

The principal events of his Administration were the passing of the Irish Disestablishment Act in 1869; of the Irish Land Act and the Elementary Education Act, 1870; the negotiations of the Treaty of Washington respecting the *Alabama* claims, 1871; the passing of the Ballot Act, 1872; and the Judicature Act, 1873. On March 11th, 1873, the University Education Bill was rejected, and Mr. Gladstone immediately tendered his resignation. The Queen summoned Mr. Disraeli, but as he declined to take office, Mr. Gladstone was induced to undertake the reconstruction of the Cabinet, and in August the new Ministry was announced. On the 24th of January, 1874, Mr. Gladstone gave official notice of the immediate dissolution of Parliament. This surprise was followed by his issue of an address to his Greenwich constituents, in which he promised to abolish the income tax. The returns of the general election, completed on February 27th, showed a most disastrous defeat for the Liberal party. Mr. Gladstone at once resigned and Mr. Disraeli became Prime Minister. During the ensuing session, although re-elected for Greenwich, Mr. Gladstone was seldom seen in the House. In January, 1875, he formally announced his determination to retire from the leadership of the Liberal party, and soon after the Marquis of Hartington was chosen his successor.

In September, 1876, he published a pamphlet on "Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East," and in March following another, described in its title as an exposition of the conduct of the Porte in and about Bulgaria since May, 1876. Both in and out of Parliament he strenuously opposed the policy of the Conservative Government, which resulted in the Treaty of Berlin and the signing of the Anglo-Turkish Convention. He was presented with the freedom of the City of Dublin in the fall of 1877, and on November 15th of that year he was elected Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow, succeeding Earl Beaconsfield.

AN OLD MAID'S CONFESSION.

By "ISIDORE."

Author of "Voices from the Hearth," "An Emigrant's Story," "An Old Miser's Story," etc., etc.

CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE SEA-SHORE.

I was in no mood to join our party in the evening. I pleaded a headache, and kept my room, having previously asked my grandmother to look after Flora. The next morning, not to my surprise, I found that Frank had hastily and suddenly taken his departure. "Say farewell to Agnes," he had said to Flora: "an important letter has summoned me to London."

For reasons which my gentle reader can now guess, I forebore asking my darling any more questions about him. In the meantime, I endeavoured, by a supreme effort of will, to root my love from my heart, and to let all thought and feeling merge in unending devotion for my sweet, love-stricken sister, who needed it all. Vainly did I exert myself to try and soothe and cheer her drooping spirits; vainly did I endeavour to overcome her lassitude and utter weariness of mind and body. All our household grey concerned about her. The two old ladies talked about her in suppressed speech. I alone knew why she so suffered, and I alone had to keep this secret with stealthy vigilance. Then they all consulted Doctor Ponder. This highly-endowed physician listened to our reports, chatted pleasantly with Flora, and recommended a change of air and scene. "Her nerves have been overwrought of late," he said, "and no stimulant of drugs which I might prescribe can equal the stimulant of a sea-breeze, which Nature does not charge for." And so it was arranged that I should accompany her to Hawlish, a pretty sea-side town on the Devonshire coast.

How well can I remember the bustle attendant on our departure: how everybody in the house busied themselves about us; how all strove to think of what we might require during our journey; and how anxiously and disconsolately they parted from us at our pretty railway-station. "You will soon get well and strong, my lass," said my grandmother, "and return home a renovated girl." "And take this with you," said Mrs. Dufresne, handing Flora an Indian shawl, warm in texture and exquisite in pattern; "it will keep you from draughts. Beware of cold currents of air, and always keep your mouth closed when you walk—all my complaints are due to currents of air, therefore look, Agnes, especially to her wraps." So you perceive that even Mrs. Dufresne grew thoughtful on my darling's account.

How clearly, even now, my memory can trace every little incident of that journey by rail; how I commented on the various passengers and their peculiarities in order to please her; how I drew her attention to the varied and picturesque scenes through which we passed, in order to awaken her curiosity.

