FLORA

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FLORA

BY

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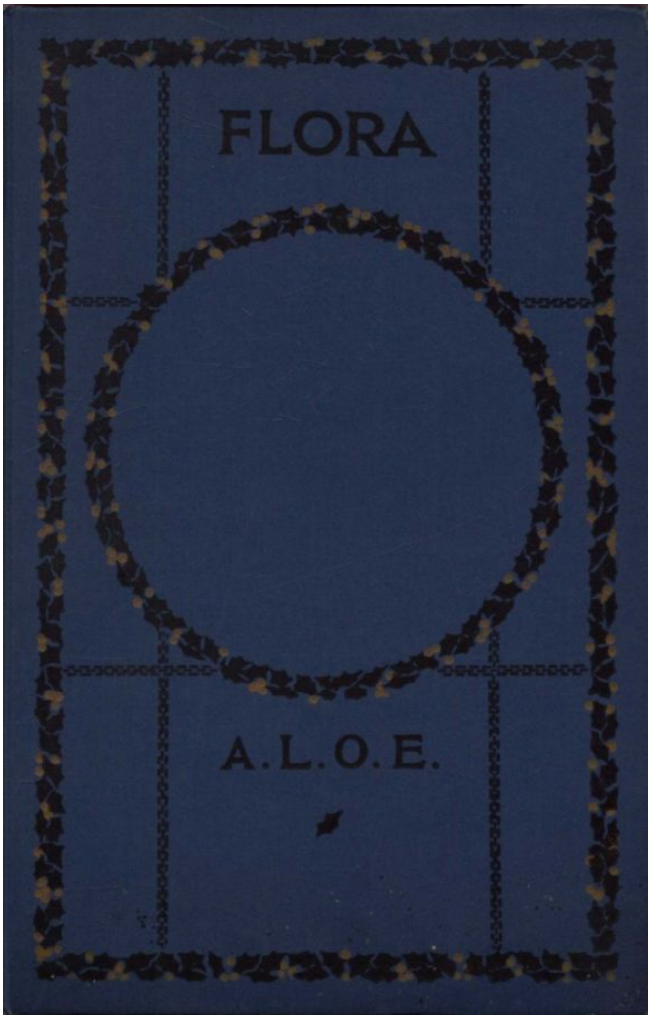

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"How are you feeling to-day?" said Flora.

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FLORA; OR, SELF-DECEPTION.

CHAPTER I.
TOWN AND COUNTRY.

"Well, there certainly is a charm in the country!" exclaimed Ada Murray, as, with the assistance of the hand of her companion, she sprang lightly down from a stile on the soft daisy-spangled grass beneath.

"The charm of *novelty*, I suppose," replied Flora.

"Well, I am afraid that I must plead guilty to knowing very little more of rural life than I have gathered from, 'Let me Wander not Unseen.' Ever since I came down here I have been looking out for the shepherds telling tales 'under

the hawthorn,' and the village maidens dancing to the sound of the rebeck; but no livelier piece of gaiety can I hear of than a feast to the school-children in a field! I suppose that you could not have archery here?" she added, suddenly, as the thought crossed her mind.

"Oh yes; we have an old bow and some arrows at home, that belonged to my brother."

"Oh, that's not what I mean," replied Ada, laughing; "bows and arrows do not make an archery-meeting, they are a mere excuse for drawing people together. But you don't seem to have any neighbours?"

"How can you say so?" cried Flora, playfully, pointing to a village on their right, nestling amidst elm-trees, above which the spire of a little church gleamed in the evening sun.

"You will not understand me, you malicious little thing! You don't call visiting old women and sickly children, and questioning a prim class of tidy girls in a school-room, seeing anything of society? Have you no neighbours in your own rank of life within ten miles round?"

"Not many," replied Flora; "but a few. There's the clergyman–you have seen him–good old Mr. Ward–"

"Oh yes, I have seen him,–the bald-headed little man, with such a benevolent look and patronising smile, that I quite expected him to pat me on the head and say, 'There's a good little dear!'"

"Naughty little dear, I should say," laughed Flora. "Oh, he is such a kind old friend, and preaches so beautifully, I don't know what we should do without him. We have known him and his dear old lady so long–he was a school-fellow of my dear father. Then there's Captain Lepine–"

"A captain! that sounds more lively. Is he an agreeable individual?"

"Yes; he takes care of my garden, and brings me cuttings of his roses. He's an invalid–"

"Interesting of course."

"And he lost a leg in battle–"

"I hope that he does not stump about on a wooden one; one could hardly stand that, even in a romance. I suppose that he was wounded at Sobraon, or some of those Indian battles with unpronounceable names?"

"No; he was wounded at Navarino."

"Navarino!" exclaimed Ada, with affected horror; "then he must be a century old at the least! Does no one live in this place under eighty years of age?"

"Yes; the doctor and his wife, and half-a-dozen little ones, the eldest not out of the school-room."

"And nobody besides?"

"Mrs. Lacy, the widow of a banker, who occupies the white house which

you observe yonder; but she does not see a great deal of society."

"I should think not," observed Ada, drily. "It is a case of 'the Spanish fleet thou canst not see, for it is not in sight.'"

"And she is often ill–"

"With ennui, no doubt."

"Ah! and I was forgetting old Miss Butterfield; we passed her just as we turned into the fields."

"Almost bent into a hoop, like an old witch, and dressed after the fashion of our great-grandmothers. If she had only sported a red cloak in addition to her poke-bonnet, I should have gone and asked her to tell my fortune!"

"Fie! fie! how can you talk so?" cried Flora.

"Well, well, my good coz," exclaimed Ada, as she threw herself down on the roots of a gnarled oak, which, green with moss, offered a tempting seat; "I can only say that I consider you buried alive here–quite buried alive!" she repeated with emphasis, plucking a daisy and pulling it to pieces; "and you so charming and fair, I am always fancying how Eddis would paint you, or whether you have not sat to him already, you are so like one of his soft, saintly beauties!"

"Don't be so absurd," said Flora, colouring.

"Ah! that was all that was wanting, a little heightened blush on the pale white rose," cried Ada, looking with real admiration, perhaps not unmixed with envy, at the fair delicate features before her; for the gipsy hat which Flora wore had fallen back on her shoulders, and as the breeze played amongst her auburn tresses, and the shadow of the young leaves fell on her gentle brow, she looked one whom to behold was to love.

"Come, come," said Flora, willing to change the conversation, which embarrassed her at the time, though, sooth to say, she found her mind frequently recurring to it afterwards, and with no disagreeable sensation; "if you think that to live here is so dreadful, how is it that you can submit for a whole fortnight to be 'buried alive' in the country?"

"Well, my dear, I must not take credit for too sublime heroism. The London season had hardly commenced, not a single dance was in view. I think that the melody of all your nightingales, and the perfume of your flowers, would hardly have tempted me away after Easter."

"And what are the delights which you prize so much?" inquired Flora, with some little curiosity. "You know that I have never spent two days together from my home, that I know nothing of what passes in the world, that though I was born in London, I was so young when we left Golden Square–"

"Golden Square! my dear, never mention such a place, nobody lives in Golden Square."

Flora coloured again, and felt uncomfortable, she scarcely knew why.

"You asked me," continued Ada, "what are the delights of town. It is hard to describe them, they are so utterly different from any which you experience here. Bustle and noise, incessant rattling of carriages and thundering raps at the door, late breakfasts–perhaps in bed–dinner at the hour of your supper; and when you, innocent dear, are retiring to rest, the maid is placing the flowers in my hair, and I am off in a flutter of muslin or tulle, to mount step by step a crowded staircase, and enter some room where it is impossible to move, and barely possible to breathe!"

"And this night after night?" inquired Flora.

"Yes, night after night; that is to say, unless the season is a dull one."

"And do you not feel knocked up in the morning?"

"Well, not inclined for a long country walk through fields garnished with stiles, nor for teaching stupid children in a school, nor for listening to a very sober, sensible book, such as that to which my dear good aunt is treating us; but just inclined to rest on a sofa with a diverting novel in my hand, to chat to amusing visitors, or to fill up the time till dinner with a concert or a botanical fête."

"Ah! these are what I should enjoy," cried Flora; "I am so fond of music and of flowers."

"Dear simplicity, do you imagine that any one goes to a concert to listen, or to a garden to look at the flowers? You go to talk, and to see your friends, and quiz the company, and–kill time!"

"And do you never grow weary?" asked Flora,

"Weary; yes, half tired to death, quite ennuyée; but then the only way to restore one's jaded spirits is to plunge deeper into gaiety; the excitement, and the bustle, and the diversion, become quite a necessity at last."

"It reminds me–but I'll not say of what it reminds me."

"Not say? but you must, and shall. What does it remind you of, little philosopher?"

"The craving which some very vulgar people, to whom I should never dream of comparing my friends, have for another kind of stimulant."

"It is a sort of intoxication, you mean," said Ada, gaily. "I will not deny it; a very pleasant sort of intoxication. I wish that you would come to Grosvenor Square and try it."

Flora gently shook her head.

"What! you are afraid of being contaminated by my evil example, I suppose! You look on gaiety as a dangerous glass of champagne; and have all here taken the pledge not to go beyond a cup of the very weakest green tea?"

"It is not that," said Flora, looking diverted.

"Then I shall carry you off with me–I positively shall; you shall be the belle of the London season; your time shall be crammed so full with engagements,

balls, operas, concerts, fêtes, that you will scarcely know day from night!"

"I do not think that my mother would approve of that."

"Well, then, you shall go to no place of which your mother, and Mr. Ward, and the whole clerical body from bishop to curate, would not approve. We'll take you to Exeter Hall, and the Museum, and the Royal Institution, panoramas, cycloramas, dioramas! Oh! there is no place like London for opening the mind. A green bud of rusticity expands at once into a full-blown rose there."

