

learning. Languages I picked up with extraordinary facility, and I thus alone redeemed me from the character of an irreclaimable dunce.

'You can learn, sir, if you will,' was March's constant remark, after I had arrived at the exalted position of a senior boy, to whom flouting and such coarse ve. measure were inappropriate, and for whom out of bounds was not. 'You can learn, or else why do I see you poring over Arabic and Sanscrit during play-hours, when you had much better be at cricket? You must have brains somewhere, but to save my life, I can't find them. You can speak half-a-dozen languages I am informed, nearly as well as I can speak Latin, and yet if I set you to do a 'Rule of Three' sum, you make more blunders than the lowest little dunce in the school! Egerton, I can't make you out.

It was breaking up day at Everdon. Victor and I walked with our arms over each other's shoulders, up and down, up and down, at the old playground, and as we paced those well worn flags, of which we knew every stone, my heart sank within me to think it was for the last, last time. What is there that we are not sorry to do for the last time? I had hated school as much as any schoolboy could. I had looked forward to my emancipation as the captive looks forward to the opening of his prison-door; and now the time was come, and I felt grieved and out of spirits to think that I should see the old place no more.

'You must write to me constantly, Vere,' said Victor, with an affectionate hug, as we took our hundredth turn. 'We must never forget each other, however far apart, and next winter you must come again to Edelston. I shall be there when the shooting begins. Oh, Vere, you will be very dull at home.'

'No,' I replied; 'I like Alton Grange, and I like a quiet life. I am not of your way of thinking, Victor. You are never happy except in a bustle. I wish I were more like you,' and I sighed as I thought of the contrast between us.

I do not know what brought it to my mind but I thought of Constance Beverly Manor. Since then our acquaintance had indeed progressed but little. We scarcely ever met except on certain Sundays, when we took advantage of our liberty as senior-boys to go to church at Fleetsbury, where from the gallery we could see right into the Beverley pew, and mark the change time had wrought on our former playfellows. After service, at the door we might exchange a stiff greeting, and a few words before she and her governess got into the carriage. And this transcendent pleasure we were content to purchase with a trudging walk of some five miles on a dusty high road, and a patient endurance of the longest sermon from the worthy rector of Fleetsbury, an excellent man, skilled in casuistry, and gifted with extraordinary powers of discourse. Victor, I think, on these expeditions in his own good-natured way, and seemed to care but little whether he went or not. One hot Sunday, I recollect, he suggested that we should dispense with afternoon church altogether, and go to bathe instead, a proposal I scouted with the utmost indignation, for I looked forward to our meetings with a passionate longing for which I could not account even to myself, and which I never for an instant dreamed of attributing to the charms of Miss Beverley. I know now what tempted me to ask the question, but I felt myself becoming bright scarlet as I inquired of my schoolfellow whether he had not other friends in Somersetshire besides myself whom he would regret leaving. His reply ought to set my mind at ease, if I was disturbed at the suspicion of his entertaining any penchant for Miss Beverley, for he answered at once in his own off-hand way—'None whatever that I care a sixpence about, not even that prima little girl and her governess whom you drag me five miles every Sunday to see. No, Vere, if I could take you with me, I should sing for joy the whole way from here to London. As it is,

and the poor I am likely to do here: I must cut it, Egerton; I must find a career; I am too good for an usher—an usher,' he repeated, with a strong expression of disgust; 'I, who feel fit to fight my way anywhere—I have mistaken my profession—I ought to have been an officer—a cavalry officer; that would have suited me better than this dull, insipid life. I must consult my cousin about it, perhaps we shall meet again in some different scenes. What say you, De Rohau, should you not be surprised to see me at the head of a regiment?'

Victor could conceal his mirth no longer, and Manners turned somewhat angrily to me. 'You seem to be very happy as you are,' I answered, sadly, for I was contrasting his well-grown, upright figure and simple fresh-colored face, with my own repulsive exterior, and thinking how willingly I would change places with him, although he was an usher; 'but wherever we meet, I am sure I shall be glad to see you again.' In my own heart I thought Manners was pretty certain to be at Everdon if I should revisit it that day ten years, as I was used to these visionary schemes of his for the future, and had heard him talk in the same strain every vacation regularly since I first came to school.

