

been told that he was perfectly recovered. When Atherstone had repeated the message, he went back a few steps from the post he had at first occupied with great eagerness, by Una's side, and leaning against the wall silent and motionless, he seemed to resign her to Hervey Crichton's very demonstrative attentions. Mrs. Northcote glanced at him once or twice, with, as Will expressed it, "all manner of thunder and lightning in her aspect," while Mr. Northcote, who was looking extremely meek and depressed, moved uneasily in his vicinity, and was evidently greatly relieved when Mr. Cunliffe asked him to make him acquainted with Mr. Atherstone. The two men conversed together till dinner was announced, and then, as the party was not large, found themselves side by side once more, with Una, whom Hervey had succeeded in bringing in, seated opposite to them.

Cunliffe was very agreeably impressed by the man of whom he had heard such doubtful accounts. He soon satisfied himself that he had a mind of no small depth and power, and as he glanced at the dark noble face, he found it impossible to believe that he had ever acted in any mean or unworthy manner. Nevertheless, he was bent on testing Atherstone, so far as he could, and he gradually led the conversation round to the case of a man whose crimes, long marvellously concealed, had originated one of the most remarkable trials of a few years previously. The criminal had been in a high position—known and esteemed in the best society, and with a reputation which seemed in every way perfectly unassailable. At last, however, an accidental circumstance betrayed him, and it was discovered that he had been carrying on a gigantic system of fraud, and finally it was proved that he had not stopped short of murder, in order to put an end to an existence which was dangerous to his own safety.

After they had discussed the case for some time, Atherstone talking of it with entire ease and freedom, Mr. Cunliffe mentioned that he had heard of it when he was in Melbourne; "and," he added, "I must say, what struck me most was the idiotic blindness of those who were connected with him in business matters for so many years. I do not know if you recollect that, on one occasion, almost at the very commencement of his career, they were aware that in some one matter of no great importance, he had acted falsely; not so as to involve any serious result, but falsely, definitely, and distinctly. After that, they ought, not only never to have trusted him again, but to have been prepared to see him reach any amount of fraudulent villany."

"A hard doctrine, indeed!" said Atherstone, "harder than any which I should have imagined had ever been promulgated by the most intolerant sects. Does not every system admit the possibility of a man repenting of a first misdeed, so thoroughly as to maintain his integrity unimpeached ever after?"

"It is not a question of ethics but of facts. All my experience, which is not small in such matters, goes to prove that unless a man holds with indomitable grasp to the idea of the absolute necessity of inviolate honour, and unswerving truth, there is really no barrier whatever between himself and the lowest depths of falsity and baseness. A fortunate concurrence of circumstances may keep him from taking the descending track; but if he have once fallen from the pure pinnacle of unblemished principle, and lost his own self-respect, the chances are that he will speedily go down hill with as much ease as rapidity."

Atherstone was quite silent for a few moments, then he resumed, "There is another side to the question, Mr. Cunliffe; moral laws are after all to a certain extent arbitrary. Can you not imagine the possibility of a man perfectly upright and honourable, finding himself in such an extraordinary conflict of duties that the boundaries of right and wrong are wholly confused, and an offence against the received code as to truth and justice becomes a higher virtue than the maintenance of a principle which could only cause serious and extensive evil?"

"The ends justifying the means, as theologians define it. No, Mr. Atherstone, such a course can never be either excusable or successful; it is only a warped judgment, biased probably by some strong personal consideration that could ever

imagine confusion in the well-defined lines of right and wrong in matters of equity; and unless the offender could control all the events of the future and bring them into harmony with his crooked policy, he would be quite certain to see his purpose overthrown by some combination of circumstances on which it was wholly impossible he could have calculated; whereas actions flowing from a simple sense of right and justice are as certain to reach their due and logical result as rivers are run into the sea."

At this moment the ladies rose, and as Atherstone moved to open the door for them, Cunliffe looked after him muttering, "He is a very fine fellow, with a high-toned mind, and the pride of Lucifer; but he has his secret, and it is not altogether an innocent one. If he gets little Una, however, I believe she may set him straight. She is safe to find it out, and she is as pure-hearted a girl as ever breathed;" and with that Mr. Cunliffe sat down to his wine, fully determined that neither then nor at any future time would he be an adverse influence between Atherstone and Una.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Northcote never dared to remain long absent from the stately lady who ruled his life, and the party were soon all re-assembled in the drawing-room. Miss Dysart was singing when the gentlemen came in, and the well-known song she had chosen, "In questa tomba oscura," was particularly suited to her rich contralto voice, with its pathetic *timbre*. Atherstone came and stood behind her, his eyes growing dark with intense feeling as he listened. When she had finished, Una rose and retreated to the window, where she stood looking out that she might escape from Hervey Crichton's enthusiastic plaudits, and Atherstone joined her at once.

"I want you to make a very pleasant dream in which I have been indulging for a long time into a reality, Miss Dysart. You promised once to come some day with your father to spend the whole afternoon at Atherstone to study the pictures at your leisure, and I see no reason why there should be any further delay. Will you not come this week?"

"I should like it excessively," exclaimed Una, "and I am sure my father would enjoy it too; but we must ascertain what day would suit him best."

