

to me—thoughts that you know, sir, to be connected with desires impossible of attainment."

"He does not know that, Hermia."

"No; and therefore, if he could be made to know it, or in any other way brought to understand that his marriage with me is beyond the scope even of speculation, I should be really glad; for then I might regain my friend. As a friend, I did value Sir Charles."

"And do you think, if there were no—no special obstacle, you might not value him as more than a friend?"

"Really, sir, I think that is a question your daughter may be excused for feeling too proud to answer, since she finds it impossible to believe in the contingency."

"Hermia, pray oblige me. Words are not much; I do not often now seek these interviews with you. I have respected your grief, your disappointment, your strangely painful and touching position—married and yet not married a virgin maiden, and yet with no hope of the maiden's natural desire being gratified in a pure and holy marriage."

"Not, sir! Am I not so married?"

"No, Hermia. To be candid with you, I think the time has come when you and I must reconsider this matter carefully. I owe you reparation for what I now feel to have been a great wrong—that foolish child-marriage, which has for so many years, and some of them the very flower of your maidenhood, been hanging above you like an iron chain, crippling you alike in body and soul. Hermia, that chain must now be broken."

"Must it?" Lady Hermia's look and tone had something scornful mingling in their defiance. The earl, however, cautiously avoided noticing it, and went on—

"It must!"

"It cannot!" said Lady Hermia, stopping in her walk, and there was an unmistakable smile on her features.

"It can!" quietly repeated the earl.

"It shall not, at all events!" said Lady Hermia, drawing herself up, and standing still, confronting her father as if prepared, once for all, to come to a decision on the question he had raised.

"I might again reply, Hermia, It shall! and with at least equal probability of proving my words to be true ones; for I wish you distinctly to understand that there is a power apart from yourself to determine this—"

"Ha! What is that? What, sir, do you say that my marriage can be undone without my will or wish being consulted? Do you, sir, really—"dare to say that" was the phrase suggested by Lady Hermia's look and attitude, but she softened the intended phrase down to—"do you really, sir, tell me, his wife, that?"

"I do, Hermia; but only that I may compel you to recognise my love for you, and my devotion to your best interests—for I hasten to add that under no circumstances will I use such a power without your consent."

"Oh, my dear father, is that true? Then, how I have wronged you in my thoughts!" Hermia came to him, took his hand, and he, in return, kissed her.

"Yes, Hermia, I repeat even more formally what I have now said; I will never myself, of my own notion alone, annul this marriage. Be easy, therefore. And now, have I entitled myself to look for a kind, attentive, respectful hearing in what else I have to say?"

"Yes, sir; yes." And Lady Hermia, who had taken his arm, allowed her fingers to search for and rest in his, with a timid, child-like gesture that her father remembered in her from a child, and which had often won his heart towards her in those days when state cares and personal ambition had not put that heart of his into a state of ossification.

"Well, darling, now then let us have the matter fairly out. I will tell you frankly my hopes and fears. I will disguise nothing from you—not even my bitter prejudices, which I am ready to confess. I only ask from you the same conduct in return. Let us thoroughly understand each other; let us thoroughly understand the position, and then let us try whether God will not so enlighten us that we may finally

come to a common agreement that, if not all we may severally desire, may still be a wise one, leading to a wise and a kind end, such as a father and a daughter may be permanently satisfied with. To begin with, Sir Charles loves you, and Lord Langton does not. I do not say, as I might, "he cannot, having had no chance of loving you," but I say boldly, he does not!"

"That is very probable; but why do you thus place the two men in opposition?"

"I will tell you. Because both have just given you the proofs of the truth of what I say. You look surprised! It is so, as I will show you. Lord Langton knows—he cannot fail to know—that you are as hostile to this new and monstrous attempt at civil war as I am myself. Nevertheless, he goes on with it, and exactly at that moment when, I am free to confess, he might have shaken me in my hostility, had he come to me and sought from me my aid to get a pardon from the king and restoration to his rank and you."

"Would you, my dear father, have thus helped him?"

"I should not have liked it, but I would have done it for your sake, and in order to secure our country from the future efforts of so troublesome an enemy. Well, Hermia, that is Lord Langton, and that is his devotion to you. Now for Sir Charles. I think I never was more deeply moved in all my life than when he confessed to me in deep emotion he feared there was no hope, at his age, of his obtaining your love before marriage, and yet that he felt sure he would win it after, by a devotion to your service that should show the old chivalry was not yet dead!"

"I—I fully believe that Sir Charles is—capable not only of meaning what he says, but of doing it, so far as the issue rests in his hands; but—"

"Say no more, Hermia. Leave the matter there for the present. I am well content with such an answer. Now to proceed. Suppose, Hermia, just for a single instant, that Lord Langton, feeling no real love, for which he has had no opportunity, still courted your society. Suppose further, that you, also, having no real love—which I am sure you cannot have—it would be so unaimedly, so immoedest—"

"Sir! My father! What means this?" demanded the Lady Hermia, her quiet words, and her sparkling indignant glances being in strange contrast.