But there was little time for such speculations. The chaises were driving round to the door to take the boys away. March bid us an affectionate farewell in his study. Victor and I were presented respectively with a richly bound copy of *Horatius Flaccus* and *Virgilius Maro*—copies which, I fear, in after life were never soiled by too much use. The last farewell was spoken—the last pressure of the hand exchanged—and we drove off on our different destinations; my friend bound for London, Paris, and his beloved Hungary; myself, longing to see my father once more, and taste the seclusion and repose of Alton Grange. To no boy on earth could a school-life have been more distasteful than to me; no boy could have longed more ardently for the peaceful calm of a domestic hearth, and yet I felt lonely and out of spirits even now, when I was going home.

CHAPTER XII.

ALTON GRANGE.

A dreary old place was Alton Grange, and one which would have had a sobering, not to say saddening, effect, even on the most mercurial temperament. To one naturally of a melancholy turn of mind, its aspect was positively terrifying. Outside the house the grounds were overgrown with plantations and shrubberies, unthinned, and luxuriant into a wilderness that was not devoid of beauty, but it was a beauty of a sombre and uncomfortable character. Every tree and shrub of the darkest hues, seemed to shut out the sunlight from Alton Grange. Huge cedars overshadowed the slope behind the house; hollies, junipers, and yew hedges, kept the garden in perpetual night. Old-fashioned terraces, that should have been kept in perfect repair, were sliding into decay with mouldering walls and unpropped banks, whilst a broken stone sundial, where sun never shone, served but to attract attention to the general dilapidation around.

It was not the old family place of the Egertons. That was in a northern county, and had been sold by my father in his days of wild extravagance, long ago; but he had succeeded to it in right of his mother, at a time when he had resolved, if possible, to save some remnant from the wreck of his property; and, when in England, he had resided here ever since. To me it was home, and dearly I loved it, with all its dullness and all its decay. The inside corresponded with the exterior. Dark passages, black wainscotings, everywhere the absence of light; small as were the windows, they were overhung with creepers, and the walls were covered with ivy; damp in winter, darkness in

spring, it had always retained his greatest desire to mat into his son some of his own love for the art; but I had hardly time to think of this ere I was in his arms, looking up once more in the kind face, on which I never in my whole life remembered to have seen a harsh expression. He was altered, though, and thinner than when I had seen him last, and his hair was now quite grey, so that the contrast with his flashing dark eyes—brighter it seemed to me than ever—was almost unearthly. His hands, too, were wasted, and whiter than they used to be, and the whole figure, which I remembered once a tower of strength, was now sunk and fallen in, particularly about the chest and shoulders. When he stood up, it struck me, also, that he was shorter than he used to be, and my heart tightened for a moment at the thought that he might be even now embarking on that long journey from which there is no return. I remembered him such a tall, handsome, stalwart man, and now he seemed so sunk and emaciated, and quite to totter and lean on me for support.

'You are grown, my boy,' said he, looking fondly at me; 'you are getting quite a man now, Vere; it will be sadly dull for you at the Grange; but you must stay with your old father for a time—it will not be for long—not for long,' he repeated, and his eye turned to the screened canvas, and a glance shot from it that I could hardly bear to see—so despairing, yet so longing—so wild, and yet so fond. I had never seen him look thus before, and it frightened me.

Our quiet meal in the old oak parlor—our saunter after dinner through the dark walls and shrubberies—all was so like the olden time, that I felt quite a boy again. My father lighted up for a time into his former good spirits and amusing sallies, but I remarked that after every flash he sank into a deeper dejection, and I fancied the tears were in his eyes as he wished me good-night at the door of the painting-room. I little thought when I went to bed that it was his habit to sit brooding there till the early dawn of morning, when he would retire for three or four hours to his rest.