The landlady of the apartments we had engaged beforehand awaited us. She was a buxom person, with fat, apple-coloured cheeks, suggestive of Devonshire cream and good living; with benignant grey eyes and a placidly contented smile. You are still in my recollection, O kindly-hearted woman! I see you now in my

mind's eye, waiting upon us so graciously, attending so skillfully and constantly to our wants and comforts. I still in fancy wander through the snug, airy, and neatly-furnished rooms, where everything had an orderly aspect, and all their surroundings were an appearance of repose and freshness. And in this retrospect I like to recall our seaside retreat, so utterly unlike the ordinary run of watering-places near London, vulgarised by the holiday-seekers of the great metropolis, and possessing a quaint charm of its own, which can hardly be photographed in a description. It was a picturesque, rugged-looking place, situated amidst bold, precipitous heights and grotesquely-fashioned rocks. The irregularity of its sparsely-built streets, decked with many an old-fashioned villa and quaintly-built house, never surprised you, but seemed in harmony with its general appearance. In some places, the rocks seemed to shut in the town; in others, one could catch glimpses of the vast illimitable sea beyond. The railway rushed through the heights, and pursued its mad course along the sandy shore, so close to its tides that it seemed to me that some mighty upheaval of the waters might one stormy day engulf it in their dark depths. And how can I dilate on the lanes that skirted the town—those exquisite Devonshire lanes, with their rich, wild floral growths and leafy luxuriance, intersecting the grassy splendours of the meads, winding their way within sight of many a lordly edifice and happy, lowlier home, till they lost themselves close to the everlasting sea. Oh, dear, well-remembered place, my thought lingers lovingly and sadly on this page when I strive to faintly image your remembrance!

On the day we arrived, I busied myself entirely with Flora. I banished all thought about myself, and only "compassed her with sweet observances."

Her childish delight at the novelty of the change was, as far as it went, unbounded; still, I missed that exuberance of spirits and outpouring of eager merriment that used to delight me of old. I think she strove to look pleased in order to please me, and endeavoured to throw off her physical languor and depression for my sake.

On the morning following, I was up betimes in order to enjoy its early balm, when the postman's knock startled me, and set my thoughts wondering and wandering. There were two letters—one from our grandmother and one from Frank. Having left my dear sister asleep, I hastened forth, in order to read his letter alone. Could I help it, if my heart fluttered with a vague expectancy to do so, and that in my passionate yearning still to read his words, I wandered amid the silence and stillness of nature, wooing the fresh quietude of the early summer morning, within sight of the everlasting rocks and within ear of the eternal sea, with no human disturbing influence to break in or mar the surrounding peacefulness? How vividly that walk is imprinted on my memory! I grasped the letter tightly in my hand, fearing that some ruthless chance might despoil me of it; I longed to possess myself of its contents, yet I did not care to open it until I had found complete seclusion. How well I can recollect the sea-waves, shimmering with the light of the young dawn; I see still the fleecy cloudlets moving lazily along the horizon, only to break and disperse. At last I alighted on a hollow ledge of rock. Around me were precipitous heights, which stretched along and around the shore in weird, fantastic shapes. Near my vision the sea-gulls disported themselves in erratic flights, careering in the distance till they were lost to the view, or else lightly skimming the twinkling waves, that seemed to dance so gleefully. Far beyond were outlines of ships that passed from my gaze, like hopes that come to visit, only to fade away. Hardly a sound disturbed the solemn stillness, except the ceaseless splash and beat of the mysterious sea at my feet, forever moaning and changing like sad murmurs of human hearts. At last, I held my letter. With trembling hands, I broke the seal, and, with palpitating heart, read the following:—

"Dearest Agnes,—I left you all abruptly yesterday, and no one guessed the cause. You alone know it, and I am sure you did not wonder at my precipitancy. Whether, when Flora disturbed us, you would have recalled your words and relented, I know not; at any rate, in the state of mind occasioned by what seemed then, and what still seems, your heartless rejection—I could not brook the chance of hearing you reiterate them. Still treasuring the happy memories of hours passed with you, when your dear converse and a thousand nameless acts on your part all encouraged me in a certain hope that I might one day call you wife, I would not run the risk of having my illusions, if they are so, dashed to pieces by another refusal from your lips, and so I left you. I am not near you—I write these words in the chilling atmosphere of my chambers, but as my pen forms them I am buoying myself up with a hope, which grows as I continue writing, that they may kindle in your heart a recognition of my thoughts and feelings for your dear sake, and that I may assure myself that later on my love will not again be proffered in vain. I have such implicit faith in your candour and truth that I am positive no whim has influenced your decision. You may not think my position warrants my taking a helpmate, or you may have no desire to wed any one for a time; if either of these surmises be correct, I can wait; so long as I eventually gain the prize I covet, I can tarry for its bestowal. Must I prove my

