

THE TRIUMPHS OF DUTY.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERIES AND ENCOUNTERS.

His mind filled with thoughts of "days of yore," Arthur remained by the fire till it occurred to him to look forth on the same scenery over which his grandfather must so often have gazed in those young days when hope and joy and tender love were his. There was sufficient moonlight to enable Arthur to distinguish the route by which he had entered the valley of Woolton, and the distant heights round Windermere. "Oh! will he ever retrace that path?" thought he. "Will he ever again stand at this window, not as I do, a stranger, but once more lord of this rich domain?" The reply to this was in the first tremulous notes of the nocturnal wail. Roused at once, and shaking off all sinister impressions, Arthur stood intently listening. He was soon convinced that he heard no human voice, however disguised, nor could he identify the sound in connection with any instrument he had ever heard. Passionately fond of music in every grade, from the wisest to the most scientific, he had, as a boy, fastened an æolian harp in his window, and the sea breeze had modulated its chords of harmony as he lay on his mid-day couch in the summer siesta. But this was not quite the æolian harp, some notes were more like the flute. At length he proceeded to another investigation—that of sight, and endeavored to penetrate the secret in every way his piqued curiosity could suggest. All in vain; he had proved that no communication existed between the room and the aerial sounds, but that was all. He softly opened the door into the rooms that formed the complete suite to the ones he occupied; and as he passed from the dressing-room into the sitting room, the immense thickness of that inner wall, as compared with the others, struck him as an architect, for Arthur had studied that art. A shallow closet occupied the thickness of the wall, but he felt assured that behind it ran a narrow passage to the mysterious choir. This once ascertained, almost to conviction, Arthur took himself to rest, and recalling all that had been confided to him, dozed into a sound sleep amid the sounds that, he felt assured, portended no evil to the ancient possessors of Woolton Court.

The mutual confidence on the following morning may be easily surmised; but the conjectured passage behind the china closet was imparted to Miss Sanderson alone. Arthur promised to remain at Woolton, after a confidential visit elsewhere, and Mr Sanderson and his sisters, anxious to travel beyond hearing of the, to them, fatal sounds, departed some days after for London and the coast of Hampshire.

Arthur started the same evening for the tour of the lakes. He had not been able to see Lady Clara, and was uncertain whether she had left Woolton before or after the Sandersons. He determined, however, to console himself for this disappointment by a visit to Windermere as soon as a letter from Mr. Oldham should release him from his forced incognito. The miniature beauties of our English lakes he fully appreciated, but he returned to Woolton a day sooner than he would otherwise have done, being desirous to "come of age" in the halls of his ancestors; their eventual re-possession, however, lay in the balance of an irresolute and prejudiced mind, on which to rely for sympathy with an exiled race of patricians, would be to rashly close the portals against them forever.

Absorbed in many conflicting thoughts, Arthur remained waiting a considerable time after the first peal had been given at the entrance tower of the court. He rang again, with an almost equal time for solitary musings, before a servant appeared.

"Oh! Mr. Bryco; so its you—yes. Mr. Sanderson said you were to return and stop till you had made out some accounts for him. I suppose you would like his study? and a new bed-room from the last?"

"I prefer the library, and whatever bed room is most convenient," said Arthur, walking across the court in that direction, while the servant closed and barred the gate of the tower.

"Oh, very well, said the man, "it is all the same. Have you dined, sir?"

"I have," replied Arthur; "but I should be glad to have a light supper towards night, and to send some man or boy to the village coach-office for my portmanteau."