So the time passed away tranquilly and dull enough at Alton Grange. My father was ever absorbed in his painting, but studied now with the door locked, and even I was only admitted at stated times, when the mysterious canvas was invariably screened. My curiosity, nay more, my interest, was intensely excited; I longed, yet feared, to know what was the subject of this hidden picture; twenty times I was on the point of asking my father, but something in his manner gave me to understand that it was a prohibited subject, and I forbore. There was that in his bearing which at once checked curiosity on a subject he was unwilling to reveal, and few men would have dared to question my father where he did not himself choose to bestow his confidence.

I read much in the old library; I took long walks once more by myself; I got back to my dreams of Launcelot and Guinevere, and knights and dames, and 'deeds of high emprise.' More than ever I experienced the vague longing for something hitherto unknown, that had unconsciously been growing with my growth, and strengthening with my strength—the restless craving of which I scarcely guessed the nature, but which weighed upon my nervous, sensitive temperament till it affected my very brain. Had I but known then the lesson that was to be branded on my heart in letters of fire—could I but have fore-seen the day when I should gnaw my fetters, and yet not wish to be free when all that was good, and noble, and kindly in my nature, should turn to bitter self-contempt, and hopeless, helpless apathy—when love, fiercer than hatred, should scorch and sting the coward that had not strength nor courage to bear his burden upright like a man—had I but known all this, I had better have tied a millstone round my neck, and slept twenty feet below the mere at Beverley, then pawned away hope, and life, and energy, and manhood, for a glance of her

ly lady with a book nose, who had been her governess, and was now a sort of companion, Miss Beverley would have had all the conversation to herself. And I am constrained to admit that once or twice I caught an expression on her calm, sweet face, that could only have been called up by the very inconsequent answers of which I was guilty in my nervous abstraction. I was so taken up in watching and admiring her, that I could think of nothing else. She was so quiet and self-possessed, so gentle and lady-like, so cool and well-dressed. I can remember the way in which her hair was parted and arranged to this day. She seemed to me a being of a superior order, something that never could by any possibility belong to the sphere as myself. She was more like the picture of Queen Dido than ever, but the queen, happy and fancy-free, with kindly eyes and unruffled brow; not the deceived, broken-hearted woman on her self-selected death-bed. I am not going to describe her—perhaps she was not so beautiful to others—perhaps I should have wished all the rest of the world to think her positively hideous—perhaps she was then not so transcendently beautiful even to me. Nay, as I looked, I could pick faults in her features and coloring. I had served a long enough apprenticeship to my father to be able to criticise like an artist, and I could see here a tint that might be deepened, there a plait that might be better arranged—I do not mean to say she was perfect—I do not mean to say that she was a goddess or an angel; but I do mean to say that if ever there was a face on earth which to me presented the ideal of all that is sweetest and most lovable in woman, that face was Constance Beverley's.

And yet I was not in love. No, I felt something exalting, something exhilarating in her presence—she seemed to fill the void in my life, which had long been so wearisome, but I was not in love with her—certainly not then. I felt less shy than usual, I even felt as if I too had some claim to social distinction, and could play my part as well as the rest on the shifting stage. She had the happy knack of making others feel in good spirits and at their ease in her society. I was not insensible to the spell, and when Sir Harry came in and asked kindly after his old friend and promised to come over soon and pay my father a visit, I answered frankly and at once. I could see even the thoughtless Baronet was struck with the change in my manner, indeed he said as much.

'You must come over and stay with us, Mr. Egerton,' was his hospitable invitation; 'or if your father is so poorly you cannot leave him, look in here any day about luncheon-time. I am much from home myself, but you will always find Constance and Miss Mimim. Tell your father I will ride over and see him to-morrow. I only came back yesterday. How you're grown, my lad, and improved—isn't he Constance?'

I would have given worlds to have heard Constance's answer, but she turned the subject with an enquiry after Bold (who was at that instant waiting patiently for his master on the door-step), and it was time to take leave, so I bowed myself out, with a faithful promise, that I was not likely to forget, of calling again soon.

