

"What-like is worse, miss, than low spirits?" said Ruth rather evasively.

"To have a real cause for them, Ruth, as poverty or pain."

"Hech! that's just as the heart feels;" and, avoiding any other words, Ruth left the room.

At breakfast-time Allan returned with a wonderful appetite, and in great spirits. The brother and sister chatted over the small talk of the district—who was married, and who dead; until, having gone the circuit of the tenantry, they returned to the parsonage.

"The curate will, of course, have the living when the vicar dies."

"I should think papa intends it," answered Gertrude, "for I know he likes him, and thinks, as I do, that it is a great thing for the parish to have such a clergyman."

"How young his sister is, True; why, I did not recognise her. I thought she had been years older."

"Oh, it is another sister you have seen—Amelia, who is now married and settled at Winchester: she it was kept his house when you were here before. I don't think you ever saw Amelia with her bonnet off. Harriet is his youngest sister, who came from Mrs. Maynard's a year ago. She and Mysie Grant were school-fellows, and are great friends. He has a nervous old aunt, poor soul! who never appears to company, but who matronises the establishment since Amelia's marriage. Marian says she goes often to the parsonage to see her."

There was an arch look in Gertrude's eyes.

"She's fonder, then, of nervous old aunts than I am," laughed Allan.

"For shame, Allan. Aunt Honor was all that an aunt should be to us when we were children."

"Well, she's by no means all she should be now to us, or to anyone else."

"I can't think what has altered her."

"Having nothing to do: that is the ruin of you women."

"Upon my word! And what hard study or hard work, pray, have you, or hundreds like you?"

"Oh, I and others find or make a pursuit in life; but I can't think how ever women-folk, that is, those who haven't to work for their living—their lot is hard enough—get over their time. Berlin and crotchet, visiting and dressing, novel-reading, scandal, and doctoring, eh?"

"Exercising saintly patience with men's impertinence and self-laudation; oh, that's work for a lifetime."

"You forget Aunt Honor hasn't exercised herself in that way."

"She hasn't exhausted her energies, I grant, in the employments you name, Allan; for even Berlin wool, poor soul! has failed her of late. But I never expected you, Allan, to turn satirist. You absolutely provoke me to ask you whether the important pursuit of colouring a pipe, which I'm told is an engrossing work of art with many gentlemen of the present day, is really such an evidence of their loftier pursuits in life?"

"I could almost fancy, Gertrude, you had heard Rupert Griesbach's diatribes against tobacco. Confess now he was your authority for that speech."

Gertrude's face flushed crimson as she rose from the table hastily, saying—

"How intensely hot it is, Allan." Then returning, her manner of a sudden becoming very demure, she said, "And you know Mr. Griesbach, do you?"

"Of course I do—both at Winchester and Oxford. He was a sort of dry stick—not much pith or spring in him; but a good fellow, though terribly addicted to hard reading; fond, too, of silence, and all that sort of thing. Though that's no wonder, considering the queer family he belongs to."

"I have seen Dr. Griesbach at Lady Pentreal's. He's a dear, kind man. I owe it to him that I was released from Miss Webb's school three years ago. I might never have had Marian for my friend, or known half the happiness I have, but for his kind prescription. 'This little girl wants home comforts,' said he; and the little girl, grown bigger, thanks him, and wishes him

all joy in a clever son, even if that son is as dry as a stick."

"Faith, Rupert's uncle, or kinsman, a German Professor, is more likely than the Doctor, by all accounts, to be proud of a clever descendant. He is such a character!"

"Who—this kinsman?"

"Yes; a great chemist and electrician, mighty in gases and all the physical-ologies. A philosopher, who buries himself, like the necromancers of old, in a wood. But I must say agricultural chemistry owes a great deal to him. I wish he could be unearthed; but it's useless, I'm told, trying. He discovers, others demonstrate—perhaps, will wear the laurels he has planted: it's very likely."

The conversation was interrupted by the removal of the breakfast things; and a message came from Miss Austwick that she could see her nephew, if he was disengaged, for ten minutes that morning.

"Now, that is considerate of Aunt Honor," said Allan to his sister.

"What, the interview, Allan?"

"No, True, the limitation."

Gertrude shook her head seriously.

"I am grieved about Aunt Honor. Some trouble—"

"Pooh! You girls are so romantic. You dignify all sorts of whims with the name of 'sorrows.' I tell you, a good drive or ride across the country behind or on a fast-trotting horse would cure such vapours."

He went away with a cheery laugh that well became his young, comely face—a creature who seemed to defy the touch of care. Somehow, as Gertrude looked after him, a strange thrill of fear ran through her sensitive frame.

"He is so gay, so handsome, so confident of his future. Surely, surely, nothing but good can come to him." A shadow fell across her as she stood, and Ruth approached, curtesying.

"I came to ask you, Miss Gertrude, to speak for me to Mrs. Martin. I want a holiday tomorrow, please."

"Certainly, Ruth, I'll ask Martin, if you wish it; but why not ask her yourself?"

