

Captain Fitzgerald with a packet of newspapers and letters.

Carelessly tossing the papers aside, he searched among the letters for the familiar writing of Charles, while Constance looked on with heightened colour and eager eyes. At length two letters bearing the free superscription of Charles rewarded his impatience, and handing one to Constance, he broke the seal of that which was addressed to himself.

With a trembling hand Constance opened her letter and perused the contents. As she read on, however, the expression of pleasure which had stolen over her face gradually vanished, and she turned away so as to hide from her father the burning tears which chased each other down her cheek, and fell upon the cold and chilling words.

"Humph! short enough!" ejaculated Fitzgerald, when he had perused his epistle and tossed it aside with an air of disappointment. "What does he say to you, Constance?"

"Charles tells me that he is well," replied Constance, endeavouring to command her voice, which trembled; "but he says his time has been so much occupied of late as to cause his neglect, for which he promises amendment in future," and again Constance turned to peruse the words, so cold, so precise, and different from the affectionate tone which his communications had formerly breathed.

Constance in vain endeavoured to account for this change, but while she grieved over it she sought to excuse Charles both to herself and to her father. She knew him too well to imagine that a few months' absence could make him forget his early friends, and though she deeply grieved, she yet cherished the hope that this melancholy change would yet be satisfactory explained. The time would soon draw nigh when Charles should return to Ardmore, and in the daily intercourse which they should then hold, she trusted that the same unconstrained tone which they had formerly enjoyed would be resumed.

Thus hopeful, she did not allow her mind to sink into despair, although at times the withering thought would strike her, that Charles had forgotten her in the society of one more beautiful, and as she fancied more worthy of his love, whom he had perhaps met in the haunts of gaiety, and in whose presence she was banished from his heart, and for a time she would distrust his constancy. But again, she thought it impossible that he, upon whose open brow the seal of truth had been set, who scorned deception, and who had by innumerable instances proved his devotion towards her, could change so instantaneously.

Thus, in alternate hopes and fears, did the time of Constance pass away.

CHAPTER XV.

I saw him stand
Before an altar—with a gentle bride;
Her face was fair, but was not that which made
The starlight of his boyhood.

BYRON.

It was one of the most stormy evenings that the large and populous city of E—— had experienced for a long period. The wind blew in loud and violent gusts; and mischievous as an unruly urchin just escaped from the presence of the awe-inspiring pedagogue, it roamed into every nook and corner in search of some object upon which to gratify its love of mischief. Onwards it flew through the broad streets which offered no impediment to its progress, dancing with glee, and overtaking each unlucky pedestrian whom necessity had compelled to forsake the shelter of his home. In an unguarded moment, when the unfortunate wayfarer thought the gust was past, and as he was availing himself of the opportunity to remove the blinding sheet from his eyes, it would make a whimsical evolution, and divesting his head of its sole covering, would send him at full speed, stumbling and sliding over the slippery pavement in search of that indispensable article of raiment. With an exulting roar at the unlucky wight it flew onwards rioting among windows which careless housemaids had forgotten to secure, but whose negligence next morning would be woefully revealed. Chimneys, tiles, doors, window-shutters and all moveable objects danced and swung in obedience to its wild glee, and maintained a continued clatter and screaming in which every variety of sound was confusedly mingled. It was such a night as subdues the most noisy children, and collects them round the aged nurse, who terrifies them still more by the ghostly stories her treasured lore unfolds, till the frightened urchins creep nearer and nearer to each other for protection, while in the parlour above, more enlightened heads are recounting the shipwrecks and hurricanes which have occurred within the date of their memory, or of which marvellous accounts have been transmitted to them.

On such a night as this, pacing hurriedly to and fro in the small and cheerful parlour of Mrs. Douglas, was Charles O'Donnell. His hasty movements and troubled aspect betokened a mind ill at ease; books which he had evidently been perusing lay scattered about in careless confusion as if hastily thrown aside, while Charles himself