"May there not be such things as over-blown roses?"

"No fear; I'll answer for you, coz, if you'll only go back with me to London. Say that you will–only say that you will," and Ada placed her arm caressingly around Flora.

"I really cannot, at present," replied her cousin, "though I should very much enjoy paying you a visit. But it would be impossible for me to quit home just now, when we are expecting my sister-in-law from Barbadoes–"

"Ah! yes; the widow of your half-brother," said Ada. "John married a Creole lady, did he not, rather against the wishes of your poor father?"

Flora bowed her head in assent.

"Then your sister-in-law is a perfect stranger to you?"

"Quite; and as she dislikes her pen, and never answers a letter, we have not even the knowledge of each other which one gains from correspondence."

"I think I heard that there were children," said Ada.

"Yes; four poor dear little orphans."

"And all coming to your home?"

"My mother will welcome them all."

"Ahem! I wish you joy of your West Indian importation. My aunt must have been remarkably fond of her step-son!"

"On the contrary," replied Flora, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper, though the birds that twittered on the branches above them were the only living creatures near–"poor John was never anything but a trial to mamma. He behaved very ill to her indeed, at the time when poor dear papa's affairs were settled; he wrote in so insolent a manner; he cost my precious mother such bitter tears when she had been already suffering so much, that no one but an angel, as she is, would ever have forgotten or forgiven his conduct. You do not know how I felt it," continued Flora, her colour rising at the recollection; "I could have better borne unkindness to myself, but insolence to my widowed mother was not to be endured! Yet, no sooner did we hear that John had died, leaving his family poorly provided for, than the heart and home of my mother were opened at once; no feeling was left in her bosom but generous sympathy and compassion; and I believe that she will receive the widow as warmly and tenderly as if she were her own cherished child."

"That *is* Christianity!" exclaimed Ada. "Ah! if profession and practice thus always went hand in hand–if 'good people,' as they are called, were always really good, they would win a great deal more respect from the world than they do now, and have a great deal more influence in it besides! But what I can't bear is, when people talk as though they believed themselves to be saints and all the rest of the world sinners, and look as though they thought it wicked to smile or raise their voice above a whisper; and when you come really to know them, when you can glance a little behind the curtain, they are as selfish, and avaricious, and mean, and spiteful, as the veriest worldling in creation! This is what disgusts one, and inclines one to set down great profession at once as hypocrisy!"

"My mother says that it is more by our lives than by our lips that we should show what we are, and to whom we belong," was Flora's quiet reply.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAGE.

"Now, charming as I find this mossy seat, and the waving boughs, and the lights and shadows, and the beautiful view before me, and, above all, the lovely companion beside me, it strikes my unpoetical mind," said Ada, "that if we sit longer here, we may find rheumatism added to other country delights."

Flora sprang up at once from her seat. "I quite forgot that you were not a country lass like myself," she said; "as it must be almost tea-time now, perhaps we had better return home."

"Dinner at one, tea at six–how deliciously old-fashioned and rural!"

"Would you object to return by the village? I wished to inquire for poor old Mrs. Arkwright?"

"Object! I am only too much delighted to go where there is anything stirring, be it only a baker's cart!"

"I think that some day, Ada, I must introduce you to some of my favourite poor people."

"I must get up a little appropriate small-talk first," laughed her cousin. "I should feel almost as much out of my element in a cottage as one of your ploughboys would do in a ball-room. I could neither speak of amusements, nor fashions, nor pictures, nor parties; I cannot imagine what one would say after the first 'Good morning' and the usual observations on the weather."

"Oh! how diverting it would be," cried Flora, with sudden animation, "to set you to teach a class at the school!"

"I'd make it a dancing-class at once, and substitute graceful courtesies for the little short bob which always reminds me of Jack in the box; and the little boys should learn to make elegant bows, instead of pulling down their own heads by tugging at the fore-locks!"

"You would not be so hard upon the simple salutations of our little rustics, Ada, had you seen our village in the old time, when a bob or a bow was an unheard-of piece of politeness."

"It is a very pretty village," said Ada, as the picturesque row of white cottages opened on their view; the latticed windows glowing bright in the sun's setting rays, the small neat gardens gay with many a flower; while in the foreground the church, of simple but graceful architecture, raised its glittering spire towards heaven.

"It was a very different place twelve years ago," said Flora, "when my dear parents first came to reside here. There was not a church then within four miles, and the people here lived in a state of almost heathen darkness. The cottages were miserable hovels, I have heard, and seemed purposely contrived to keep out sun and air, and admit the snow and the rain. Half of the children had never been baptized, and ran about bare-foot and bare-headed, as dirty and as ignorant as the very pigs with which they associated! The only thriving establishments were the ale-houses, and the character of the place was altogether so bad that it was really dangerous to be out after dark."

"And what worked such a wonderful change?"

"Oh, everything was gradually done, by patience and untiring zeal and benevolence. My dear father expended much money, and more time, in improving the dwellings of the poor, combating prejudices, inviting the lazy to exertion, raising a spirit of order. My mother exerted herself amongst the women. They regarded her with suspicion at first, and were very jealous of interference. They seemed to consider it as their privilege to be ragged and dirty. But nothing could withstand the power of her gentleness and kindness. The first great step was gathering some of the children to a little class in our own house."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ada, "and could your mother really endure to have a set of ragged, bare-footed little wretches, with unwashed faces and uncombed hair, in her house?"

"She not only endured them, but she loved them; and soon, very soon, they were neither ragged nor untidy. A smile and a word from mamma accomplished more than a long lecture from another would have done. As the children learned to read, they carried Bibles and little religious publications into their parents' miserable homes: gradually a taste for reading was produced, and my father

took care that it should be gratified by useful and improving works. All this time my parents were making every effort to collect subscriptions for building and endowing a church–regular schools followed, until at length our poor village became the dear, peaceful, happy little place that you behold it now."

"Well," cried Ada, "it must have given your parents a great deal of pleasure to see all the good that they had done."

"You do admit then," said Flora, archly, "that even the country may have its pleasures?"

"Yes; but only think at what a price the pleasure was purchased! Only think of the misery of being imprisoned in a place quite out of the world, with no society at all; your only occupation–picking your way into dirty hovels through rivers of mud, tumbling over ragged urchins, lecturing poachers and sheep-stealers, coaxing and coddling sick old women, and then returning home to write begging-letters for subscriptions to friends who are sure to have 'so many calls' that they wish you at Nova Zembla for adding another!"

Ada interrupted herself as a sweet golden-haired little boy lifted the latch of the gate of a tiny garden, and timidly, as if abashed by the presence of a stranger, offered a bunch of violets to Flora. She received them as graciously as though they had been a chaplet of pearls, and her words of thanks made the face of the child radiant with joy.

"Quite a chivalrous attention," said Ada, as they moved on.

"Oh, my children love me, and often bring me their little offerings. On my birth-day our myrtle was quite covered with their garlands of early spring flowers."

She now stopped at the door of a cottage and knocked. A feeble "Come in" sounded from the interior, and she entered, followed by Ada, who gathered together the folds of her silk dress, afraid to let them come in contact with the walls of the lowly dwelling. But her own luxurious home could not have presented a picture of more perfect cleanliness and neatness than that humble abode; there was nothing to shock even the refined taste of a lady of fashion.

An aged woman, in a snowy cap, was seated in an arm-chair beside a small fire; while a woman who had been engaged in ironing, paused in her occupation to drop a humble courtesy to Flora.

"How are you feeling to-day?" said Flora, in a tone of gentlest sympathy, approaching the invalid, and laying her soft fingers on the thin wrinkled hand that feebly grasped the arm of the chair.

"All the better for a sight of your sweet face–blessings on it! But I'm going–going fast! I shall soon be in my home. God be praised for His mercies!"

Ada sat down on the wooden three-legged stool which the washerwoman, after wiping it with her apron, placed for her accommodation, and listened

silently and wonderingly to the dialogue between the aged woman and her visitor. There was no forced conversation, no difficulty in finding themes for discourse. Their subjects were the highest, the most solemn, the most interesting which can occupy the minds of immortals. Mrs. Arkwright was near the grave, and she knew it. She was calmly standing on the brink of the Jordan awaiting the signal from the Lord whom she had loved, and leaning upon the staff of His promise, "*When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.*"

Ada had ever connected the idea of death with terror and gloom. The struggle, the darkness, the parting from everything once prized, the hatchment, the hearse with its black nodding plumes, the cold desolation of the grave,–such were the images brought to her mind by the word; and she had turned from them with repugnance and horror. But here she beheld death in a totally different aspect, as a freedom from sorrow, a commencement of bliss, a reunion with all most beloved, a summons to the presence of an adored Redeemer, a welcome to the home of a Father!

Ada had imagined that those of her own class only entered the cottages of the poor to convey help to the needy, or instruction to the ignorant; but she beheld here that the rich in visiting the poor may receive as well as impart, that she whose mind is cultivated and refined may well sit as a learner beside the lowly saint whose only knowledge is the knowledge of the Saviour. Flora listened more than she spoke. For some time the feeble voice of the dying woman alone broke the stillness of the place, till, at her earnest request that the young lady would let her hear once more–for the last time–her favourite hymn for the departing, in accents which trembled with emotion Flora sang the following verses:–

HYMN FOR THE DYING.

The day of life is closing,
Its last faint beams have fled;
Yet faith, on Christ reposing,
Can death's cold waters tread!
The dark sea spreads before me,
Upon the brink I stand,
Oh, guide me, Lord of glory!
To heaven's blissful strand!
To Thee, Lord, I flee;
My trust is in Thee.
O death! where is thy sting? O grave! thy victory?

