

strong enough to undertake the journey, we will go wherever you wish."

Florence, somewhat calmed, suffered her aunt to adjust her head on her pillows, and draw the curtains, when she soon sobbed herself to sleep.

#### CHAPTER XX.

THE news of lord St. Albans' sudden departure, almost on the eve of his marriage, and Florence's dangerous illness, had spread far and wide, and the world, with its usual quick-sightedness, immediately divined the truth. The double flight of Nina Aleyn, and Percival Clinton, involved the most experienced gossips in an ocean of doubt and anxiety. Many a cause was assigned, many an opinion hazarded, which left them in the end as far as ever from the truth. The mystery involving the fate of the latter personages, however, was almost disregarded in the general exultation which the downfall of the feared and hated Miss Fitz-Hardinge excited. Their joy was equalled only by their curiosity, and each day beheld fresh parties of morning visitors thronging Miss Murray's saloons. The latter received them with her usual dignified politeness, spoke of Florence's illness feelingly, but simply; in short, opposed to their insatiable curiosity, the impenetrable veil of her calm lady-like reserve. Some, however, went so far as to ask "if it were indeed true that the Earl of St. Albans had gone abroad, and that, too, without the consent or knowledge of Miss Fitz-Hardinge?" To these inquiries, Miss Murray tranquilly replied "that it was quite true his lordship had gone abroad, but Miss Fitz-Hardinge was perfectly acquainted with the fact at the time."

The absolute seclusion in which Florence lived, the sedulous care with which Miss Murray avoided every topic which might awaken painful thoughts, and the vigilance with which she guarded from her charge every jest or *ou dit* of the day, concerning herself, tended greatly to restore her mental as well as physical strength. Hearing nothing but soothing words and tones, her self-love, that very sensitive part of her nature, was left to recover in peace from the terrible shock it had received, and youth, with a good constitution, did the rest. It was well indeed for Florence that she mixed not as before in the crowded halls of fashion, for she would have been an aim for every shaft, for every cruel jest.

The very day after the earl's departure, a mysterious announcement, the work probably of some of her numerous enemies, appeared in a fashionable morning paper, hinting "that the

intended alliance between a noble lord and a certain fair lady, famed as much for the keenness of her wit as for the beauty of her person, had been broken off, owing to the unbounded freedom the latter had given to that dangerous weapon her tongue.

"The unrelenting lover, after disposing of his town mansion, and making other arrangements which seemed to indicate a protracted absence, had gone abroad, leaving his whilome lady-love to weep over the loss of a coronet and title, and to learn, in neglect and solitude, in the mockery of the many, the compassion of the few, that there are cases in which woman best shews her wisdom by suppressing her wit."

Had the sensitive Florence, so nervously alive to any thing in the shape of ridicule, but looked on that paragraph, it would have almost killed her; but neither it nor any other obnoxious paper ever penetrated her apartment, guarded as it was by Miss Murray's watchful solicitude.

About a week after their long conversation concerning Nina, they set out for Somerset, in which picturesque county the estate Florence inherited from her mother was situate. The step was prudent, as well as suitable, for in the absolute seclusion of Murray Lodge the repose and peace her weary spirit sighed for, awaited her. The day after their departure, the closed shutters and placarded window of Miss Murray's fashionable mansion, in Belgrave Square, announced that it was now vacant, and that the *belle* and beauty, Florence Fitz-Hardinge "had," to use the word of a titled wit: "retired from public life."

After a wearisome and to her interminable journey, Florence at length arrived at her future home. Everything had been prepared by the fore-thought of Miss Murray, who had sent her servants in advance, and when she wearily ascended the wide dark stair-case to the room destined for her use, she found everything arranged with comfort and elegance. Rich ample curtains adorned the tall narrow casements, while pictures of taste and value were hung around the walls, concealing in part the quaint devices and rude carving of the oaken pannels.

"How do you like your room, dear Florence?" inquired Miss Murray, as she anxiously watched her niece's pale cheek and listless air.

"Very much, thanks, dear aunt, for all your kindness; but if you would leave me, I will try to sleep as I feel fatigued. You need not send Fanchette; I do not require her."

"Then, good night, my child, and do not rise to-morrow at all. May your repose be long and refreshing;" and, affectionately kissing her pale brow, she left the room.