

Alice and the Angel.

IN TWO PARTS.

PART I.

My father lived in an old cathedral city, where he gained his livelihood as a carver in wood. He brought me up to his business, as his father had done with him; indeed, I believe our family had been wood-carvers for ages. He took some pride in his calling, and did not consider that he worked for bread only. He was a quiet, thoughtful man, fond of antiquarian lore. He knew the history of every corner of that solemn old city. We had plenty of employment, and were well known for skilful workmen. We worked, once, in one of the antique churches for months together, cutting out wreaths, and heads of angels, for which purpose an eccentric old gentleman had bequeathed some money to the church-wardens. While at work, my father would talk to me of the dignity of our art, until I was deeply convinced that mine was the noblest calling upon earth. I recollect, once, carving out what I thought a sweet expressive face; and coming into the church afterwards, when the sun was lower, and a long ray of light, purpled with the stained-glass window, fell upon it. I remember, even now, my sensation at that moment. It was not vanity, but a feeling of delight, nearly of superstitious admiration. I was almost a young idolater. I could have knelt down and revered the work of my own hands.

As I grew older, however, and found that others were far from giving that importance to our business to which I had been taught to believe that it was entitled, I became less enthusiastic for it. I read of men who had devoted their lives to painting and sculpture; and had died and left them immortal names. So high had my father's discourses raised my ambition, that I thought it was only for want of a different sphere of action that I spent my days in obscurity. I indulged such dreams for a long time in silence, for I knew it would have grieved my father had I said a word against his art; but at length, I thought that I might, without offending him, attempt to carve some images in stone; for the sculptor's and the wood-carver's art are near akin. So I procured tools, and began

to cut shapes in stone, without a master or any theory to guide me.

At first, I carved wreaths and other simple ornaments—gradually advancing, I attempted human faces. This was a happy period of my life. In the summer afternoons, when we were not busy, I used to work upon these things in the garden at the back of our house. It was a large piece of ground, half garden, half-orchard; though it had no large trees: It was, however, filled with fruits and flowers. Next to us were the grounds of some ancient alms-houses; and the wall that separated us was composed of flints and pieces of stone, that crumbled at a touch. On our side this was covered with peaches, ripening in the mellow afternoon sun; and against it, on a board with tressels, stood several large beehives of plaited straw.—Sitting here, quietly alone, in fine weather, was enough to make a man idle; but I followed my new employment with increasing industry.

In this way I carved a number of objects, always destroying them as soon as I had done, being satisfied with the improvement which I had derived from the work, and not wishing my rude first efforts to be seen.—Hour by hour, and day by day, I strove to trace some image that floated in my mind. Then, looking afterwards upon my work, I saw how I had fallen short of my ideal; and sometimes I grew weary of my task, for awhile, till I took my tools again; and, hoping for the time when greater skill should crown my efforts, I renewed my toil.

I had no models. I chiselled out, from memory, sometimes, the faces of great men of bygone times, whose portraits I had seen in books or plaster casts. When I had finished, I left my work until the next day.—Then I stole down into the garden, and, after an attentive look and farewell of the task that had cost me many hours of labour, I took an iron hammer in my hand and shattered it to pieces. For several years I did this, and still I had not gained the power I coveted. The long hours of toil and the continual failure fretted my spirits. They only know—the patient worshippers of Art how slow and wearisome are all the steps by which her temples are approached! Who shall say how many, holding in their hands divinest gifts, have fallen and fainted by the way!