

Austwicke held his wife, struggling, as she was, in her sea of doubts. And it did have some effect; so also had the Doctor's cheery words—

"Fancies and follies go together," said the latter; "take a ride on horseback, and get rid of both, and be thankful for your beautiful Gertrude. You used to say, and not so long back, if she grew out of conspicuous littleness, you would have nothing to complain of; and she, pretty sprite, has obeyed you, eh? And, by the way, I had almost forgot; I've a petition to present from my Ella: she wishes you would spare Gertrude for a month or so this autumn. Do oblige us. Professional matters keep me in London this season: it is hard on Ella; for she and I never part company."

Mrs. Austwicke seemed actually to catch at idea, and muttered something about not being able to take Gertrude to Scarborough.

"Then you consent? thank you. But I must go. Rupert will have a right to complain, and that's more than I think you have, my dear madam."

With pleasant greetings they separated, and, as both husband and wife lingered in the drawing-room and watched the Doctor's departure from the windows, Mr. Austwicke said, very gravely—

"I must, once for all, Mrs. Austwicke, request that this topic, in the mysterious way you think proper to comment on it, shall be named no more. It will be all cleared up soon."

"But Dr. Griesbach is a friend of the family."

"Yes; and I value him highly. But to no one will I have anything hinted in a way to injure Gertrude. I'm amazed at you! Permit me to say there's a want of sense and feeling in it. Let's have no more of it. I'm glad he invited the poor child; your manner depresses her."

When Mr. Austwicke, ordinarily so easy and good-natured, was roused, he could assume a tone that his wife, as well as all the family, must obey; and that had all the force of contrast with his usual manner to make it impressive. His lady, therefore, made no reply; but, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, swept out of the room.

#### CHAPTER LII. TOO LATE.

"None are all evil. Quick'ning round his heart.  
Were yet some feelings that would not depart,"  
BYRON.

We must take our readers back a little way in our story. On the Saturday that Ruth had asked for a holiday, she had, as she said, gone to Winchester. She knew enough of Miss Austwicke by attending on, and watching that lady, to be sure she would be reluctant to let her go out for more than an hour or two. Ever since she had been employed to post certain letters of Miss Austwicke's, with the name and address of "Burke," she was kept as closely as possible in attendance on her mistress. The great recommendation being not any talents or aptitude she possessed, but her want of one acquirement: Miss Austwicke believed she could neither read nor write; and it was a passport, if not to favour, certainly to confidential employment. However, on that Saturday, as we have seen, Ruth went her way, and it conducted her, first to Winchester, and then to the men's ward of an infirmary there, where, nearly at his last gasp, lay a miserable man, who for two whole days previously had been sinking; and yet amid all his weakness scarcely moved his glazing eyes from the entrance door of the ward which was opposite his bed. His life seemed faintly to linger—stayed by the strong yearning after some one he wished to see once more.

A patient discharged two days previously had been paid by the dying man to carry a message to Ruth, and had faithfully executed his commission, which had been the cause of her asking for the holiday. Not that the sick man had been wholly neglected by acquaintance, or had used no other means previously of letting her know. He had been visited twice during the last fortnight by our old acquaintance, Burke, who had taken charge of certain messages, and one urgent letter, written with great difficulty, imploring her to come; neither of which had been delivered. And if the more faithful con-

valescent had not gone, those hungry eyes, so soon to close on this world, would have failed to see what they languished for.

When Ruth entered the room, she saw right before her the fixed gaze of the weary eyes. Something prompted her not to lose a moment, but to rush forward at once. The power of vision had not left the dying gaze; with a convulsive effort the man raised himself in the bed, threw open his arms wildly, then, with a gurgling moan, fell forward on his face. A nurse in the ward ran to help Ruth, who was lifting him eagerly. They laid him back on his pillow. A leaden hue spread over all the features; the eyes were now closed.

"Speak to me!" faltered Ruth.

She leaned her head against him to listen for an answer, and dimly heard some fluttering, broken words not wholly unintelligible to her—

"Make—a—clean—breast—mercy—in—"

Then came silence; a struggle heaved the chest a moment. She tried to place his head differently, but it fell heavily aside from her hands in the last rigour that followed. She needed to one to tell her as, looking on the dead, she waited those saddest of all sad words—"I'm too late!—too late!"

"Was he your husband?" inquired the nurse, compassionately, as she noticed the large-framed woman trembling from head to foot, pale, and gasping, yet unable to shed a tear, or, indeed, for a moment to speak.

"Well, it's a satisfaction you've seen him even as you have. I never thought he'd last out so; but come away—come away."

And Ruth was led to a little room of the nurse's that abutted on the ward, where she remained until she could regain composure.

Later in the day she looked again on the dead; and having been told the arrangements that were needful to make for the removal of the body, and the expenses of the funeral, she left the infirmary.