worthiness to be your husband by more words? If so, the future shall prove to you that I can act as well as talk. Do you recollect you once informed me that I 'had all the elements of success in my nature'? I have not, as you perceive, forgotten your cheering words. Do you wish to recall them now?—when I have set my mind to win a greater stake than worldly success, a nobler ambition than fame at the bar? Have I already partially failed in winning the dearest gift allotted to man? No, Agnes, my dearest Agnes, a voice whispers I have not. The hopes I have formed may be clouded, but they are not extinguished. Again I look forward to the time when these formal protestations on paper shall take a newer guise, a warmer and a fuller life; when their utterance breathed into your ears shall evoke the one dear responsive word to make my life's happiness."

"You will think of me, Agnes, as you read these words; let my love and my determination to win yours plead my cause, so that the next time I see you, which I trust will be soon, I may quit your presence, your accepted, instead of your rejected, lover."

"I hear that you intend to take Flora to the sea-side for her health. I hope the change will benefit her. Remember me to her, and believe me yours ever devotedly,

"FRANK."

I finished this letter with a mist of tears between my eyes and the dear, hopeful, earnest words. I looked on the pitiless, desolate sea beyond, until in my misery I could almost have prayed that it might take and hide me within its cold embrace. Then some happy children's voices in the distance banished the fearful thought. Involuntarily I shuddered as I folded the letter, and kissed it fondly and sacredly.

Oh, Frank, Frank! if you could only have read my heart, and have known the bitter truth! Often and often have I, in the after-time, poring over these treasured words, until I seemed to live once again the half-hour that I am striving to enshrine in these pages. Oh, sacred memorial of the buried years! I can hardly, even now, summon courage on paper to look you away from my sight.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISITOR.

"I have been so anxious about you," said Flora to me on my return to our cottage. "And Mrs. Dudsall, our landlady, has also been wondering why you have not returned to breakfast, and I have had such nice, pleasant letters from home, and they all miss us, and Mrs. Dufresne begs me not to stay out in the cool evenings, and who do you think is coming down to see us?"

How pretty she looked, as I entered, in her simple white dress, with a pale blue ribbon at her throat! And it was so like her old self to hear Flora rattle on, telling me all the news in one breath, that her talk quite gladdened me. "In the first place, my darling, I felt inclined for a long stroll. You will forgive me for my forgetfulness." And my heart smote me then even for my slight thoughtlessness.

"But you have not guessed the name of our expected visitor," continued Flora. "Small I whisper the name! Doctor Joshua Ponder. There! Why don't you look gratified? Whereupon I strove to look pleased, and failed miserably in the attempt."

"He is coming, doubtless, to see how our dear little patient is progressing," I replied, "and perhaps he also requires a change."

I had grave misgivings that perchance some other motive had directed his steps towards our Devonshire retreat, but I inwardly hoped I was mistaken. On the following day he presented himself. He pronounced Flora somewhat better, and he said to me later in the day, when he and I were alone—

"Your sister's ill-health puzzles me."

"And it gives me great concern," I answered.

"Naturally; and I wish to ask you a few questions about her. As a general rule the imaginary complaints of those who consult me are easily checked. I administer innocent potions, which exercise the beneficent effect of making the patient believe in their efficacy. When the disorder is slight, I still administer my innocuous nostrums, and order the patient to positively abstain from that, be whatever it may, which in my opinion caused the bodily disorder. Under the curative process the patient recovers."

"This is very interesting, Doctor," I replied, interrupting him, "but I do not see the application of your theories in my sister's case."

"I am coming to her case, my dear Miss Dagmar," continued the Doctor. "Whenever the symptoms of unmistakable illness are inexplicable, as in your sister's case, then I try to discover the cause, the root of the malady. Health, as you know, has been rightly described as a *mens sana in corpore sano*. Our corporeal frame often owes its ill to the incorporeal mind. Now, is any disturbing element working an injurious influence on your sister's mind? If so, we must endeavour, to use Shakespeare's words, to 'minister to the mind diseased.'"

How could I answer the Doctor truthfully? I dared not do so. Under all hazards I had to faithfully keep Flora's secret.

"What an idea, Doctor Ponder!" I answered. "What in the world is there to prey on my sister's mind? You know what confidence I have in your judgment, but this time it has fallen into an error."

"Perhaps," said the Doctor.