This commission being accompanied by the remuneration in advance, the servant volunteered to go himself that minute, and our hero, relieved to be alone, walked leisurely into the great hall, and gazed with the eye of a critic—yet a partial critic—on the fine oak panelling, the lofty vaulted ceiling, the broad staircase, parting at the first flight into two branches, and the stained-glass windows, still bearing the crest of the Wooltons, and part of the armorial bearings; the crest of the coat of arms having been repaired at various times, with good arrangement of colors, but without heed to correct quarterings. Arthur then gazed on the rusty armor, and other trophies of an obsolete warfare, and was finally about to seek the library, when, remembering that some of the happiest moments he had spent in that house, had been opposite the picture of the Lady Sybilla in the picture gallery, he mounted the stairs, and, for the sake of these reminiscences, passed through the open door at the east end of the gallery, which extended the whole length of the north facade of the mansion. The portrait of the Lady Sybilla was at nearly the west end; and Arthur, whose time was his own, slowly passed up the gallery from picture to picture on the contrary side, till he recognized a certain knight in armor, which he remembered to hang exactly opposite the picture of happy associations. He turned, and beheld, with a momentary terror, succeeded by a transport of joy, the living form of Lady Clara, who was gazing with equal surprise at him. In the distance she had supposed Arthur to be some stranger, admitted to view the pictures. She was painting, as when he had first known her, but the copy was nearly completed. She seemed more beautiful—more interesting than ever. Her sudden recognition evinced pleasure the most encouraging; so, in the impulse of the moment, darting forward, and bending one knee to his liege lady, the young viscount poured forth his vows of fealty, and passionately entreated a return.

Lady Clara did not reply. It appeared as if emotion prevented speech; at length a few large tears slowly trickled down her cheeks, and she said—

"Lord Stanmore, this meeting has not been sought by either of us; neither is to blame. Before we parted you told me your history. I will now tell you mine; it will soften the refusal I am compelled to give. It is so painful to inflict pain. I am betrothed to another. I am to be soon married to one who possesses claims on my heart that no other can ever equal. He is blind."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Arthur. "Then you are, indeed, lost to me."

"Oh, how well you understand me," said Lady Clara. "But," returned he, "how well, at the same time, I feel the value of all I have lost. Oh! angel of a woman, why—why have I to feel it is too late. To-day I know, for the first time in my life, what sorrow is. To-day, the 2nd of October, I am twenty-one. In bitter sorrow have I come of age."

"Do not say 'bitter'" interposed Lady Clara, with gentleness. "There is no sting where there is no self-

reproach. You were free—you believed me free. I do not wish that my engagement and approaching marriage should sever the ties of friendship and family connection between us. Would it not interest you to hear something of my future life?"

"*Mon Dieu, non,*" exclaimed Arthur, proceeding unconsciously and rapidly in the language most familiar to him. "At all events not now; I could bear nothing now."

"Believing that you would devote a much longer time to a view of our beautiful scenery, especially round Keswick, I wrote to my brother to invite you to his cottage on Windermere, and to direct his letter to the lawyer at Keswick, where you had purposed to remain some days. I wish you to know and appreciate my brother, and I wish him to know and appreciate your venerable grandfather and yourself. No one more fitted than my brother to understand and value the laborious thirty years of Lord Charleton, for he has of late years had plenty of mental labors himself. You are aware that he has been in the ministry ever since the formation of the present cabinet."

"You mean your elder brother, the Marquis of Seabam?"

"Yes—Hugh. He is at present in office for the colonies; but Claud is also engaged in serving his country. He is in the foreign office, and is just now under Sir Stuart Gorman, at Munich. It is possible that Claud may be sent to England this autumn, and join us for a short holiday here at the lakes. We do not remove into Cheshire till near Christmas. Now, if you are not recalled into France by duty to Lord Charleton, and can spend the Christmas at Marsden, having previously visited us here at Rockley, you will become insensibly attracted, by all you hear around you, to the service of your country."

"I do not feel in the least attracted to that service at present," sighed Arthur. "Perhaps I might, under other circumstances; but now I have no stimulus to exertion."

"Have you not that of love of country?"

"But I am not clear that England is that country. I believe I love France much better. I could have loved England—I could have loved this Woolton Court; but now I am quite prepared to hear by post that Mr. Sanderson has finally made up his mind to die here of cramp or sore throat, I shall then return to France, or more probably roam the world over."