No longer here detain me;
I hear my Saviour's voice,
I feel His arm sustain me,
I triumph and rejoice!
The Lord will bless for ever
Those who His love have known
Nor life nor death can sever
The Saviour from His own!
Victorious and free
His people shall be.
O death! where is thy sting? O grave! thy victory?

After receiving the solemn, fervent blessing of the sufferer, Flora quitted the cottage, followed by her companion. Ada felt that she had been standing on holy ground; she was awed for the moment, sobered by the scene of which she had been a witness. Did she envy her cousin that dying blessing?

At the gate of Mrs. Arkwright's little garden they were met by the silver-haired clergyman, evidently on his way to visit the suffering member of his flock.

"Just where I should have expected to meet our Flora," he said, with a beaming expression on his benevolent face.

He courteously greeted Ada, to whom he had before been introduced, and expressed his hope that her visit to the country would be a prolonged one.

"Oh no! I leave Laurel Bank at the end of next week; and I wish," Ada added, laying her hand on her cousin's arm, "to carry away Flora with me."

"Carry away our Flora," cried the old clergyman, shaking his head; "would you rob our poor village of its sunshine?"

Flora and Ada walked on some way in silence. "I wonder," thought the latter, "who would miss me were I to go to New Zealand to-morrow! Would there be one smile the less amid my gay companions? would I leave a blank in the brilliant assemblies which I have frequented so long? should I be more regretted than one of the flowers which deck the ball-room for a night, to be thrown aside withered and faded in the morning? After all, I am not certain whether Flora's life is not happier than mine; at least I suspect that it will be pleasanter to look

back upon when youth and all its follies are past!"

CHAPTER III.

CONFESSION.

"Did you not admire the sermon?" said Flora to Ada, as, during the interval between services on Sunday, the two cousins strolled through the shrubbery.

"Mr. Ward was very earnest."

"Was he not?–and so eloquent! he is a very delightful preacher! You don't know how we missed him when he went away last winter for a few months. We had such a dreadful man, with a sepulchral voice, really, I know it was very wrong, but I could scarcely keep awake while he preached." And the young lady went on describing the messenger of the gospel in much the same terms as Ada would have used in speaking of an actor whom she did not admire.

"But Mr. Ward is so different," she said in conclusion. "I was quite delighted with his sermon; were not you?"

"To own the truth, it made me feel a little uncomfortable," replied Ada.

"That is a compliment to the preacher's power," said Flora, with a smile. "I never heard him speak more forcibly than he did to-day on the parable of the sower."

"And you were delighted with the sermon because all the last part of it belonged to yourself,–all the beautiful description of the good seed springing up."

Flora gave a little deprecating "Oh!"

"While I was wondering which part applied to me–"

"And which did you fix upon?" said Flora; she was smiling, but Ada was grave.

"I am afraid," said the young lady with a little sigh, "that I am most like the seed among the thorns."

"Oh no, dear!" cried Flora, through whose mind the same reflection had been passing during the greater part of the sermon.

"I am not always thoughtless," said Ada earnestly, "when I was a little girl how I used to cry over the story of the Young Cottager, and wish that I were like little Jane! and now often, on Sundays, when I hear a beautiful sermon like that of this morning, I feel like a different creature, really quite religious, and go

to bed with such good resolutions; but then comes the morrow, and somehow I forget all about them till Sunday comes round again."

Flora was silent, for she knew not what to reply.

"You are so good, so unselfish, so unworldly–so altogether unlike me!"

"My dear Ada, you are a sad flatterer!"

"But every one thinks the same: your mother, the clergyman, all who approach you see that you are an angel, only wanting the wings! When I heard you repeating the confession of sins so fervently beside me, I could not help saying to myself, I wonder what Flora has to confess; how, by any stretch of imagination, she can believe herself to be a 'miserable sinner?'"

"Ada, we are all sinners."

"Ah yes; I know that there is plenty of wickedness in the world, but then it is very unequally divided. Some have so little for their share that it is actually invisible–like yours! Now what I wish you to tell me is this, when you follow the clergyman in that part of the service, are you confessing the sins of your neighbours in general, or any of your own in particular?"

"You are jesting," said Flora, looking embarrassed.

"No indeed, I am not jesting, I am in very sober earnest. I want to know with what you can possibly charge yourself when you pray for forgiveness so devoutly."

"Do you wish the office of a father confessor?"

"Now, like a dear good child, just answer my question, or I shall think that you do not because you cannot."

Flora hesitated;–strange to say, it was a subject on which she was little accustomed to reflect. Through habit she had repeated prayers aloud, and her voice had acquired an intonation which naturally gave an impression of fervour; but she had never thought of questioning her own heart as to the sincerity of her prayer, or the real existence of that earnest devotion which was expressed in her manner. As little had she dreamed of inquiring what particular sins lay on her conscience! the truth is, that the burden, if she had any, was so light, that she could scarcely be said to feel it. Ada, however, pressed for a reply; and afraid that her cousin might suspect her of self-righteousness if she remained silent, Flora, casting down her eyes, made answer–"I know that I sometimes neglect my duties and put them off to a more convenient time."

"What duties, may I ask?"

"Such as visiting the sick poor."

Ada threw up her hands in amazement. "Why, it seems to me there is nothing here but attending to the poor from morning till night–cutting out work for the school, carrying broth to old women, lecturing little boys, visiting, reading–"

"Ah! that is my mother's doing more than mine."

"My dear child, you do enough to constitute you a saint in any Romish calendar! If you have to repent of not doing more, what is to become of me who do nothing at all! Pray let us have some more tangible fault, if the microscope of your conscience is sufficiently strong to discover one in your conduct."

"I am sometimes out of patience with the school children."

"I should think so–though I never saw you impatient; but what can be so trying to the temper as teaching a batch of stupid rustics? You are only too good in having anything to say to the little dunces! Well, have you come to the end of your catalogue?"

Flora waited for some moments before she added, with a little sigh, "Sometimes I wish for things which I ought not to wish for."

"There's no harm in wishing," said Ada quickly. "I wish for a thousand things every day: a harp, a diamond cross, a trip to Italy, a good horse–there is no end to my wishing, and it does nobody harm."

"There sounds the bell for afternoon church," said Flora, rather relieved by the interruption.

"I hope that you go in a very penitent frame!" cried Ada. The light words of the thoughtless girl did not grate on the ear of her companion as they ought to have done–as they would have done had Flora's views been clearer, her knowledge greater, her self-examination more searching. Rather did they give a sensation of pleasure; for while Flora felt herself inferior to her cousin in knowledge of the world, and instinctively looked up to Ada in every matter of fashion, she was conscious of possessing a great superiority in whatever regarded the mind or the heart, and secretly compassionated the young London lady as worldly, frivolous, and ignorant of spiritual things. How far Ada deserved her cousin's silent censure, I will not at present inquire; my subject is Flora herself–it is for such as Flora that my little book is written, for the thousands and tens of thousands who, in our peaceful, happy island, lead useful lives in the bosom of pious families, enjoying all the blessings of home. It is such whose patient consideration I would earnestly, affectionately entreat, as I endeavour to search a little deeper than the surface, which appears so fair, to see whether the ore which lies below is as precious as the landscape is lovely; whether–to change the metaphor–the seed of the Word has really fallen in honest and good ground, and is bringing forth a harvest of good works through the blessing shed on it from on high.

To prosecute our search, we must assume the power of looking more closely into the heart of Flora than she has ever looked herself, and to trace her actions to their source, as she never has dreamed of tracing them.

Flora was the beloved and only child of a devoted Christian. From her birth she had been the subject of many prayers, and religion had been instilled into her mind from the time when she could first lisp the name of the Saviour. Great

had been the delight of her tender mother to see the first dawnings of religious perception in the mind of her child. Great was her pride, if one so meek could be proud, to mark the pleasure taken by Flora in her Bible; who can wonder if she did not closely analyze whether that pleasure arose from a desire to win her smile, or simple love of the truth! Flora was gifted by nature with a sweet and easy temper, and in the secluded life which she led there was seldom anything to ruffle it. She had also a warm affectionate heart, and as its tenderness was lavished upon her mother, duties toward her were regarded as delights–Flora pleased herself in pleasing her parent.

One of the strongest features in Flora's character was the love of approbation; and carefully guarded as she ever had been from any influence that could injure her, this passion, often so dangerous, so fatal, ever wore the semblance of virtue. It was so charming to be loved and admired; to be praised by the clergyman, looked up to by the poor, considered as a model of piety and charity! Flora was little aware that, in her life of seclusion, love of variety, necessity for occupation, desire to find some object of interest, might suffice to lead her to the dwellings of the poor, without any higher motive. She would have been startled to have been told how much of vanity mingled with her benevolent zeal. She had a floating idea, just in itself, but injurious in its effect on her mind, that woman never looks so heavenly fair as when engaged in offices of mercy; she had a consciousness that her own delicate loveliness never showed to greater advantage than when contrasted with squalid poverty and sickly age; and when others compared her to a seraph or a sunbeam, the words which brought the soft colour to her cheek and the modest disclaimer to her lips, were by no means distasteful to her heart, nor were they altogether condemned by her secret judgment.

There was one other circumstance which further blinded Flora to her own imperfections. She had a refined and elegant taste, cultivated and improved by voluminous reading. Her natural love for the beautiful led her to enjoy with enthusiasm all that was perfect in nature or art. The rapture with which fine scenery inspired her, the sensation produced in her by sacred music or burst of eloquence from the pulpit, she mistook, as thousands have done, for proofs of a renewed and pious heart. Could she have doubted her own deeds of charity, she could not doubt her tears of devotion, though the sensibility which called them forth would have been equally excited by a well-acted tragedy.