"There is no doubt about it," I exclaimed, peremptorily, wishing to completely disabuse his mind of the idea. "There is no anxiety of mind in Flora's case."

"Then I am mistaken," replied the Doctor.

"You are, completely," I continued. Then, as was his wont, he walked backwards towards the door, and left me, promising to rejoin us in the afternoon, when we meditated a drive.

Had I, or had I not, quite undecieved the Doctor? In the solitude of my room I vainly and unsatisfactorily questioned myself on the subject. Even could I have unburdened myself to him, no possible good could have arisen from my confidence. It was best for every one that my secret should still remain in my own breast. For her sake, for her dear sake, I had to wear a bright mask of cheerfulness, and seek an outlet for my own misery in devotion to her, and yet never betray her secret.

"I thought there were two letters this morning," said Flora, immediately after the above conversation; "the landlady told me so."

I could not tell my darling a deliberate falsehood. "Yes, there were two letters, and one was from Frank," I replied.

"One from Frank?" said Flora, turning pale. "And was there no letter for me, and no message?" And she gazed at me with such a wistful, pleading look.

"There are all kinds of pleasant messages for you," I said.

"Indeed?" and Flora's dear eyes brightened. "Let me see the letter, Agnes!"

How could I show it to her? What excuse could I plead for not being able to produce it? Was I now, for the second time to-day, compelled to be guilty of falsity of speech? Must I dull the lustre of those dear, tender eyes, and quell the gay expectancy of her manner by uttering an untruth? Oh, pitiless circumstance, that makes us unworthy in our own eyes! In my own exceeding tenderness for my sister I had to obey circumstances. "My own pet," I murmured, "I have not got the letter. I dropped it in the sea whilst reading it."

"Oh, how careless!" answered Flora, almost sobbing. "Why did you take it to read it alone? Why did you not wait for me to see it also?" And then, as if she was afraid she had said too much, my sister's manner changed.

"It doesn't matter, after all," she petulantly remarked; "I don't want his letters," and when, later on in the day, I sought Flora, I found the door of her room locked, nor could my persuasions prevail upon her even to admit me.

How can I narrate what I suffered that afternoon! It is just as possible to transcribe the bitterness of agonising mental pain as the delicious sweetness of mental pleasure. I watched and waited eagerly and anxiously for the sound of my darling's footfalls hour after hour. I pictured her suffering alone, when even her sister could not be present to soothe and comfort; I imagined her a prey to the bitterest feelings, perhaps, which can overtake a suffering human lot; and I, a martyr, for her sake, a wealth of love ready for me in that letter about which I had uttered a falsehood, could not be privileged even to minister sweetness to her pain—to play the lover and fret, which I am certain was torturing my darling alone in her chamber.

CHAPTER X.

THE DOCTOR SPEAKS.

We did not take our promised drive that afternoon. In the evening Flora made her appearance, and made extraordinary efforts to seem lively—she even, at times, chattered heartily, though often incoherently. The Doctor and I humoured her, doing our best to be cheerful and talkative. Now and again my pet would suddenly cease speaking, and look round absently and dreamily. During those moments the Doctor and I, exchanging glances, would notice how wan and pale she looked.

"Do you know," said Doctor Ponder, when Flora had left us for the night, "your sister is a bit feverish. Has she over-walked herself?"

"No, Doctor," I answered.

"Then," said the Doctor, repeating his yesterday's words, "I can't exactly understand her, but I must try and trace her illness to its probable cause."

"Yes," I answered, inwardly resolving that he never should. "You must exercise your skill, and do so."

But as the days flew on my darling's health did not materially improve. She was not apparently ill, and never kept her bed; but she had constant fits of depression and languor, alternately succeeded by moods of forced vivacity.

The Doctor administered his harmless doses, and strove to make himself agreeable to us both, and the one subject which interested and concerned us—namely, Flora's health, gave him many opportunities of frequenting my society, and so we often wandered, sometimes with and sometimes without Flora, within sight of the restless sea-billows, near the margin of the pleasant beach, or else along the densely-foliaged lanes, enjoying the balm of the summer atmosphere, and the freshness of the healthful sea.

One day when we were alone the Doctor suddenly looked melancholy, and then grew strangely taciturn. "How monotonous is the sound of the waves," I said hazingly a remark. He drew a long breath, but did not reply. The Doctor not to answer me! What could be the matter? "Do you think," I continued, hazarding a second remark, "that the strange silence