Her usual stolid look had returned to her face, and the nurse, who in her avocations was not unaccustomed to see people who seemed to be well-to-do servants, and who, when they came to pay their last attentions to their kinsfolks, would show great reserve about themselves or their employment, respected Ruth's silence, and manifested no surprise when she heard that she could not attend the funeral, merely saying—

"But I suppose you know he's had another friend besides you to visit him—an old man?"

"Yes, I know. I'm going to him; he will see to what has to be done."

#### CHAPTER LIII. STRUGGLING IN THE TOILS.

"Oh, conscience! who can stand before thy power,  
Endure thy stings and agonies one hour!"

JOHN FLAVEL.

With a look of desolation settling on her heavy features, Ruth had left the walls that held her dead, and sought among a nest of small streets in the lower part of Winchester for the man Burke, who was so mixed up in the wretched jumble of her life. She was about to ring the bell at the side porch of a quaint, old, gabled house, partly used as a broker's shop, that looked seamed and rickety with age, when her hand was arrested by the opening of the door, and the man she sought stood, or rather stooped, before her. He was more grey, bent, and shrivelled than when we saw him last; and the infirmity, toil, or habit which had bowed his back into a sort of arch, necessitated his looking up so obliquely through his shaggy, grey hair, that it increased the furtive keenness of his vulpine eyes. Neither spoke as they met. The door-step being between them, each regarded the other a moment in silence. But there was to the man's eyes that indefinable something in the white, heavy face of the woman before him, that he read what had happened at the infirmary, and he whined out, in an insinuating whisper—

"Oh, it's sad I am; and were ye in time? I was just going over to the Chace to get sight of ye, and let ye know how bad he was."

"Just going!" "deed, are ye?" she answered, choking with emotion. "And you knew he had his dead ail on him, and ye did not bring me a word—not one." "Just going!" oh, you may stay now." Her voice failed her.

"Whist! Ruth, whist!" he cried, still holding the door in his hand, as if unwilling or afraid to let her enter. "Be patient, ye've done your part by him, if ever woman did; but I canna just speak here. There's lodgers and children wandering all about the house. I'll meet ye at the ould place in a wee."

He came out of the doorway into the street, and, passing her before she could check her sobs and reply, he turned into a covered passage more quickly than, from his bent form and shuffling steps, might have been expected. One or two children, stopping their manufacture of dirt pies by the gutter, looked at Ruth as she stood, half stifled by the dull, heavy beating of her heart. Their gaze recalled her caution; she turned in an opposite direction from that taken by the man, passed through some better streets to where the old cathedral loomed grandly before her, then, through a paved side passage, emerged into the spacious graveyard that lies about the venerable edifice. She had evidently been used to make this a place of meeting; and though there is a thoroughfare through it in several directions, yet its space permits unnoticed wanderings in quiet nooks, shadowed by the stately buttresses of the grand old building, all brooded over by solemn silence. Here the threadbare garb of the old man, Burke, faded to a faint brown with age, was so in harmony with the walls that, as he crouched and shambled along the walls, he was scarcely seen, unless, as in Ruth's case, he was being looked for. She approached him, and, as he shrank into an angle, and rested his bent back there, not the wildest Gothic fancy could have traced a more grotesquely vicious gargoyle than he formed. As Ruth stood before him, her massive form quite shut him out from observation. Their first conversation was a series of reproaches on Ruth's side, and of justification and awkward condolences on his, to which were added promises of his attending to the last offices of duty to the dead. His manner was singularly conciliatory. It was evident one means of holding Ruth in his power was loosened, if not lost, and that something like fear had crept over his hitherto hard, deliberate cunning. Still his power, if weakened, was by no means lost. The woman was slightly tranquillised by his words. There is something in the inevitable that compels submission; and as yet the blow was too recent for her to feel more than its benumbing influence. By adroit questions, which a careful observer could have seen were put so as to satisfy himself, he discovered, evidently to his satisfaction, that she had not had one distinct sentence from the dying man's lips. She did not name the broken words—"Make a clean breast;" though they were well understood by her, and were even now sounding, and evermore to sound, in the depths of her being.

So Burke said, "Get back, my friend, get ye back! Ye've done all; I'll see to the rest; and now ye'll have a chance of saving a bit for yersel'."

"Dinna talk that way, man," said she, suddenly. "I care no for myself—I'm weary of it all—weary and sick to death; and, what's more, I'll leave—I must—I've long wanted to, and I must."

"Leave!" said Burke, aghast. "What! leave a good home, where ye're making yer way finely—leave the young laddy that loves ye!"

"That's it. I can't keep it up. He's gone, and I canna—"

"Woman," said Burke, in a hissing whisper; "do ye know what I saw last Thursday?"

He pointed, as he spoke, his lean and horny forefinger across the city toward a hill in the distance, with a strong building on the summit.

She did not answer, but she looked in the direction to which he pointed.

"I saw a man hanged there for a murder, woman—a murder they said he did some while a-gone."

"Murder!"

"Hush! it's an ugly word to speak, even against a nine-foot thick wall. Yes; it was not clear to me, nor to a many more, that the man was guilty. He might ha' been an accomplice; but I saw him hanged—hand like a dog!"