Flora had a talent for poetry, and naturally chose for the usual theme of her verse the most sublime and glorious of subjects, and that which the circumstances of her education and position most constantly presented to her mind. She knew that her sweet hymns were read with delight by her mother, copied out in her handwriting, treasured in her memory, looked upon by the pious lady as evidences that her dearest hopes had been realized in her daughter. Flora's

poetry was regarded as the exposition of her mind. Alas! her writings were far more holy than their authoress! Thus a false opinion was formed of her character, aided in no small degree by the singular sweetness of a face upon which no rude passion had ever traced a line.

When the course of duty is down the current of inclination, the leafy branch floats smoothly along the stream. *But that motion is not life;* that progress is owing to no inherent power in the bough. The least impediment is sufficient to stop it–the smallest eddy to turn it aside!

CHAPTER IV.

THE RAJAH'S DREAM.

"I made such a discovery!" exclaimed Ada, with a look of triumph, as she entered the drawing-room one morning. "Ah, Flora! demure, sensible, philosophical Flora–you who listen to Alison with such profound attention, and whose brain is a silent library of solid and intellectual literature, I have found you out at last!"

"What do you mean?" asked Flora, gaily, while gentle Mrs. Vernon looked up with an expression of inquiry.

"You don't read novels! Oh no; you are too wise! But who keeps Eastern tales in her boudoir, quietly hidden behind a vase of Innocent flowers, to feast upon when nobody sees her?" And Ada displayed a book, in singular binding, which she had carried off from the room of her cousin.

"Oh, I have not had time to read it yet! It is a book which Mr. Ward lent me."

"Mr. Ward! Now, that is too good! Who would have dreamed of Mr. Ward's patronizing a new edition of the Arabian Nights?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Vernon, "I have no doubt that any book lent by our excellent clergyman will be very improving."

"Oh, I'm so glad that you think, so, for this looks amusing besides! I propose that for one day–you know that this is my last day at Laurel Bank–we substitute it for Alison."

"As you please," said Mrs. Vernon, taking the quaint volume from the hand of her niece, and turning over some of the pages. "This appears to be a kind of Eastern fable."

"Then I'll have the story, and Flora shall have the moral, and we'll both be suited exactly."

In a few minutes the young ladies were seated, Ada at her embroidery, Flora at her drawing, when Mrs. Vernon, who was usually the reader, commenced the following tale:–

THE RAJAH'S DREAM.

Mighty was the Rajah Futtey Sing, and great were the deeds which he had done. His granaries overflowed with corn, and his coffers with gold; the hungry were fed by his beneficence, and the needy supplied by his wealth. He was like a magnificent banyan-tree, whose branches having stooped to the earth, there take root, and extending on all sides, the tree becomes as a forest. Beneath it the beasts of the field take shelter; the bright-winged birds roost on its boughs; the sunshine rests brightly upon it; it stands glorious and beautiful to the eye of man.

The Rajah lay reclined on cushions in his lordly dwelling. The calm of evening was over earth; the red orb of the sun had almost touched the horizon; he seemed glancing, ere he departed, on the world which his beams had clothed with brightness and beauty; and a calm was upon the soul of the Rajah–a joy was within his heart. He said to himself, where he lay–"I have been a blessing in my generation; I have gone on my course like the sun, and the world has been the brighter for my smile. I have benefited man, and I have glorified the Supreme. I have fasted long and I have prayed much; I have wasted my flesh by abstinence, and spent the long night in devotion. And now, am I not holy? May I not stand upright before my Creator? Are not my hands stainless? Is not my heart clean? Who can lay anything to my charge?"

A Brahmin in his white robes now entered, and bent reverently before the Rajah.

"Friend of the needy!" said he, "thy will hath been obeyed! In nine different parts of thy spacious domains, nine wells, dug deep into the heart of the earth, now offer their waters to the pilgrim, plenteous as thy liberality, clear as thy nature."

"It is well!" cried the Rajah. "Let their number be trebled! Let the travellers from the north, from the east, from the west, bless the name of Rajah Futtey Sing."

Another Brahmin approached, and made obeisance.

"Hope of the friendless!" said he, "behold, at thy command three hundred indigent and sick, the leper and the blind, wait at thy gate for the accustomed alms bestowed by thy princely bounty!"

"It is well!" cried the Rajah. "Let their numbers be thrice three hundred!

Let no poor man stand hungry at my gate. To supply the wants of the needy shall my fields grow yellow with golden maize, and the rice-plant lift its head above the spreading waters; and let those who come to me in rags retire in fair white garments such as are worn by my servants!"

A third Brahmin entered, and bowed his head before the Rajah.

"Mirror of piety!" said he, "the foundation of the great temple has been laid which thou wilt raise to the honour of the Deity. Stones are being hewn in the distant quarry; yellow brass is brought from afar; an edifice is rising from the earth which will be lofty as thy devotion, firm as thy power!"

"Leave the stones in the quarry, and hew me white marble!" cried the Rajah; "lay aside the brass, and supply its place with beaten gold. No mean sacrifice will I offer to the Creator; he shall look upon my gifts and be satisfied, and future generations shall witness the vastness of my liberality and of my devotion!"

And all who heard exclaimed, "Praise to the Rajah! Praise to the pious and the holy! High is his place in this life; higher shall be his place in the next! His offerings shall be accepted on high; his prayers and his fasting shall bring great reward! Wisdom is on his lips and virtue in his heart. He stands faultless before God and man!"

The red sun had sunk beneath the plain, and darkness spread her sable wings over earth. There was silence where the axe and hammer had rung, in the spot where the temple was rising; the poor had departed satisfied from the gate, and no pilgrim bending to drink of the wells dug by Futtey Sing disturbed the image of the quiet stars that were reflected in their motionless depths.

Sleep came to the Rajah with the night; and as his eye closed to the world around, the eye of his mind opened to the world of dreams.

Behold, he dreamed that his temple was completed, and that it was fairer to look upon than ever before was temple erected by man. Its marble dome and cupolas were white as snow from the summit of the Himalaya. It was encrusted with precious jewels in every form which could charm the eye. There the diamond glittered like a petrified dewdrop; there shone the ruby, and the sapphire blue as the Nerbuddah; and wreaths of pearls of magnificent size twined round the lofty pillars of gold!

In this temple stood the Rajah in his dream; and his heart was lifted up with pride. He looked above, around, below him, and all was beautiful and glorious. "Am I not holy?" he repeated to himself. "Shall I not rejoice in my works?"

He wondered in his dream to behold a bright ray, more intense than any which the sun ever shed, stream down from an opening in the dome; and down this ray, as down a path of glory, descended a being who would have been too bright to be looked upon, had her form not been shrouded in a wide veil, which encircled her like a silver cloud. The Rajah trembled as the unearthly visitant

descended to his side.

"Who art thou," he cried, "that comest as from above? and wherefore do I behold thee?"

"I am Truth," replied a sweet but solemn voice from the veil, for the face of the bright one was not seen. "It is my office to open the eyes of the blind, to draw aside the curtain of delusion, to dispel the mirage upon the desert, to waken mortals from the dreams of their fancy. Hast thou, O Futtey Sing, courage to follow me–courage to explore, with me for thy guide, this Temple of the Human Heart?–for what we now survey is thine own."

The Rajah paused in his dream; a strange feeling of awe was on his soul.

"Dost thou fear," pursued Truth, "to know thyself?"

"I fear not," replied the Rajah. "He who knows not himself knows nothing. I shrink not even from thy searching eye! I have fasted long, have prayed much, I have freely given to the poor; my hands are stainless, my heart is clean; I am holy in the sight of all men!"

"But in the sight of God what art thou?" exclaimed Truth. "Ye see not the motes in the air, though numerous as the leaves of the forest, till the glowing ray reveal them to the eye. The river seems to flow stainless and clear, till the wondrous microscope displays to the view a hundred loathsome reptiles enclosed in every drop that glitters beneath the sun! But if thou fearest not to know that which it most concerns thee to know, follow me, and thine eyes shall be opened!"

She led him to the lofty entrance of the temple, from whence they could gaze into the fair garden which surrounded it.

"We will not now speak of thy sins," said Truth; "perhaps thou deemest that thou art defiled by none. But show me first, O Rajah! thy virtues, that, if they merit the favour of the Deity, I may join my praises to those of all men."

Then the heart of Futtey Sing revived, for the topic of his virtues was ever sweet to him; and even if his life could be proved to be not quite free from sins, his merits, he felt assured, would far outweigh them.

So in his dream he beheld before him three fair and lofty trees, bending beneath the weight of the fruit which loaded their branches. The eye of the Rajah brightened as he gazed on them, and, turning to Truth, he exclaimed: "Lo! these are the trees of love to God and love to man, and thou knowest that they are mine! Behold how they are loaded with fruit, so that the boughs bend down to the earth! There is the first, that bears *deeds of beneficence*, rosy as the clouds at sunrise. The second bears *deeds of justice*, in ripe clusters of shining gold. The third bears *deeds of self-denial*, resting like snow-flakes on the dark leaves." And as he spake, again he seemed to hear the voices of men blending in loud chorus together,–"Praise to the Rajah! praise to the holy and the pious! High as is his place in this life, higher shall be his place in the next Wisdom is on his lips, and

virtue in his heart; he stands faultless before God and man!"

"When I passed by the trees of love to God and love to man"–such was the reply of Truth–"I looked, and beheld they were barren: they bare neither blossom nor fruit. Whence, then, are these clusters, red, yellow, and white? Are they indeed fruits which grow on the trees, or have they been placed there to charm and to deceive? Has the sap of life swelled them, the sweet juices filled? Approach, O Rajah! the tree upon which hang the rosy clusters; for methinks it is the *love of praise* that has placed on it seeming *deeds of beneficence*!"

