

MILDRED.

CHAPTER I.

THE STORM, AND WHAT IT BROUGHT.

The sultry September day was drawing to a close, and as the sun went down, a dark thunder-cloud came slowly up from the west, muttering in deep undertones, and emitting occasional gleams of lightning by way of heralding the coming storm, from which both man and beast intuitively sought shelter. Ere long the streets of Mayfield were deserted, save by the handsome carriage and span of spirited grays, which went dashing through the town toward the large house upon the hill, the residence of Judge Howell, who paid no heed to the storm, so absorbed was he in the letter which he held in his hand, and which had roused him to a state of fearful excitement. Through the gate, and up the long avenue, lined with giant trees of maple and beech, the horses flew, and just as the rain came down in torrents they stood panting before the door of Beechwood.

"Bring me a light! Why isn't there one already here?" roared the judge, as he stalked into his library, and banged the door with a crash scarcely equalled by the noise of the tempest without.

"Got up a little thunder-storm on his own account! Wonder what's happened him now!" muttered Rachel, the coloured housekeeper, as she placed a lamp upon the table, and then silently left the room.

Scarcely was she gone when, seating himself in his arm-chair, the Judge began to read again the letter which had so much disturbed him. It was post-marked at a little out-of-the-way place among the backwoods of Maine, and it purported to have come from a young mother, who asked him to adopt a little girl, nearly two months old.

"Her family is fully equal to your own," the mother wrote; "and should you take my baby, you need never blush for her parentage. I have heard of you, Judge Howell. I know that you are rich, that you are comparatively alone, and there are reasons why I would rather my child should go to Beechwood than any other spot in the wide world. You need her, too—need something to comfort your old age, for with all your money, you are far from being happy."

"The deuce I am!" muttered the Judge. "How

did the trollop know that, or how did she know of me, any way? I take a child to comfort my old age! Ridiculous! I'm not old—I'm only fifty—just in the prime of life; but I hate young ones, and I won't have one in my house! I'm tormented enough with Rachel's dozen, and if that madame brings hers here, I'll—"

The remainder of the sentence was cut short by a peal of thunder, so long and loud that even the exasperated Judge was still until the roar had died away; then, resuming the subject of his remarks, he continued:

"Thanks to something, this letter has been two weeks on the road, and as she is tired of looking for an answer by this time, I sha'n't trouble myself to write—but what of Richard?—I have not yet seen why he is up there in New Hampshire, chasing after that Hetty, when he ought to have been home weeks ago;" and taking from his pocket another and an unopened letter, he read why his only son and heir of all his vast possessions was in New Hampshire "chasing after Hetty," as he termed it.

Hetty Kirby was a poor relation, whom the Judge's wife had taken into the family, and treated with the utmost kindness and consideration; on her death-bed she had committed the young girl to her husband's care, bidding him be kind to Hetty for her sake. In Judge Howell's crusty heart there was one soft, warm spot—the memory of his wife and beautiful young daughter, the latter of whom died within a few months after her marriage. They had loved the orphan Hetty, and for their sakes, he had kept her until accident revealed to him the fact that to his son, then little more than a boy, there was no music so sweet as Hetty's voice—no light so bright as that which shone in Hetty's eye.

Then the lion was roused, and he turned her from his door, while Richard was threatened with disinheritance if he dared to think again of the humble Hetty. There was no alternative but to submit, for Judge Howell's word was *law*, and, with a sad farewell to what had been her home so long, Hetty went back to the low-roofed house among the granite hills, where her moth-