return to school from Pentreal Lodge, and that she should not continue to stay there, so I wrote last night to you, and Miss Webb sent me with her."

"And here we are, aunt, and the letter is still on the way. Don't be afraid of me—I have never been near the nursery at Pentreal Lodge." She came close as she spoke, and rising on tiptoe, put up her mouth, with a pretty girlish gesture, to be kissed.

Miss Austwick kissed her forehead lovingly. "My little True, you do not grow; you are, I