She approached it without motion of foot or of wing, gliding towards it like a cloud impelled by breezes; and even thus, in his dream, did Futtey Sing appear carried on beside her. She stretched out her hand towards the fair and stately tree, and even as she stretched it, down fell the rosy shower of fruit like hail, reddening the ground on which they lay. Not one remained fixed upon the branches!

"They grew not upon the holy tree," cried the bright one; "*love of praise* had but fastened them on, and the waxen fastening melted at the approach of Truth! Thy alms were not given from love to God; thy alms were not given from love to man; they were done to be seen, they were done to be praised, and surely thou hast had thy reward! Fool, fool! dost thou claim merit for this? Lo! the dust of earth hath defiled thy *deeds of beneficence*!"

Futtey Sing heaved a sigh of bitter disappointment; he had deceived others, but himself had been most deceived.

Then, irresistibly impelled by Truth, the Rajah approached the fair and stately tree upon which hung the golden clusters. Truth stretched forth her hand, and, even as she stretched it, down fell the yellow shower of fruit like hail, gilding the ground on which they lay. Not one remained fixed upon the branches.

"They grew not on the holy tree," cried the bright one; "*interest* had but fastened them on, and the waxen fastenings melted at the approach of Truth! Well has it been said by the wise–'*Man judges of our motives by our actions, God judges of our actions by our motives*!' Thou knewest that the strength of thy throne was justice; and therefore, O Rajah, wert thou just! Surely thou hast had thy reward! Fool, fool! dost thou claim merit for this? Lo! the dust of earth hath defiled thy *deeds of justice*!"

And Futtey Sing sighed more heavily than before; he had deceived others, but himself had been most deceived.

So in his dream the Rajah approached the third tree, the fair and stately tree upon which hung the milk-white clusters, the *deeds of self-denial*! Truth stretched forth her hand, and, even as she stretched it, down fell the snowy shower of fruit like hail, whitening the ground on which they lay. Not one remained on the branches!

"They grew not on the holy tree," cried the bright one; "*pride* had but fastened them on, and the waxen fastenings melted at the approach of Truth! Thou didst feel exalted in thine own eyes by thy humiliations, thy fastings and thy oblations raised thee in thine own sight above the level of common men. Surely thou hast had thy reward! Fool, fool! dost thou claim merit for this? Lo! the dust of the earth hath defied thy deeds of *self-denial*!"

Then Futtey Sing groaned aloud; he had deceived others, but himself had been most deceived.

"What see I yonder," said Truth, "on the marble before the porch of thy temple? Every bird of goodly plumage appears to be there, with wings of emerald and sapphire, and necks of changing hues, like the varied colours of the opal Tell me, O Futtey Sing! what are these?"

Again the spirit of the Rajah revived–again his heart throbbed with a feeling of pride, as he gave answer in his dream: "These are the thousands of prayers which I have uttered, at morn, at noon, and at the hour of sunset. Have I not worn the marble with my knees? nay, have I not stolen the hours from sleep, and with the voice of my supplication pierced the dull air of night! These, my prayers, like birds of strong wing, shall rise above the clouds, appear for me before the eternal throne, and draw down a blessing from on high!"

"Yea," replied Truth, "the Supreme loves to receive the prayers of his people. The faintest sigh from a true, humble heart, mounts far beyond the twinkling stars. But wherefore rest thine upon the ground? Will they not take flight at our approach? Are their goodly wings so clogged that they cannot rise?"

And Futtey Sing trembled as they drew nigh to the porch of his temple; and the light which gleamed through the silvery veil of Truth fell on the types of his prayers. Lo! death had breathed on the birds whose plumage looked so bright from afar! Stiff and cold, with ruffled feathers, they lay on the marble! A few, but a few, with some feeble show of life, fluttered their pinions and rose for a little way from earth, then sank down again as though these pinions were of lead! And many others were already corrupted by decay, so that the Rajah shrank from the touch of them as from pollution!

"Are these, then, thy merits!" exclaimed Truth; "thy lifeless prayers that rise not to Heaven–the prayers which thou fearest to examine! Here is the form, but where is the life–the outside show, but the spirit is wanting! Thou hast never uttered one real and acceptable prayer, for the first petition that can rise as on an eagle's wing from guilty man to his Creator is the petition for mercy–the first cry that brings down a blessing is the cry, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!'"

The Rajah bowed his head and was silent

"Let us return into the Temple of the Heart," said Truth. "But a small portion of it can be seen by thee: it has deep recesses, which can never be explored but

by the eye of Omniscience; yet mayst thou learn something by the quest."

Then reluctantly, yet drawn on by invisible power, Futtey Sing re-entered through the porch of the temple.

The place seemed strangely changed, as places do change in dreams. The gold on the pillars was dim, the silver was tarnished and blackened; where jewels had shone there were spots, and spots upon the pavement of marble.

"What are these spots?" cried the Rajah; "I behold them wherever I turn my eye, staining the wall, specking the floor, numerous as a flight of locusts, which darken the earth as with a cloud!"

"These are the evil words of thy lips," replied Truth; "every day has added to the number, and well mayst thou compare them to locusts, whose myriads blacken the plain. Thou hast deemed that a word once spoken hath passed away from thee for ever, because thou seest not its shape on the air, nor its shadow on the ground; but every one is remembered and recorded. Each hasty word of anger has fallen like a red drop, not to be washed away; every word of profanity or pride like a black drop, whose stain lies deep on the soul; nay, every idle and foolish word hath left its mark–and who, O Futtey Sing! shall number them?"

Then the Rajah started and trembled. "What are these unclean birds," he cried, "that swoop round my head, filling the air with the rustle of their flight; and these winged reptiles and creeping ones that cross my path, unsightly and loathsome to behold?"

"These are the evil thoughts that have haunted thy heart ever since thy mind opened to knowledge–thoughts of pride, thoughts of covetousness, of malice, envy, and impurity. Thou didst think them gone for ever, like the track of a vessel through the waves, or of a vulture through the air; but they live in the sight of the Omniscient, before whom the past and the future form but one infinite present."

I hen Futtey Sing wrung his hands in despair. "Who then can say, I have made my heart clean?" he exclaimed; "where is the being who is faultless before God? In vain shall we seek for the righteous upon earth; there is none who is holy, none!" And from the dome above, and from the earth beneath, a hollow echo repeated "*None!*"

"Behold here!" cried Truth, and she touched the wan, and the face of the marble was changed to glass, and a wide mirror appeared before them. "If thou wouldst know more, look into this, and see some of thy sins of *omission*!"

Then the mirror became crowded with figures; and though his eyes ached as he gazed, the Rajah could not choose but look. Fast scene succeeded to scene, and each shot a pang through his heart. He saw evils that he had winked at–duties that he had overlooked–the proud oppressing the weak–the hand of the magistrate closing on the bribe–the quiet, uncomplaining poor left to suffer ne-

glected, while idle mendicants absorbed the stream of charity which should have flowed to bless them! Futtey Sing often had dwelt with complacence on the good which he had done: he started to behold how much he had left undone. He groaned and hid his face in his hands.

"Thou hast beheld some of thy sins of *omission*," cried Truth; "shall I now show thee the sins which thou hast committed?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the Rajah; "I have seen enough, and too much! I have seen enough to humble me in dust and ashes–to make me know myself blind, wretched, and guilty! Why," he continued, bitterly, "why hast thou come to break my peace–to poison my happiness in the very temple which I have erected to the Deity? Mean and polluted it may be, but still it hath been raised to his honour."

"Is God then enthroned in this temple?" replied Truth. "It cannot be, or the presence of divine purity would have purified even it. Self-deceiver! thou standest now in the centre of the temple–thou standest at the foot of the shrine; lift up thine eyes and behold the object of thy worship–behold the Idol which thou hast adored all thy days!"

Futtey Sing glanced up; the pedestal was lofty–on image of clay was on the summit. He saw the idol, and he knew it; he saw the effigy of himself, dressed in the robes of his pride, and he fell on his face with a cry.

"To exalt self have thy good deeds been performed–to exalt self has been the motive of thy actions–to exalt self has been the object of thy life! And will the Supreme see His rightful throne in the heart given to another? Will not His lightning strike down the idol?"

It seemed as though the words shook the earth beneath their feet; it shuddered, it reeled, it heaved. It seemed as though the words awakened the thunders above their heads; they rolled, they burst, they roared in the sky. The walls trembled, rent, fell with a fearful crash, as if to bury the sinner beneath their ruins; while a vivid flash of forked lightning darted from the heavens, struck the idol of Self, and laid it prostrate in the dust.

"Save me! I perish! I perish!" exclaimed the Rajah; and with that cry of terror he awoke.

CHAPTER V.

SECRET INFLUENCES.

Mrs. Vernon closed the book. Various comments were made on the story. The question was discussed whether it were really a translation from an Eastern composition, or the work of a Christian author, who had chosen to adopt the peculiarities of the Oriental style. Flora was decidedly of the latter opinion, and showed so well the grounds upon which her judgment was formed, that she completely won over her opponent, Ada, and closed the discussion in triumph.

Was, then, Flora's position so entirely different from that of the self-righteous Rajah that his story afforded her nothing more than a field for intellectual exercise?