"I will find that out before he leaves the room to-night," continued Atherstone. "You do not know how I look forward to it, Miss Dysart; there is so much I am anxious to show you."

"Yes, there is a great deal for me to see, and I ought to have seen it long before." The voice that said these words was not Una's; and Atherstone, turning round with a start, met the merry glance of Will Northcote's bright black eyes, who had come unperceived quite close to them. She put her arm round Una's waist, and leaning her piquant little face against her friend's shoulder, said composedly, "You did not know I was coming too, did you, Mr. Atherstone? but I am; I have been dying to go over the Abbey for a long time past, only my mother objects to my calling anywhere by myself—a curious superstition, is it not? and she declined to accompany me. You have failed to win her affections, as you are probably aware. So now I have simply to say that I will take means to prevent Una going, unless you invite me too. The matter is quite in your own hands."

"Then I shall decidedly beg you to come," said Atherstone, smiling. He had felt somewhat annoyed at first, but Will's absurd speech had given him time to reflect, that he should be much more likely to get Una to himself, if they were a large party than if she came alone with her father. "The more the merrier, Miss Northcote; so pray bring any one with you who might care to see the old Abbey."

"In that case, might we come before Mr. Cunliffe goes away, and let him accompany us; I should like to show him what a real old English castle can be?" said Una.

"By all means," said Atherstone; "any friend of yours will be most welcome."

"Then, of course, you will invite Mr. Hervey Crichton," said Will, with great apparent innocence.

Atherstone frowned darkly, but Hervey, who was hovering near, had so evidently overheard

Miss Northcote's speech, that Atherstone was obliged to invite him then and there, with as good a grace as he could, greatly to the malicious little lady's amusement. Hervey, of course, accepted with alacrity, and when Humphrey spoke of the plan to Colonel Dysart, including Mr. Cunliffe, who was sitting beside him, in his invitation, both gentlemen agreed to his proposal, with a satisfaction which was due to somewhat more far-seeing prognostics that he at all suspected. It was finally arranged that they were to go two days later, if the weather was fine.

The grand old Abbey was looking its very best under the glowing radiance of the powerful July sun, as Una, with Mr. Cunliffe and her father in the carriage beside her, brought her spirited ponies clattering over the ancient drawbridge to the door. The strong lights and shadows brought out the massive proportions of the grim, grey building with wonderful effect, and showed the lovely sweeping lines of the magnificent cedars on the lawn to perfection, while the park-like grounds were in the height of their summer beauty, and the deer, seldom disturbed by a stranger's foot, had taken up their positions close to the house in every variety of picturesque attitude.

Humphrey Atherstone certainly looked well worthy to be the master of so stately a dwelling, as he came down the steps to receive his visitors. His face, always undeniably beautiful even in his saddest moments, was now lit up with an intense pleasure which dispelled every trace of the gloom that sometimes overshadowed his noble features and dark, expressive eyes. He greeted Colonel Dysart and Mr. Cunliffe with the utmost courtesy, but it was a mute though more eloquent welcome that he bestowed on Una, as he retained her hand for a moment, after he had helped her to alight and looked down with deep tenderness into her sweet brown eyes.

They had scarcely entered the courtyard when the sound of horses' hoofs on the bridge announced the arrival of Mr. Northcote and his daughter with Hervey Crichton. Little Will at once cantering in on a mettlesome steed, which seemed indisposed to stand still long enough to let her even dismount, Humphrey of course went to her assistance, along with his servants, while Crichton precipitated himself off his horse in his hot haste to reach Una's side.

Meanwhile Mr. Cunliffe and Colonel Dysart had gone back to a corner of the courtyard, where they could get a good view of the ponderous keep, which was the most ancient part of the building, and excited the Australian's enthusiastic admiration.

"Well, really," he said, "if a daughter of mine had a chance of becoming mistress of such a glorious old place, I doubt if I should have the courage to inquire too curiously into the antecedents of the man who could give her that position. It is enough to make one compound a felony to think of obtaining possession, even indirectly, of this undecayed, unblemished inheritance of ages."

"The man does not exactly look like a felon just now, does he?" said Colonel Dysart, directing his friend's glance towards Atherstone, who was standing bearheaded at the door of the entrance hall ushering in his guests.

"No, indeed. If he is one, Lavater is completely at fault as a physiognomist, for a finer face I never saw, or one indicative of nobler qualities. I believe that the secret which mars his life and subjects him to such evil report, partakes more of the nature of a mistake than a sin—a mistaken sense of duty probably. Anyhow, I believe your sweet little Una would be entirely safe in his hands."

"I must be well assured of that before I let her go to him. I cannot have the fair promise of her life destroyed, but I quite agree with you in your opinion of Atherstone, and I have little doubt, if for her sake he gives up his celibate tendencies, that he will be able to give me satisfactory explanations."

Of course luncheon was the next feature in the small entertainment of that day, and to please Una, Atherstone had ordered it to be served in the huge banquetting-hall—where the table and the small party seated around it seemed like an oasis in a perfect desert of black oak flooring, while the grim old Atherstones for centuries back, looked down with apparent scorn on the ephemeral beings