"For what purpose?"

"For no purpose, but to forget that ever I saw you, heard you, adored you; to forget my own identity, my own existence."

"A very mistaken purpose for an intelligent and responsible being. Shall I propose for you something far better, that will make you far happier? Shall I? Shall I? Do say yes. You shall begin by calling me 'Clara,' while I will call you 'Arthur.' You shall confide your thoughts and plans to me as to a true and affectionate cousin. You shall prepare, in a subordinate office, under my brother, to rise gradually in the service of your country, till your eloquent and effective speeches shall attract your cousin, Clara, first to the ventilator of the house of commons, next to the peeresses box in the house of lords."

"What am I fit for?" said he, gloomily.

"That remains to be proved, not altogether by the test of our own abilities, but also by the demand that may be made of the special kind possessed by you alone. For instance, in the midst of a galaxy of talent, you alone may be found to possess a talent for finance, and the Marquis of Seabam, minister for the colonies, may have to cede you to Lord Gratmore, minister of finance, to the total disappointment

of Sir Drake Bruce, of the board of trade."

Arthur could not smile, but he just said—

"And what next?"

"Some years of patient toil and investigation, and sacrifice of self to the public good; a high tone of feeling, with great urbanity of manner, and at length the Earl of Charleton will be sent for by the august lady at the head of the state, and will return with the portfolio and seals of office, to form a cabinet of his own views in Downing street."

CHAPTER VI.

CONSOLATIONS.

The picture-gallery at Woolton Court was visited early on the following morning by Lord Stanmore; but some workmen, removing a picture-case, and the absence of all painting apparatus, told him that his happy interviews with Lady Clara were now to be classed among the reminiscences of his minority. He felt as if the last few hours had added years to his life. Much of what had fallen from her lips he retained with respectful tenderness, and they formed subjects for deep consideration, as he wandered through the grounds that lonely day.

At dinner he asked, in as careless a tone as he could assume, at what hour Lady Clara Chamberlayne had left the house, and was informed that her ladyship and attendant had departed in a hired carriage the evening before, having given directions for the picture to be forwarded to Marsden, the family seat in Cheshire. In the evening, by the cross-country post, the letter arrived from the Marquis of Seabam, forwarded from Keswick. It contained a more than polite—a cordial invitation to Mr. Arthur Bryce to spend as many days as his professional duties would permit at Eockley, the "holiday cottage" on Windermere. A ray of something like consolation gleamed across the desolate heart of our hero, as he drew the implements of writing towards him, and responded gratefully to the invitation. He was convinced that the secret of his identity had not been divulged to the marquis, and therefore comprehended more fully the confidence that the brother must repose in the taste and judgment of the sister to so immediately accede to her request. There was much in this thought to soften the pain of his position.

Arthur had accepted the invitation of the marquis for the 6th October. It was then the third of the month. On the ensuing day, after devoting some time to completing the arrangement of Mr. Sanderson's papers, he rowed to the spot where he had related his story to Lady Clara, and gave a turn to his pensive regrets by taking an exact sketch of the mansion, its platform, causeway, and back-ground of mountains. On his return to the house he made two copies, one for Lady Clara, one for himself. The original, which he carefully worked up, he enclosed in a letter to Marsailles, which he endeavoured to make cheerful, but his own hopes had fallen so low, respecting the re-possession of the Woolton property, that he could scarcely dwell on the topic. He preferred filling his letter with inquiries about persons and places in the city of his early happy youth; so, promising to write soon again, he was closing the envelope when the servant brought two letters with the London post-mark. He recognized the handwriting of Mr. Oldham, and he thought he could pronounce the other to be from Mr. Sanderson. Weariness and disgust filled his mind. The upper servants had informed him that day that they had no doubt of the return of the family, and he thought he might well defer opening the letters till the morrow. The still unsealed letter to Marsailles, however, and long-taught habits of attention to correspondents, urged him to read first the lawyer's, than Mr. Sanderson's, not only once,