It was with Flora as it is with many that have been brought up in what is called "the religious world." She had heard so much, read so much, talked so much, on spiritual subjects, that she had acquired a certain amount of theological knowledge, which not only supplied the place of deep heart-devotion, but blinded her to her own want of it. Flora never for one moment during her life had felt her soul in danger, or doubted that she was walking in the narrow path which her widowed mother so faithfully trod. The warnings which she heard in sermons she constantly applied to others. She read serious works rather as a critic than as one anxiously gleaning from them lessons for the conduct of her own life. Flora earnestly upheld the doctrine of justification by faith; she owned that through the merits of the Saviour alone a sinner could find pardon from God. But in the depths of her heart; unknown to herself, there was a secret lurking feeling that her own virtue, her benevolence, her gentleness, her filial obedience, her early piety, deserved the favour of the Almighty. She did not believe that her slight short-comings merited any severe condemnation. She was unconsciously going to the marriage-supper of the King's Son in the garment of her own righteousness. The seed of the Word, received with so much joy, had fallen on stony ground; it lacked depth of earth; the leaves were fair to the eye, but the root of humility was wanting.

On the following day Ada took her departure. Her visit was not without its effect, both on herself and her cousin; for it is a solemn consideration that two beings can seldom mix in close and familiar intercourse without exercising some degree of influence on each other for evil or for good.

What she had seen and heard at Laurel Bank had rendered Ada in some degree discontented with herself. She had seen something of the beauty of a life of holiness and benevolence–at least so it appeared to her mind; and it sickened her to contrast with it her own course of selfishness and frivolity. Not, perhaps, that the impression was a very deep one, or that Ada had the slightest present intention of following the example which she admired; but she had a vague hope that a day might come, perhaps when the spring-time of youth should be over, when she too might be of some use in the world, and live for some object more

noble than to flutter through a round of gaiety amidst those whose friendship would be as lightly lost as it had been lightly given.

The effect of Ada's visit was very different upon Flora. It had not humbled, but rather confirmed her in her false estimate of her own character. At the same time it had awakened within her bosom a secret discontent at her own quiet lot, a yearning for the more brilliant and exciting scenes which her cousin loved to describe. Flora began to think–though she breathed the thought to no one–that living in the complete seclusion in which the will of Providence had placed her, was in truth a serious disadvantage. She cared less for the beauties of her garden, spent more time at her toilette, and as she looked at the lovely reflection in her mirror, she turned over in her mind, as a miser might his treasures, the flattering words of admiration which she had heard from the lips of Ada. Her school children seemed to her duller than usual; her thoughts wandered greatly at prayers; the conversation of the poor old lame captain grew insufferably tedious; and when Miss Butterfield paid one of her long, tiresome visits, Flora took care not to appear at all, but left her mother to entertain the old lady. As Eve, amidst all the charms of Eden, looked longingly at the one forbidden tree, so Flora, surrounded by blessings, inwardly repined at the decrees of Providence, yearning for the one thing denied to her–denied to her by divine wisdom and love!

Mrs. Vernon had less leisure to observe any change in her beloved daughter, from being much occupied in making preparations for the reception of the family from Barbadoes. She studiously regarded Flora's comfort in all her arrangements, while she quite neglected her own: but it was impossible to receive so large an addition to her limited household without making some changes which necessarily somewhat affected the convenience of her daughter. Flora felt the petty sacrifices which she was compelled to make, more than can be readily imagined by those who, from having been members of large families, have been accustomed from childhood to submit to them. She had been the object of her mother's almost undivided attention and care, and had grown a little selfish without being aware of it.

Nevertheless, Flora had a gentle, kindly heart. The situation of her sister-in-law touched her compassion; she felt for the young widow, bowed down by the double trial of poverty and bereavement, quitting her native land to come amongst those who were strangers to her. She was sure that she would love the dear helpless little orphans; and she spoke so sweetly on the subject, seemed to make so light of difficulties, was so ready to give herself to the congenial task of comforting the afflicted, that never had her mother more fervently thanked Heaven for such a child, or visitors left the house more impressed with the idea that Flora was the impersonification of every Christian virtue, as she was of every feminine charm!

At length dawned the long-expected day of the arrival. In a place so retired as the village of Wingsdale, comparatively trifling occurrences rose to the rank of important events. Flora, who was imaginative and poetical, had drawn in her mind so touching, a picture of the pale widow and her golden-haired cherubs, had rehearsed to herself so often the scene of the meeting, that she had worked herself into a state of eager impatience. Unable to settle steadily to anything, she fluttered from room to room, now altering the arrangement of the flowers with which she had adorned the widow's pretty boudoir, now bringing some elegant trifle of her own to add to the beauty of the effect. She pulled up the blind, that the view might be seen; then drew it down again hastily, lest the glare from without should fall painfully on the eye of sorrow. She had amused herself for several evenings by preparing a pretty book of pictures for the children, and had pleased herself by collecting little toys, with which she doubted not to find a speedy road to their hearts.

At last, in the quiet village, appeared the unexpected apparition of a post-chaise and four–an equipage which had never been seen there since the county member came to canvass in Wingsdale. All the little rustics ran eagerly to look at the unusual sight, and the cottagers stood in their doorways as the vehicle rolled past in a cloud of dust, with a quantity of luggage piled on the top, box upon box, the whole heap surmounted by a parrot cage with its screaming tenant. But what most excited the wonder of the rustics was the negro who sat upon the box. The children stared with open eyes and mouths at his black face, curly woollen hair, and thick lips, which, parted in a merry, self-satisfied grin, displayed two rows of shining white teeth.

Through the village, sweeping past the church, up the shady lane, dashed the post-chaise! The gate of Mrs. Vernon's little shrubbery stood open, and along the narrow drive rolled the dusty wheels, the horses' hoofs tearing up the carefully smoothed gravel, which even the doctor had always respected, tying up his black nag at the gate. At the sound of the arrival of the vehicle, Mrs. Vernon and Flora hastened to the entrance, their faces expressive of the welcome which their lips eagerly pronounced. The carriage-door was opened by Flora, too impatient to wait till the grinning negro tumbled down from the box: she stretched out her hands to receive some infant treasure from the crowded chaise, and a cage with a squirrel, followed by a bundle of shawls and a broken bonnet-box, were hastily thrust into them. Before she could disencumber herself of the luggage, three of the children had been handed, or rather tumbled, out of the carriage–thin, sickly-looking creatures, wrapped up in gaudy scarfs, which strangely contrasted with their faded black ribbons and dresses, and complexions which varied in shades from whity-brown to dingy-yellow. While Mrs. Vernon stooped to kiss and welcome the little strangers, the youngest of whom, from some cause

unknown, was crying as if her heart would break, Flora pressed forward to assist the widow to alight. Instead of the lady, a very fat negress, very gaudily attired, with gilt bracelets on her wrists and beads in her ears, holding a screaming baby in her arms, slowly shoved her stout person through the doorway, and heavily descended to the ground.

"My dear sister!" exclaimed Flora, in a tone of sympathy, again pressing to the carriage, and leaning forward into it to greet the afflicted widow.

A very languid voice answered from within, "Just see, do, that they are careful in taking down the parrot."

It was a chill to the feelings of Flora, and her first glance of her sister-in-law was little calculated to re-warm them into interest. Emma Vernon might once have been pretty, at least something in her air conveyed the idea that she had–and perhaps still considered herself to be so; but she had a sallow, withered look on her face, an affected expression in her sleepy black eyes, a languid listlessness in her manner, which to Flora were almost repulsive. Coldness and indifference seemed conveyed in the very touch of her thin fingers, and the cheek which, half hidden by a profusion of black curls, she turned to receive Flora's kiss. Slowly, very slowly, she descended from the carriage, leaning heavily on Mrs. Vernon and her daughter, and moving as though she were scarcely equal to the effort of placing one foot before the other. With many a pause, and many a sigh, she reached the lovely little boudoir which Mrs. Vernon, at considerable personal inconvenience, had appropriated to her use.

Emma sank on the sofa, and in an affected voice exclaimed, "Take away those flowers–I can't bear them!–take them away or I shall faint!"

Flora hastened to remove the beautiful bouquet, while Mrs. Vernon offered a scent-bottle to the languishing lady.

"I hope, dear Emma, that country quiet will soon restore you," she said soothingly.

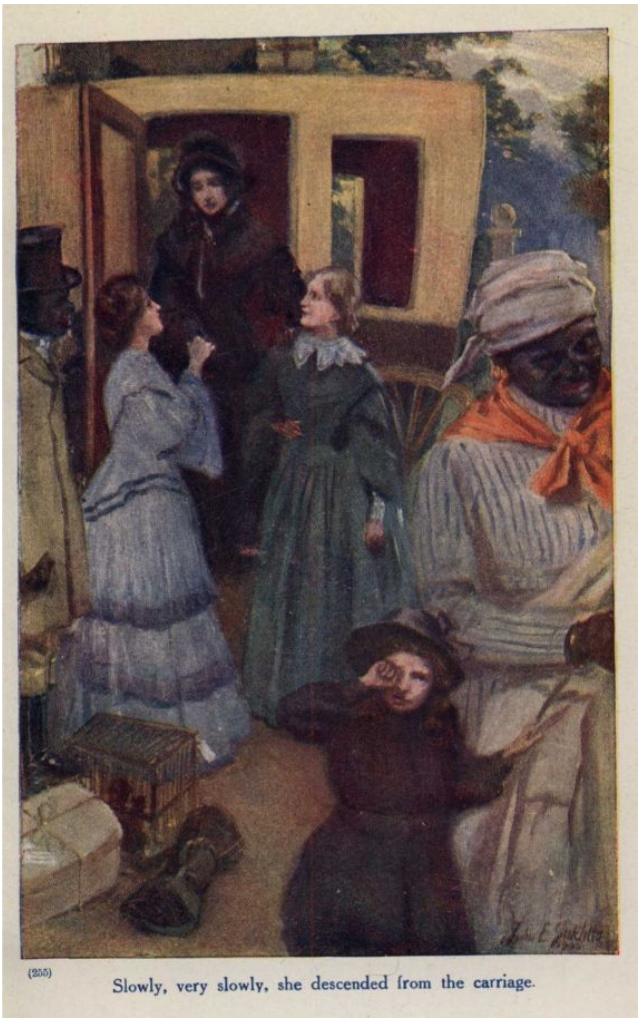
"Do open the window–there's not a breath of air–this room is so small!" lisped the newly arrived.