'So she has not forgotten Bold,' I said to myself, at least twenty times, in my homeward walk. And I think, fond as I had always been of my dog, I liked him better that day than ever.

'Father,' I said, as I sat that evening after dinner, during which meal I felt conscious that I had been more lively, and, to use an expressive term, better company than usual; 'I must write to London for a new coat, that black one is quite worn out.'

'Very well, Vere,' answered my father, abstractedly. 'Tell them to make it large enough—you grow fast, my boy.'

'Do you think I am grown, father? Indeed, I am not so very little of my age now. And do you know, I was the strongest boy at Everdon, and could lift a heavier weight than Manners the usher. But father—and

ran to get it mended, with an alacrity devotion that must have convinced her it not for her sake: and yet I loved Miss M. dearly, she was so associated in my mind with Constance, that except the young lac own, that wizened old face brought the bl to my brow more rapidly than any other the world. Oh! my heart aches when think of that beautiful drawing-room, opening into the conservatory, and Constance playing airs on the pianoforte that made nerves tingle with an ecstasy that was almost painful. Miss Mimim engaged with crochets-work in the back-ground, and I, awkward, ungainly youth, saying nothing hardly breathing, lest I should break spell; but gazing intently on the fair young face, with its soft kind eyes, and its thrilling smile, and the smooth, shining braids of black hair parted simply on that pure brow. Mine was no love at first sight, no momentary infatuation that has its course a burns itself out, the fiercer the sooner, with its own unsustainable violence. No; it grew and stole upon me by degrees. I drank it; with every breath I breathed—I fought against it till every moment of my life was struggle; and yet I cherished and pressed to my heart when all was done. I knew was no equal for such as Miss Beverley. I knew I had no right even to lift my eyes so much beauty and so much goodness—the awkward, ugly schoolboy, or at best, shrinking, unattractive youth, in whose homage there was nothing for a woman take pride, even if she did not think it ridiculous; but yet—God! how I loved it! Not a blossom in the garden, not a leaf on the tree, not a ray of sunshine, nor a white cloud drifting over the heaven, but was associated in my mind with her who was all world to me. If I saw other women, I compared them with her; if I read of beauty and grace in my dear old romances, or looked over the exquisite casts and spirited studies of my father's painting-room, it was but to refer the poet's dream and the artist's conception back to my own ideal. How I longed for beauty, power, talent, riches, fame, everything that could exalt me above my fellow that I might fling all down at her feet, and bid her trample on it if she would. It was bitter to think I had nothing to offer; and yet I felt sometimes there ought to be something touching in my self sacrifice. I looked for no return—I asked for no hope, no favor not even pity; and I gave my all.

At first it was delightful: the halcyon days flitted on, and I was happy. Sir Harry when at home, treated me with the greatest kindness, and seemed to find pleasure in initiating me into those sports and amusements which he himself considered indispensable to the education of a gentleman. He took me out shooting with him, and great was my natural aversion to the slaying unoffending partridges and innocent hares soon conquered my foolish nervousness about firing a gun, and became no mean proficient with the double-barrel. My ancient capt the head keeper, now avowed that 'Miss Egerton was the coolest shot he ever saw for so young a gentleman, and cool shot generally deadly!' The very fact of my caring a straw whether I killed my game or not, removed at once that over anxiety which is the great obstacle to success with all sportsmen. It was sufficient for me to know that a day's shooting at her father's secured two interviews (morning and afternoon) with Constance, and I loaded, and banged, and walked, and toiled like the veriest dunc of Colonel Hawker that ever marked a cock. All this exercise had a beneficial effect on health and spirits; I grew space, I was longer the square, clumsy-built dwarf; my frame was gradually developing itself into that of a powerful, athletic man. I was taller than Constance now, and not a little proud of that advantage. Having no other with whom to compare myself, I began to hope that I was, after all, not much weaker looking than the rest of my kind; and degrees a vague idea sprang up in my mind that Constance might some day learn to kindly upon me.