

THE PARENT'S CURSE;*

OR, THE ORPHANS OF WINDSOR FOREST.

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CHAPTER XXI.

"WILL you permit me to ask you, my lord," said lady Harriet, as she entered her brother's room, "if it was with your consent that the earl waited on the lady Maria Percival, with a proposal from you this morning?"

"Certainly!" replied lord Frederick; "you cannot suppose our father would make such a proposal unsanctioned by me!"

"And this is the result of your devotion to one of the loveliest daughters of earth! this is the proof of your ardent love, your undying affection, which will not endure through the separation of a few short months! Much do I rejoice that dear Florence is free from one so worthless as yourself, so volatile, so changeable; your capricious mind would have robbed her of every hope of happiness!"

"Rather, my sister, cease your reproaches, and congratulate your brother on his escape from the wiles of a base, heartless coquette, for so have I found Florence Oakley! Read this letter, and then say if you do not think her unworthy of a thought!"

Lady Harriet took the letter, and glanced her eye hastily over its contents; as she finished reading it, she threw it on the floor, exclaiming:

"Base, worthless girl! hereafter shall you be to me a stranger! Yes! she has abused the kindness which raised her from her lowly sphere, but from this moment I renounce her forever!"

A deep groan burst from the agonized heart of lord Frederick—though his own peace had been blasted by the perfidy of Florence—though his own heart condemned her, it was painful to hear her condemnation spoken by another, and that other her warmest friend.

For a moment lady Harriet sat lost in thought. Suddenly she started, and raising the letter from the floor, perused it with careful attention. She spoke not now, as she completed it, but again her eye was fixed upon it with intense interest, which seemed to increase with every line which she scanned over, and as she came to the conclusion, exclaimed, "Forgery! black, base forgery, and

even I, dear Florence, could for a moment believe you worthless!"

"What mean you? oh, my sister!" cried Lord Frederick seizing her hand. "Tell me, what would your words imply?"

"That Florence is innocent, and we deceived!" she replied; "for full well I know that Florence never saw that letter!"

"Then I am the victim of the darkest villainy! But tell me what can be done to rescue poor Florence, for I am but too sure she is in the power of her enemies!"

"Go at once to the king; and learn from him to whose care he consigned her, and—"

"And learn from him her history," interrupted lord Frederick; "but what will it avail me to know it now? Am I not now pledged to lady Maria?"

"No matter for lady Maria! our present aim must be to serve Florence, and we will think of her ladyship when more at leisure!"

The day was too far advanced to seek an audience of the king, but at an early hour the following morning lord Frederick repaired to the palace. The travelling carriage of the monarch was in waiting, and to his appeal to be admitted to the royal presence, the reply was—

"His Majesty cannot be seen now, he is just leaving for Windsor, but you can probably see him on his return, which will be in two weeks."

Lord Frederick turned away with a heavy heart—ere two weeks had passed, might not Florence be beyond his power of serving her? It was evident that an important crisis in her fate was at hand, from his having received the letter purporting to have been written by her; he saw no alternative, however, but patiently to await His Majesty's return from Windsor, and as he felt no desire to visit Fitzmorton hall, to which the family were about retiring, he determined to go at once to Devonshire, and there await the return of the king.

Lady Harriet combatted this resolution in vain. In vain she averred that if his affection for Florence were real, he would resort to every method to discover her retreat; he would search every