"How strange it is," thought Flora, "that she neither asks nor thinks about her children! Nothing but her own comfort seems to occupy her mind, and it does not appear very easy to please her. I will go and look after her little ones."

Flora was followed into the passage by her mother, who looked a little troubled and anxious.

"My dear child," said Mrs. Vernon, laying her hand on Flora's arm, "what are we to make of the negro? I never calculated on Emma's bringing a man-servant with her."

"I'm sure I don't know, mamma. It was very inconsiderate in her, I think. But everything seems so strange and confusing and uncomfortable, I am afraid–"



Slowly, very slowly, she descended from the carriage.

she stopped in her sentence.

"We must make the best of everything, my love. Just go and see that the poor dear children are comfortable in their nursery."

Flora obeyed without reply.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NURSERY.

As Flora approached the nursery, its vicinity was sufficiently indicated by the sound of loud, passionate crying, and then that of several sharp slaps; which made her quicken her steps, lest the black nurse, whose looks she distrusted, should be maltreating any of the children. The first glance at the interior of the room, however, showed her that the fat old negress was not the giver, but the recipient of the blows! Before her was a little boy in a furious tempest of passion, kicking, striking, and roaring, while Flora's pretty book of pictures lay in a hundred fragments at his feet!

"Oh! Massa Johnny, Massa Johnny!" exclaimed old Chloe in an expostulating tone, as he struck her again and again with the ferocity of a little tiger. Flora sprang forward and caught his hand, but only turned his passion upon herself. The child clutched at her flowing locks, and it was not without difficulty and pain that she extricated her hair from his grasp. He then flung himself down on the floor, and rolled on it in impotent passion.

"What can be the meaning of all this?" exclaimed Flora, surprised and ruffled by the unexpected attack.

"Oh! Massa Johnny, he only want to pull de swing 'uns off de clock; he very angry cause he cannot get em."

"I am afraid that Johnny is a very naughty boy," said Flora, smoothing down her disordered tresses, and looking down with the reverse of admiration on the dark little savage before her.

"Oh! Massa Johnny, he have great speerit, he have mighty great speerit!" was the nonchalant reply, as the negress slowly rose from her seat to attend to the baby, who had been sleeping in a cradle, but who, awakened by the noise, now swelled it with his fretful cry.

"I'm sure, if one doesn't want a dozen hands atween them all!" pursued the old woman, trying to hush the child; "there's Miss Lyddie now, there's no

knowing where she's agone–I've not set eyes on her this half-hour!"

"Not know where she is!" said Flora, glancing round anxiously. Emmie, the youngest child but one, was quietly amusing herself in a corner, breaking off the legs of the wooden animals belonging to an ark which Mrs. Vernon had provided for her amusement. But no trace of Miss Lyddie was to be seen. Flora hurried from the room to search for the little truant.

It was not long before she found her in the dining-room, close to a small press in which various preserves and other little dainties were kept. Lyddie was several years older than the other children, and tall for her age; her lank overgrown form, untidy hair, awkward carriage and sickly face, conveying to the mind the idea that she was like some idle weed, which had sprung up uncared-for and untended, She started slightly on seeing Flora, and hastily closed the door of the press, which had stood a little ajar.

"O Lyddie!" exclaimed Flora, "it is very wrong indeed to take sweets without asking leave!"

"I didn't!" said the child, shrinking back from her touch, and eyeing her with a furtive glance.

"Look there!" cried Flora, pointing very gravely to some unmistakable crimson stains on the dress and hands of the girl. "It is still worse to tell an untruth about it."

The girl pouted, and put two fingers into her mouth.

"O Lyddie! has no one taught you who sees our actions, and–" Flora was commencing a gentle, but very serious reproof, when it was suddenly cut short by her auditor darting from the room.

"What dreadful children!" said poor Flora to herself; "they seem more unmanageable, more uncared for, both as regards their physical and moral condition, than the poorest cottager in the village! We must speak seriously to their mother about them; it is impossible to let them go on in this way."

To speak to Mrs. John Vernon was not at that moment practicable, as she had gone to sleep on the sofa, and was on no account to be disturbed. The dinner, which had been delayed for some hours for her arrival, was thus again indefinitely postponed, as both Mrs. Vernon and her daughter thought it more courteous to take their meal with their guest, instead of sharing that prepared for the children. Flora felt irritated and tired, and very little disposed to look at the bright side of affairs. The noisy voices of the children seemed never to be silent. They penetrated every part of the house; no room appeared safe from the intrusion of unwelcome little guests: for a spirit of active curiosity was a characteristic of Lyddie, and Johnny was prosecuting a search for his negro Sambo, which carried him to places where he was unlikely, as well as those where he was likely to find him.

At length Emma awoke from her siesta, but Mrs. Vernon found that her politeness towards the lady had been carried to an unnecessary extent. Emma declined joining the family at table; she preferred having her dinner carried to her in her boudoir. Flora, desirous to please her new guest, herself took the refreshment to her, and had the mortification to find that it consisted of the only thing, as Emma declared with a sickly smile, that really she could not touch; while, when pressed to say what she fancied, she named something which it was difficult, if not impossible to procure!

Flora dined alone with her mother. This was a relief, for she was weary, and out of spirits and out of patience. She resolved not to trouble her mother more than she could possibly help with her own annoyances and perplexities, for Mrs. Vernon looked harassed and anxious already. When the lady had gone to superintend the sleeping arrangements of the children, Flora sought the boudoir of her sister-in-law, having previously rehearsed many times in her mind the conversation which she thought might take place between them, and having studied how she could tell painful truths in the most gentle and least irritating way.

The widow was still reclining on the sofa, her cap put aside on account of the heat, a fan and scent-bottle beside her; and she received Flora with the languid, affected smile, which to that young lady was peculiarly unpleasing.

"I hope that you have now recovered a little from your fatigue," said Flora, seating herself beside Emma.

The only reply was a languid sigh, accompanied by a slight elevation of the eyebrows, and then a closing of the eyes.

Flora paused for awhile, and played with the clasp of her bracelet, before she ventured to say, "Emma, there was one thing which I wished to ask you–have you perfect confidence in your black nurse?"

The lady opened her eyes. "Oh! she's the best creature in the world!" Here the scent-bottle was in requisition.

"You know, of course, whether she is a Christian?"

"Well–oh! why"–(each word was drawled forth as though to speak were too fatiguing)–"yes; she has a crucifix and beads; she is a Christian, I am sure of it."

"And is it possible–" Flora felt herself beginning to warm with her subject, but with an effort of self-control she commanded herself, and proceeded in the same gentle tones as those in which she had commenced.

"Do you think it desirable to trust her so entirely with the children? I viewed a little scene in the nursery to-day which gave me an idea that Johnny's temper requires more judicious management."

Emma looked so utterly indifferent, that Flora gave her a more lively description of the little scene, and of her own unpleasant part in it, than she had

intended to have done.

"Poor dear! he has so much spirit!" was the only observation of the mother.

"But I have more painful things to tell you," said Flora, feeling utterly provoked; and without further reserve, she gave an account of Lyddie's conduct at the press, which would greatly have distressed a tender and conscientious parent, but which only elicited the words "Poor dear!" uttered in a more sleepy tone than before.

"But, Emma, this must not be!" exclaimed Flora, with kindling indignation; "these poor unhappy orphans are not to be left to acquire habits of dishonesty and untruth–"

She stopped suddenly, for she knew that she had said too much; she saw it in the malignant expression which lighted for a moment the sleepy black eye, she felt it in the quick throbbing of her own heart. Glad was Flora that her mother's entrance gave her an excuse for quitting the room. She sought her own in a very bitter spirit.

"Mamma," said Flora to Mrs. Vernon, when they were both retiring to rest, "I fear that we shall have a dreadful time with this family! There will be no more comfort in the house. Those miserable, neglected children will be the torments of our lives!"

"We must have patience with them, my love; they will not be neglected here."

"But Emma will hang as a drag-chain on all our efforts to improve them. She seems to regard nothing upon earth but her own comfort and convenience, and listens with that odious smile to things which should make a mother blush for very shame!"

"My love–" expostulated Mrs. Vernon.

"I do not like that woman, mother, and I am certain that I never shall. She looks so heartless, and silly, and affected!"

"We must not be hard upon her, my Flora; her own education has probably been neglected. You have had a day of fatigue and excitement, and it re-acts on your own spirits, my dear. Go and rest now, you need it; all may seem more sunshiny in the morning."

Flora sought rest, but that night she was not destined to find it. In the room next to hers was the baby, and hour after hour his wailing cry sounded in her ears, driving away sleep; thrice she started up and hastened to see if nothing could be done to soothe him. As morning dawned the babe fell asleep, and so did the exhausted Flora, to dream of the house being attacked by a legion of negroes, till she was awakened at an earlier hour than usual by the sound of a furious

quarrel between Johnny and Lyddie.

CHAPTER VII.
THE TOUCHSTONE.

And so passed day after day, each appearing to Flora more unendurable than the last. She at first sought refuge in her favourite woody haunts, and there reading some pleasant book, or throwing her own thoughts into verse, she enjoyed brief but delicious respite from the cares and vexations of her home. But a season of rainy weather cut off even this source of enjoyment, and she was imprisoned in the house with four noisy, quarrelsome children, and a companion whom she disliked and despised.

