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The Favourite Child.

(Continued from p. 19 and Concluded.)

Pondering these reflections in her mind, and still keeping the objects of her intense interest in view, the miserable woman beheld with surprise that they turned into the narrow street which led to her own dwelling. They approached the door, they actually entered; for in the distraction of her mind she had left it open. But how could she meet them? How could she look them in the face? unprepared as she still was, now and for ever, to renounce her besetting sin. She followed them, however, and with silent steps ascended the narrow stairs, concealing herself in a recess behind the door which opened into her own apartment, where she could hear everything which transpired within; and great was the disappointment they expressed, on finding the occupant of that humble chamber still absent.

"It is me they are seeking, then," said she; and she began to tremble as if about to be arraigned at the bar of judgment.

"I am confident," said Gilbert Gray, "that I saw her amongst the crowd; I could not be mistaken in her features, though their expression was now to me; I could not be mistaken in her tears and never did I see such a look of humbled, heart-broken feeling, as that which her countenance wore."

"It is all in vain," said Maria, with a deep sigh, "my hopes are again defeated."

"It is not—it cannot be in vain,"—said her companion, "while your mother is on this side the grave; for is there not a power beyond and above us, directing all these things in wisdom, and in mercy; softening the stubborn spirit, and guiding the perverse. Wait then, Maria, with patience; but while you wait, forget not to use the appointed means. Even now, there is something to be done this night, before we sleep. I have spoken with such humble powers as I possess; I have addressed them unparaphrasingly; and I came here prepared to meet your mother, as if she had been my mother too; to appeal to her alone, to kneel at her feet, had it been necessary; to implore of her to put away this poison from her lips, this evil from her heart; and now that she is not here, and cannot hear me, now that she has returned most probably to the haunts of vice, more hardened and more guilty, for the neglect of each repeated conviction—even now, I will not despair; because I know that God has his own time, for what his will designs. Even now I will not despair, so long as heaven is open to the voice of prayer."

The mother of Maria remained concealed until her two friends, the only friends she had in the whole world, had offered up a prayer in her behalf, in which she almost unconsciously had joined, in silence and in sorrow. She then watched them depart before entering her own chamber; and dreadful were the solitary hours of that long night, in which she could neither sleep nor rest, and often did her broken spirit quail under the horrors which a diseased imagination conjured up around her. All that human ingenuity can devise of torment and annoyance, was there; all that pride can endure of chagrin and mortification; all that remembrance can recall of bitterness and gall; all that anticipation can present of difficulty and dismay;—all these were there, with a thirst, an aching after something which a single act could, at any moment supply—a single act, which the tempter within was ever-telling her would be seen and known by no one, would add nothing to her accumulated load of guilt, and would banish in an instant all the horrors which surrounded her.

And are such things not to be pitied? Not to be aided by every means which Christian benevolence can suggest? even if the price of our effort be to make some little sacrifice of our own social indulgence, our own accustomed stimulus, that we may say to them with unsullied lips, "I know it is possible to abstain, because I have made the trial."

There is one consolation, however, to the victim of intemperance, who engages in this struggle, which ought never to be lost

sight of. It is, that every day, every hour, which passes in a state of abstinence, is so much time gained upon the enemy; and the mother of Maria found this consolation in her lonely lot. The second night was less wretched than the first; and so on, until nearly a week had elapsed, when her daughter came to visit her, and learned the good tidings, and wept for very joy upon her mother's bosom. All was then peace between them. There was no suspicion, no reproach, no craving for the means of unlawful indulgence; but a blessed hope, and a sweet calm, in which both partook, though, for the present, it was with fear and trembling.

With Isabel Ainsworth the case was widely different. She too had her seasons of better feeling, and of stronger hope; but to peace she was yet a stranger simply; for this reason, that she had never made up her mind to renounce the evil wholly, and for ever. Thus, though her life was one of general abstinence, there were occasions when without appearing culpable to others, all her sorrow, her shame, and her repentance, had to be renewed; when the ground she had gained against her soul's enemy, was more than lost; and when temptations to deception, to falsehood, and to many other kinds of evil, again beset her path.

It was while the purpose of her secret soul remained thus unsettled, that she was one day alarmed by a more than usual sudden and loud knock at the door; and, starting from her seat to look out of the window, she saw a carriage drawn closely up to the steps, while her eye caught the figure of a physician with whom she was well acquainted, who appeared to be arranging with his servant, to convey some helpless burden into the house.

Never once did it strike Mrs. Ainsworth that any thing could have happened to her husband; he was so healthy, so vigorous, so unchanging in all his habits, so full of thoughts, and schemes, and calculations for this life only, that no one ever connected the idea of disease or death with him. Yet, so it was; paralysis had seized his active frame, and, while still retaining his mental faculties, he was borne to his chamber more helpless than a child, and scarcely wearing a resemblance to the eager money-making man who had that morning left his door.

To those who have loved the world for its wealth, its distinction, its pecuniary pre-eminence, how awful and appalling are the first sure symptoms of disease, when they know, and feel that the very foundation of all they have ever coveted, or struggled for, is passing away from beneath them, as the shallow waves of the receding tide fall back from the vessel stranded on the shore.

Mr. Ainsworth was, of all men, in a situation to feel this. He had loved the world not for its rational enjoyments, but for the many victories it had afforded him the means of obtaining in the great conflict, where money is the prize, where gain is the crown of glory, and loss the badge of disgrace. In the same proportion, he had resisted the encroachments of old age, purely because he knew, that as he lost ground, others would steal past him, and make sure of the advantages, which his experience, added to his natural capacity, enabled him to grasp. What then were his reflections, while his mind retained the power of thought, clogged by a body now deprived of muscular power, distorted, speechless, and inert?

Had the fearful stroke, under whose powerful mastery he now lay, extended its influence to other members of Mr. Ainsworth's family, they could scarcely have been more helpless, than when this critical emergency demanded the full exercise of all their faculties, of thought and action. Their experience had hitherto been filled up with the minute affairs of human life, upon which, however, they had expended so much contrivance and activity, that they had nothing left for great occasions; while the habit of doing every thing with reference to economy, as the one paramount principle of human conduct, left them altogether adrift upon a sea of uncertainty, when circumstances rendered it necessary for any higher principle to be recognised.

Of all the household, Isabel alone was able to see and understand the exact measure of importance proper to be attached, not