

"I have not ventured to tell it to my dear Rosetta yet, as she still continues depressed and far from well," she proceeded, "but I trust your cheerful society will soon help to restore her, dear Blanche, as you will of course take up your abode with your father at the Priory, until you are once more established in a place of your own."

"Now, this is what I feared," said Lord De Melfort, with an air of vexation, "and for the first time I wish the Priory had been miles off."

"Nay, you might have spared that ungallant speech," returned Lady Neville smiling, "since you are going to leave us all tomorrow, and could not benefit by the presence of your guests."

"I have postponed my departure," said Lord De Melfort, fixing his eyes on Blanche. "The cause which would have hurried me away is removed, may I not then oppose my influence to yours, Lady Neville, and try to retain my visitors?"

"My dear lord, your kindness is unbounded, and appreciated as it deserves," said Mr. Neville pressing his hand warmly; "yet I think you will allow that her aunt's house is the natural home for Blanche, under existing circumstances, particularly as my duties oblige me to be very frequently absent." Lord De Melfort reluctantly assented to this, when Lady Neville, as she rose to take leave, observed:

"Now do you not merit that I should close my doors against you for the next month, yet as the punishment would fall heavily on myself, I suppose I must forgive you," then turning to Blanche she arranged the hour, she would call for her on the following day, soon after which she departed, waving her hand to the happy group, who had accompanied her down to the Hall.

Blanche now regretted every hour as it chimed, and told of the fleeting time. Never had a day seemed to fly so rapidly as this, and when she retired from the dinner table, and returned to the drawing-room alone, she perceived with reluctance that the glorious sun was already setting in one burnished sheet of gold, its resplendent rays mirrored in the lake, and reflected in softened gleams over the rich foliage of the forest trees. She watched it in its gradual descent with peculiar interest, and an attention so absorbed that she heard not the approach of footsteps, until a gentle breathing behind her caused her to start round, when she beheld Lord De Melfort—she looked for her father and Colonel Lennox, but they had not followed him—in another instant she perceived them walking together on the lawn. Lord De Melfort smiled at her palpable confusion, and taking her hand, said in his mildest tone:

"You do not unwillingly give me these few moments of happiness I hope, Miss Neville; I have desired them throughout the whole day, since I wish you to confirm what I read in your eyes this morning, that you ~~devoke~~ evoke the cold sentence those lips

were never formed to pronounce, as the dictates of your heart, but which they uttered a few evenings ago—what am I to believe?"

"Believe what you wish, believe anything rather than that I am coldly insensible," replied Blanche, struggling for composure, while her soft eyes sought the ground.

"God bless you, dearest Blanche, for this sweet avowal," returned Lord De Melfort, pressing both her hands, his fine countenance irradiated with the deep fervour of his feelings; "you have removed a painful thought which obtruded itself on my mind, and which was wholly unworthy to entertain of one like yourself—this was that, by some unaccountable means, you had previous knowledge of my unhappy and degrading affinity to the idiot dwarf. I deserve that indignant glance, but I knew not what to assign as a reason, particularly as your looks, when you fancied I was unobservant, so constantly contradicted your cold manner. Will you now confide to me the real one?"

"No, it must still remain a mystery," replied Blanche, "which is a fitting punishment for your evil thoughts—thus much I may confess, that were the cause known to you, you would not feel displeased."

"And with this I must be satisfied—ah, Blanche, whatever it may be, you know not the pain it has occasioned me. Yet tell me, dearest, when I have gained the happy right to your entire confidence, you will own it to me, will you not?" he drew her towards him as he spoke.

"I will," murmured Blanche in the lowest tone, as her face rested on his bosom.

A long silence followed, for both felt the happiness of that moment too great to give it utterance. The sound of one approaching first recalled them, when Lord De Melfort pressing his lips on the snowy forehead of the beautiful girl, led her to an ottoman and placed himself by her side. In the next instant the door opened, and the hunchback entered—Blanche instinctively clung to her companion, and looked fearfully in his face.

"For my sake, dearest, try to overcome this repugnance to his presence," said Lord De Melfort, in a sad and earnest tone, as he encircled her with his protecting arm.

"For your sake I will learn to love him," replied Blanche impressively, and turning to the dwarf, who approached them, saying to the Earl:

"Brother, may I come in? my head is aching again."

"Yes, you may come in, only promise to be quiet," replied the Earl.

The dwarf then drew a low stool near him, and laid down his large ill formed head on his knee—Lord De Melfort stroked it as he said:

"Poor Hugh, he is always suffering from headaches, owing to the blows of his savage nurse."