"I mean, Hermia, that no love can grow on the basis that a woman, as a girl, knew something, and that not much, of a boy, who is now a man—one whom she has not even seen as a man, or if seen by any accident, of whom she is profoundly ignorant. I do not think that any highspirited woman would apply the word love to such an acquaintance, however peculiar the accidental tie that compelled them to think of one another." The earl had remembered, when he said this, that the diamond merchant might have made himself known; and the admission he was perforce obliged to make that Lord Langton might have been seen, weakened (so he felt) his case. He hastened, therefore, to stronger ground, for which, indeed, all this was mere preparation.

"Well, Hermia, we won't press that point too strongly either way. I grant you might, from romantic associations, be strongly inclined towards the man whom you have so long looked on as your husband, and he the same towards you. But then you must grant, in return, that is not the same thing as when a husband and a wife—or, to take a still more favourable example, two lovers—have been for months or years in constant communication, knowing each other's views, and temper, and habits, and growing, therefore, all the while in sympathy, which is the true bond of love. You own, Hermia, that is not the position?"

Hermia said nothing, but bent her head as if in acquiescence, though it might be merely in depression, to recollect how truly all this, which, in her soul, she knew did not apply to her, might, and probably did, apply to Lord Langton.

"Well, now, Hermia, heed me, I entreat you, for now I have to deal with matters of larger scope, and involving serious issues for us all. You will believe me when I tell you that there

is no doubt whatever that Lord Langton has undertaken a Jacobite mission, and is now in England to fulfil it."

"I—I fear so!" murmured Lady Hermia.

"Very well. Out of that business what comes? Probably the scaffold! Do not tremble. It is not to alarm you I speak. It is not even in hostility to him I speak. I could find it in my heart to have a sort of pity for him."

"Could you, indeed?"

"I will convince you, Hermia, of that, if you give me a chance. But what was I saying? Oh, I know, I asked what must be the end of his undertaking? The scaffold, if he fails. If he succeeds, what for me and you? I leave you to speak of yourself, Hermia; but as to myself, I suppose it is no secret that the Jacobites hate me with an intensity that is simply devilish. I know their excuse—that I played the traitor to them, and so on. You do not believe that, Hermia."

"Oh, no. I am sure you did but what you thought right for the country."

"Well your only hope for Lord Langton must be, if he is not himself to fall before the executioner—your only hope, I say, then, must be that England is ruined by long periods of civil war—for it is quite impossible that the Jacobites can be left to enjoy their ill-gotten powers—and that I shall lose my estates, rank and life, and die as an attainted rebel! That is the alternative, Hermia; the only one. There is and can be no other. The ruin of your country and the ruin of your own family, or the salvation of your country and family by the destruction of your rebel husband. Nay, weep not, darling. Do I not feel for thee? I do—I do! Let me show thee what is in my heart. Consider about this marriage, while I, on my part, get all ready to proceed with the divorce, in case you should be finally content—"

"No, no!"

"Stay, Hermia, hear me out. If you do that, you will probably then save Lord Langton himself."

"What! How is that?" hurriedly asked the unhappy wife.

"Supposing he does not fall in actual contests of any kind, which is not probable, his fate will in the event of failure, be in the hands of our king. Then, Hermia, I dare to say to you he will be in mine!"

"Ha, yes! I understand."

"Well, I ask for no decision to-day. I would rather you gave none. I will even let Sir Charles go away without any fresh satisfaction. Think, then, and think dispassionately. If you do as I advise, you will act a noble—a patriotic part to our country; and is it not fitting, Hermia, that you, my daughter, should be the one woman to play so grand a part—I mean, if your heart really is engaged. Well, do as I say, and you will win eternal fame; probably help to ensure the failure of the attempt, if it really has any chances, as, on the other hand, you will incur all the guilt and infamy of the rebellion itself if you sympathise with him. For that will soon become known; men will whisper I am going to change again; the Jacobites, with devilish ingenuity, will be sure to set that idea going, when they know that the leader of the rebellion is married, or going to be married, to the daughter of the minister, the Earl of Bridgeminster himself."

"You say you will save him if I consent—save him at any personal sacrifice?"

"I will, even if it be necessary to throw up my own position, or threaten to do so, in order to obtain his pardon."

"And if I do not consent—if I cannot—and he—he—"

Her faltering words sufficiently expressed her meaning.

The earl took her two hands in his, and said, with something like real emotion—

"Hermia, I should grieve, my child, for thy sake, but I must, in that case, extricate my own name and character from all possibilities of supposed collusion; he would then surely die."

CHAPTER XXXVII.—REACTION.

When the first feeling of relief had passed away—relief from the danger of exposure