

Standing at some distance from him, but near enough for him to mark every shade of her countenance, was Nina Aleyn. There was something strangely suited in the unassuming simplicity of her dress to the quiet solemnity, the antique formality of that vast hall, and the pictured beings that looked down upon her, but it was not her dress, her appearance, which attracted the attention of the intruder, but the expression of her usually impassible countenance, now lit up, beaming with life. Her eyes were fixed with an expression of almost religious veneration on a portrait before which she was standing, and which the earl recognized with a start, as that of his mother. Long, long did she look, whilst a thousand varying shades passed over her child-like features, but ever still remained the same look of deep, reverential tenderness, and St. Albans felt that he would have given half his broad earldom to have seen, even but for one fleeting moment, such a spell-bound, fascinated look on the beautiful countenance of his betrothed. The movements of the unconscious Nina, he scarcely continued to watch, indulging a conjecture as to the real cause of the deep tenderness she lavished on the lifeless canvas before her, a tenderness equalling his own. Suddenly, some shadowy idea brought the rich crimson to his cheek, and his eye wandered for a moment to his own portrait, but he murmured:

"It is not mine she cherishes, it is my mother's."

His doubts were soon dispelled, for the object of his attention suddenly bent towards the canvas, and imprinting a fond kiss upon it, exclaimed with passionate tenderness:

"Oh! had Heaven but spared to me my mother, she might have been like thee! How I would have cherished, have loved her. None other should ever have shared my heart with her."

St. Albans blushed for his doubts, his conjectures, and the look of deep admiring emotion which crossed his features, was a priceless tribute to the holy, filial affection, the childish innocence of the young girl, whose heart, even to its most secret recesses, he had just fathomed. But fearing the shrinking sensitiveness, whose extent he could now fully divine, by the watchful vigilance with which Nina had heretofore shielded it from every eye, he drew back intending to return to the saloon, but an irresistible wish to converse a moment with her, to penetrate further into her thoughts, to see if her wonderful and heretofore undreamed of softness of character would be immediately replaced by the icy mask she had adopted, impelled him to retain his position till a favorable moment for entering would present itself. He had not long to wait, for Nina, soon brushing

away the large tears which filled her eyes, turned from the portrait and slowly walked towards one of the windows. In passing the earl's picture, she stopped a moment, and glancing over it, murmured:

"How like his mother; the same soft eyes and kind smile, and, like her, he is good and gentle too. May Florence prove worthy of him, and may they be happy; but I hear horse's hoofs! Can they be returning so soon?"

"Now is my time," ejaculated the earl, as Nina threw open the window, and gazed earnestly from it. Her conjecture was unfounded; it was one of the servants of the castle, and as she drew back to close the casement, the earl approached, and exclaimed with a pleasant smile:

"Will you pardon my intrusion, Miss Aleyn, and give me permission to remain?"

"'Tis I, my lord, who should apologize for entering unauthorised this sacred spot," rejoined Nina, who had recovered completely, after the first start of surprise, what Florence styled her "stoic gravity."

"Believe me, I would feel happy and proud were it intruded on oftener," said the earl, gravely; "but, though the music-room, billiard-room, and conservatories are generally thronged, the picture gallery has never seen the same visitant twice within its enclosure. You may therefore judge, Miss Aleyn, how gratifying your presence here, is to my mortified self-love. As the party will not arrive for some time yet, if you are not already wearied of it, we may pass a pleasant hour here together, and if you wish it, I will make you acquainted with a few of the remarkable characters around us."

"Your offer is rather late, my lord," replied Nina, with the *waitre* smile which became her so well, but which so rarely lit up her still features. "I have already made an acquaintance with some, formed a friendship for others. Your worthy housekeeper's assistance, and the help of some old traditional volumes, occupying a remote shelf in the library, have rendered me almost as well versed in the history of each portrait as herself."

"Then permit me to put your proficiency to the proof," returned St. Albans, coloring with pleased surprise. "You will tell me what you know of those which interest you most, and I will endeavour to add some little trait of each, beyond the sphere of good Mrs. Rawdon's knowledge."

Without a shade of hesitation, Nina accepted the Earl's proffered arm, and glancing at the portraits before them, ran over the chief circumstances of the history of the personage it represented, with a fidelity and ease which gratified.