

"Alice, my dear cousin, makes religion wearisome by the rigorous manner in which she enforces its duties. She is one of those stern sectarians who belong to what is termed the evangelical part of our church; who declare war on all the kindly feelings of the heart; and she considers me vain and irreligious, because I shrink from making an ostentatious display of feelings which ought to be held sacred."

"But Alice is sincere?"

"She thinks herself so. But is it charitable to condemn every one that happens to differ from herself?"

"True," replied Fleming thoughtfully; "and what are your sentiments on the subject, Sophia?"

His fair companion was rather puzzled how to answer this unwelcome question. After a few minutes awkward silence, she made a desperate effort to free herself from her embarrassing situation; and laying her hand upon her heart, and looking up in his face with as serious an aspect as she could assume, she replied, "I fear, cousin Fleming, I should fail to convey to you my sentiments on this important subject in words. But it is all here!"

The slight blush which accompanied this act of duplicity heightened her beauty and completely deceived her companion into the belief that she was not insensible to its holy influences. "If religion reigns in your heart, Sophia, guard well the sacred treasure. But beware, my dear girl, that you do not deceive yourself."

They were now within a few yards of home, and Arthur forbore to press the matter farther. His conversation with Sophia awoke in his mind a thousand painful regrets. He did not suspect her sincerity, yet he felt dissatisfied with the invidious remarks she had made on her sister. He made every allowance for slighted pride and early prejudices, and the exaggerated medium through which she viewed Alice's faults; but he could not justify her for seeking to prejudice him against her absent sister; and his respect for her character greatly diminished.

Sophia was one of those persons who, pretending to great candour, constantly depreciate their own talents, that their auditors may contradict their assertions. She affected the deepest humility with regard to her own person and accomplishments, but never forgave those who had the temerity to agree with her. She wished to become the wife of Arthur Fleming, not on account of his talents or worth, or the very fine person he really possessed, but she considered that it would be an excellent match. Had Arthur been poor, Sophia would never have deemed him worthy a second thought; but he was rich, and wealth and power were the idols that she devotedly worshipped; and she could not regard with indifference any one who possessed these solid advantages. Besides, she was determined that Alice

should not carry off a prize she had marked for her own. The pretended affection she had asserted Alice felt for the young missionary, would, she thought, ensure all her cousin's attention to herself for the future. So far from this being the case, she well knew that Stephen Norton had been for years engaged to a young lady in B——, whose ill health entirely precluded their present union.

#### CHAPTER VII.

THE summer evening had nearly waned into night. The chirring of the grasshopper in the green banks that skirted the pretty mill-stream that flowed through the town of B—— had succeeded to the songs of the blackbird, and all the numerous tribe of finches, which had made the air eloquent through the day with their melodious warblings. At the end of a green lane that skirted the town, full of fine old trees, and bounded by high hawthorn hedges, stood a neat little dwelling facing the aforementioned stream. Within a trellised porch, covered with woodbine and briar roses in full bloom, reclining in an old-fashioned, high-backed leather chair, an aged man, with strong marked features and snow-white hair, sat in a sort of dreamy stupor, his head bowed upon his breast, and a black velvet cap pulled nearly over his eyes. A stool supported his wooden leg, while the other limb, which, by its swollen appearance, looked as if it most needed support, was firmly planted on the ground. A large black dog sat at his knee, which from time to time shoved his nose into his old master's listless hand, and licked his fingers, while a fine tabby cat sat purring on the sill of the door. At the open window, her head resting on a very small white hand, sat a middle-aged, meek-eyed woman, in a widow's dress. The knitting she had been employed in had fallen from her grasp, and her eyes were turned towards the lane, with an anxious and earnest gaze.

"Down, Nelson! you are troublesome," said the old man, in a querulous voice. "A good dog should not love two masters; and if Roland were here, small notice you would bestow on me."

The dog looked piteously up in his master's face, as if he understood his reproof, and couched down at his foot.

"I wonder what detains Roland," said Mrs. Marsham. "It is too late for Alice to come to-night."

"She seldom comes now," muttered the veteran. She, like Nelson, has got tired of the company of an old man.

The widow sighed. "She does not like to come while Roland is with us."

"Then the sooner he goes to sea the better.—She is far kinder to a poor, blind, infirm old man, than he is, who is my own flesh and blood."

"He is young and thoughtless," returned the mother, wiping away a tear. "You must make