"Because she won't refuse you, miss."

The woman sighed as she spoke—a rather common habit with her—and Gertrude was struck by an extra gloom in the pale, stolid face. Her pity invariably outran her other faculties, and she went instantly to the house-keeper, so wording her request that it must be complied with.

"Martin, I wish Ruth to have a holiday tomorrow."

"To be sure, Miss True. But I must say as holidays aint what I approves on. They're up-settin'; and if the servants as is staid-like takes 'em, they skittish pieces o' goods—or bads, I calls 'em—'ull be all folloring cry, like the hounds in the Austwick Hunt, and no stopping 'em."

Gertrude laughed at the old servant, and left her with a cheerful word. She gave Ruth the permission for the holiday, and encountered, on her return from the servants' region, Marian in the hall. Miss Hope held a newspaper in her hand, and, after the first greetings, said—

"My father sends this Glasgow paper for Mr. Allan. There's news of the progress of the railway through Glower O'er estates, which he thought your brother would like to see; and something, too, about a discovery of relics by the excavators. I have not read it."

"No chance of Roman amphoræ, or tessellated pavement, or, better still, buried treasure in that bleak and barren part of old Scotland," answered Gertrude, linking her arm in Marian's, and laying the newspaper, without looking at it, carelessly, as she passed, on the table in the library. They went to their morning room, and were soon deep in a translation of Schiller.

How lightly had Gertrude carried and laid down that newspaper, which was a winged arrow from the quiver of Providence to her! The ancient record of "a certain man who drew a bow at a venture," and smote on the vulnerable part of the adversary's armour, was applicable here.

Meanwhile, the unconscious girl, happy in her pursuits with her friend, new sources of joy silently springing in the depths of her heart,

bent her fair head over her books; a little, it may be, too intent to get a certain portion done in a given time, to be quite as accurate and painstaking as on some mornings. Indeed, she said—

"I'm working, Marian, this morning, to effect a compromise, so as to satisfy duty first, and then yield to inclination."

"There's a great many such compromises, dear True; but why not yield, for once, to inclination this fine day, and lay aside books altogether?"

"I will when Allan comes," was the reply.

CHAPTER XLIII. A MORNING VISIT.

"Idle hope

And dire remembrance interlope

To vex the feverish slumbers of the mind:

The bubble floats before, the spectre walks behind."

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE.

ALLAN AUSTWICK'S swift, elastic step, so significant of the gaiety and confidence of youth, brought him into his aunt's presence like a fresh breeze diffusing health and cheerfulness. But just as she had contrived, by having all the blinds of the windows closed, to darken the room and exclude the light, then she seemed to shrink away and ensconce herself in the depths of an arm-chair, at the remotest corner of the apartment from the door at which Allan entered. He stopped a moment and looked around, like one groping in the dark—the contrast was so great between the brightness of the summer day without and the gloom within Miss Austwick's drawing-room.

"Where are you, Aunt Honor? Why one would think you were playing at hide and seek, as I recollect you have done in old days with me."

Could it ever be possible that she had played in childlike fashion with her brother's children? was the thought which struck out a sigh, as Miss Austwick, without rising, held her hand tremulously, and said—

"Ah! 'old days,' as you call them, seem more distant to me than to you. Time has, only as yet, made life more pleasant to you. To me, Allan, of course, it is different. I am glad you have such health and spirits."

"Yes, Aunt Honor," said the young man, good-naturedly; "and we must get you out; you're too shut up here. Now I am come, I shall be wanting to show you all sorts of new devices, that will interest you about the place. I mean to throw myself right heartily into country work—rusticate in the best fashion."

"What! and entirely give up all thought of following your father's profession?"

"Certainly: I mean to follow my grandfather's pursuits, and you, of all people, must approve that."

"I have heard you, Allan, when a mere boy, talk rather superciliously of a country life."

"That, to speak plainly, Aunt Honor, was when there was no prospect of a living for me in a country life, else I always liked it well enough, and marvelled at De Lacy Austwick—poor fellow!—with his foreign education, being such a bookworm as we heard he was."

"Poor fellow! oh, that he had lived!" exclaimed Miss Austwick, in such accents of sorrow, that Allan hastened to change the conversation by saying—

"Well, aunt, if you have been brought so to admire the law, you must be glad of my father's success—so cosy and quiet; nothing brilliant, but immensely comfortable."

"Yes, that is why I am disappointed at your not following in his track. Everything is so changeable and uncertain: but the law lasts."

"And the land lasts."

"Does it?" said Miss Austwick, dreamily.

"Why, of course. The ground to till, and man to till it, was the first possession and occupation, and will be the last; or, at all events, will remain to the last," laughed Allan. "You don't surely think that the Austwick acres will be swallowed up in an earthquake, or submerged by the sea. The fact is, aunt, you're too much alone, and that makes you hippish. You must have True more with you. What a capital bit of goods she is—I mean our True; and not so little neither."