

oaths to never approach her, save when she summoned me ?'

'It was a strange oath for a husband to a wife. If she was indeed so dear to you, how came you to take such an oath ?'

Thorpe made a gesture of the most fiery impatience.

'Your question is a most insulting one. Nevertheless, I will answer it. For the sake of calling her mine I would have fore-sworn eternity. It was the only condition on which she would ever suffer the ceremony of marriage to be said over us—a mockery it was, too; the bitterest and most hollow of mockeries. I never dreamed that she would exact the fulfilment of so monstrous a vow. Don't tell me I cast her off, sir, when I have entreated her by every law, human or divine, to cancel that oath. In despair, at last, I ceased even to write to her. I tried to forget, though I might as well have tried to forget myself; and, after all, the only excuse she can find for my silence, is that I am dead.'

Leon Erownlee rose from his seat in much agitation.

'There is some strange mistake here. Vashti was not the only one who supposed you dead. Your death, the announcement of your loss by shipwreck, was in all the papers of your city.'

'And almost immediately contradicted

'I know nothing of that, and I know that they knew nothing of it at Everleigh till months after. Then Leonore Everleigh blundered upon that account of your almost miraculous escape from death, and wrote immediately to you, without Vashti's knowledge.'

'And why without her knowledge ?'

'Least the shock of your desertion of her in the hour of her greatest calamity should kill her.'

'Sir, this is an idle play upon words. There was no desertion in the case—at least, none on my part.'

'What else could you call it after the receipt of that letter ?'

'I never received any letter, and if I had, should not have considered myself authorized to force myself on my wife even, at any other summons than her own.'

'I repent, Professor Thorpe, that there is some terrible mistake. Do you know that Vashti—is it possible that you do not know that our Vashti is blind ?'

'Sir ! sir ! Blind !'

'Blind.'

Thorpe looked like a man suddenly stricken with a thunderbolt. He stood staring at Leon, as though bereft of motion.

'What do you mean, sir ?'

'I mean that the lightning struck her; that she is blind, utterly and hopelessly so; that she is a wreck of her former self, but incomparably more interesting now than she was ever before. If less beautiful, she is far lovelier; and if I were her husband, I would see these hands severed from my body rather than relinquish my right to guide her steps to the end of this life.'

The strong man tottered as he approached Leon, and grasping his hand warmly, said in a tremulous voice:

'Pardon me, pardon me! I have felt angry, despairing, and vengeful. If I had done my duty and hovered in her vicinity, I should have known her sooner; I should have had the precious consolation of—but will she receive me, Mr. Brownlee, even now will she receive me ?'

'There is not a doubt of it; she is very much changed. But, Professor Thorpe, I want to ask you—and do not answer the question if it seems to you too great a liberty—how did she come to exact so singular an oath from you ?'

'Her father is a madman.'

'Was—he is dead.'

'Madness is said to be hereditary in the family—she believed she would come to that at last, and therefore was determined to keep our fates separate. She called herself taciturn and gloomy, and said that constant companionship with her would make me hate her at last.'

'Singular girl! Were not your fates indissolubly connected by that contract of marriage ?'

'There was a time when I hesitated on account of that hereditary taint, but before the invincibility of my passion, all such obstacles crumbled. I thought if she would let me, I could save her even from that.'

Thorpe changed the subject to a discussion of ways and means to reach home with all the expedition possible, and looked already a changed man—much of the gloom of his manner being lost in an impatient and feverish joyfulness, that displayed itself in every movement.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MEETING.

The voyage was sufficiently tempestuous and lingering to give the Messrs. Thorpe and Brownlee an opportunity to draw largely on their united stock of patience. At the wharf they took conveyance for Everleigh, with that headlong haste that usually characterizes lovers.