Mrs. John Vernon was a very weak woman, and had all the infirmities and follies naturally attendant on characters of such a stamp. She was, of course, passionately fond of dress–a fondness which even the necessity for wearing mourning did not subdue. Flora could scarcely disguise her contempt when she saw how completely the thoughts and time of this vain, silly woman, were engrossed by the cares of the toilette; how she squandered money, which she would perhaps have to borrow, In decking out her person in all the extravagance of fashion. "As if," Flora thought to herself, "all the silks and lace in the world could ever give the shadow of beauty to that insipid, affected face!"

Emma was unpunctual in the extreme; and this, to one accustomed to the clock-work regularity of a small, well-ordered household, was a defect of no small magnitude. It interfered with the comfort of every one, and sorely tried the patience of Flora.

The widow was also absurdly fanciful about her own health. She was afraid of exertion, afraid of cold; and, by some unfortunate contrariety, her opinion on the subject of the weather never seemed to coincide with that of those around her. When Mrs. Vernon felt chilly, Emma was certain to be longing for open windows and air; if Flora found the room oppressively warm, Emma languidly suggested a fire. The widow loved to draw upon herself the attention of all who approached her; she would rather have been disliked than unnoticed; she must attract the observation, occupy the thoughts of all, or she felt herself wronged and neglected.

Gently did Mrs. Vernon bear with the infirmities of one whom it was dif-

ficult to love, impossible to respect. Gradually and quietly she made suggestions on the management of Emma's family, or the arrangement of her pecuniary affairs. But tenderly as every hint was given, it was received either with irritation or peevish distress; and when, at length, detected instances of dishonesty on the part of both Sambo and the nurse induced Mrs. Vernon gently, but firmly, to urge the necessity for dismissing them both, her words occasioned a burst of passionate tears, succeeded by a long fit of depression.

"Mamma," said Flora one morning to her parent, as they sat together at breakfast, a meal which was never graced by the presence of the widow, who kept her own room till noonday–"Mamma, I do not think that we can endure all this much longer. It is impossible to please Emma, whatever we do: let her set up house for herself, and manage as she may!"

Mrs. Vernon looked very grave, and it was some moments before she replied. "I think, Flora, that you can scarcely have reflected on what would be the result of such an attempt. You can scarcely have failed to observe how careless poor Emma is of money, how unable she is to manage a household, or to keep account of its expenses. She would certainly involve herself inextricably in debt, while the consequences to the unhappy orphans must be such as would deeply distress us both."

"They could scarcely be worse than they are," said Flora, bitterly; "wild, ignorant, unmanageable little creatures. I have attempted several times to teach Lyddie, but she has always darted away like a little wild colt; while Master Johnny, the other day, threw the spelling-book out of the window. Their footprints are over all my borders, their fingers cannot be kept off my flowers; Lyddie strewed the walks yesterday with apple-blossoms, while Emmie managed to get hold of my paint-box, and has not only mixed all the colours together, but has left traces of them on a dozen of our books."

"It is very trying; it quite distresses me, my Flora, to see the annoyance and discomfort which you suffer. Night after night I lie awake, turning over in my mind by what means I can prevent the inconvenience from falling upon my child. But no path seems to open before me. Emma is as unfit to keep house for herself as her own Lyddie would be; and I feel–I am sure that you feel–that, as long as we have a home, the orphan grandchildren of your beloved father should never be denied its shelter!"

Flora pressed her mother's hand fondly to her lips, "Oh, mamma! you are so good!" she exclaimed; "and what a return do you meet! I do believe that if we were to give up our house altogether, or only to remain in it as servants, slaving from morning till night, and denying ourselves common comforts that Emma might enjoy every luxury, she would take it quite as a matter of course, think that everything was as it should be, and feel not one spark of gratitude towards

us, whatever our sacrifices might cost us!"

There was much truth in Flora's remark. In a mind mean and selfish as the widow's, gratitude has rarely a place. Alas! that in the world it should be a virtue so rare! Not that I would for a moment swell with my voice that cry so common, yet often so unjust, which indiscriminately charges the poor with ingratitude towards their benefactors. Far from it; in this virtue, as in many others, I believe that the comparatively rich may often learn a lesson from the poor. There are perhaps few in the world who have no opportunity of exercising gratitude, few who lie under no obligations either for substantial services, or for kindly attentions; watchful care in infancy, help in difficulty, generous hospitality, or some other of the thousand acts of benevolence and friendship which so sweeten the cup of human life. Yes, the many are laid under obligations, but the few have the candour to acknowledge them; the many are helped, benefited, and cheered–the few gratefully remember the benefactor. The lepers in the gospel are still types of human nature. *Ten were cleansed, but where are the nine*? Reader! pause a moment; ask your own heart, do you treasure up the remembrance of benefits–do you carefully keep up the warm glow which perhaps kindled in your heart when you first received them? Or has the cold wave of time chilled the generous warmth of your feelings–or, worse still, did that warmth never exist? From such observations as I have been enabled to make, it seems to me to be almost a general rule that the most truly generous are also the most grateful–that those who most readily do acts of kindness, most thankfully acknowledge them from others.

Nor let us think want of gratitude a light sin, or one which we may safely overlook. The same proud, thankless spirit which leads us to forget our obligations to man, is at the root of our unbelief, our indifference, our coldness towards Him who is the giver of all good. We receive our blessings as rights; we think little of the mercy which bestowed them, or we should scarcely dare to murmur and repine when the smallest is taken away from us. When Flora accused her sister-in-law of ingratitude, she little thought how well the charge might have been retorted on herself. Had she not been loaded with mercies–granted health, strength, all the comforts of life, opportunity of benefiting others, and power of pleasing–the love of her friends, the deep tenderness of a mother–and, above all, innumerable spiritual blessings, the means of grace, and the hope of glory!

And yet, with all this, the heart which the world deemed so pure, the heart whose depths she had never yet fathomed, was now filled with a bitter, almost a rebellious spirit. Flora had worked–was well pleased to work for God, but it must be in her own way; she could make sacrifices for religion, but the choice of the sacrifice must be her own. It was as though the soldier who for years had glittered on parade, and performed the routine of daily duty with faultless

regularity in time of peace, had started back when the war-trumpet sounded, had turned from the sterner obligations before him, and murmured because he was called upon at last to "endure hardness," and to face trial in a holy cause.

Flora was still ready to sit by the sick, to visit the dying, and to teach in the school; she was still willing to give freely to the poor, looking for a plenteous reward hereafter, and receiving in the present the interest of human gratitude, admiration, and love. But she was not ready to be "*kind to the unthankful and the evil*," to "*let patience have its perfect work*," to strive to reclaim wilful and unruly children, with the prospect of awakening the jealousy of their parent, but never of rousing her to a sense of obligation. Flora's religion was not "the love of Christ" which "*constraineth*," therefore in the time of trial it failed her.

Consideration for her mother usually restrained Flora from making audible complaints, though she had not sufficient command over herself to abstain from them altogether; but she indemnified herself for her forbearance by writing to Ada full and circumstantial details of all her petty miseries, with a by no means flattering description of the family from Barbadoes. It was a letter which Flora would not willingly have seen in the hands of her revered pastor; she would never have addressed it to her mother; she had some doubts, after having finished it, whether it would be well to post it. But it was really a clever and amusing letter; it eased her heart to write it; she was glad to have some way of giving vent to the pent-up flood of bitterness which was beginning to overflow its bounds.

The letter brought a speedy reply, containing an affectionate and urgent invitation to Flora to join her cousin in London, giving a glowing description of the amusements which she would enjoy, while a P.S. entreated her not to delay her visit, lest she should lose all the May-meetings in Exeter Hall, which Ada was "sure that to one so good would be a greater pleasure than all the rest."

Flora uttered an involuntary exclamation of delight as she perused the letter of her cousin. It was as though a caged bird had suddenly seen the door of his prison open, and the way free to liberty and to sunshine. She was full of impatience to show Ada's epistle to her mother, and could scarcely endure the delay occasioned by Mrs. Vernon's having to examine into the cause of a furious dispute between Johnny and his elder sister, and then to administer gentle advice and reproof to each of the little offenders. The interruption appeared to Flora so vexatious and petty–she would willingly have ended it at once by sending both the children away to the most distant part of the house, to settle their disputes by themselves; but her mother calculated more truly the importance of whatever regards the training of immortal beings.

At length, however, Johnny and Lyddie were dismissed, having been, after much trouble, induced to exchange the kiss of forgiveness; and the door had scarcely closed behind them, when Flora placed the letter in the hand of her

mother. Eagerly she watched the expression of Mrs. Vernon's countenance as she read it. The lady perused it to the end before she uttered a word, and then she glanced up with a smile.

"What do you say to this, Flora?"

"Oh, mamma–it is just as you like–just as you think best–but–"

"This invitation seems to meet a difficulty which has pressed heavily on my mind. I have grieved to feel how trying to you has been the change in our family arrangements. You have grown thinner and paler; your spirits have left you; for the first time in my life it has pained me to look at my child, It is better, perhaps, that you should be absent from home till we bring matters into a somewhat better train."

"It seems almost like deserting you, mamma; and yet–I do not think that I can help you much–I have not the least influence with the children."

Why was it that even Flora knew that her absence at this time would be actually a relief to her mother? How was it that she had proved a burden rather than a helper? She had never put the question fairly to her own heart, and was very glad to substitute for it another.

"Does it not seem to you, mamma, as though I might be more useful in London than I am here? I believe that poor dear Ada really likes me; I have some influence with her, I believe: she seemed here to be turning her mind more towards religion than she hitherto had done; but she has no one now to speak to or consult on serious subjects. If I were with her she would be induced for my sake to go to meetings which she would not otherwise attend–it seems to me that it may really be my duty to go to Ada at this time."

"It will be your pleasure, at least," said Mrs. Vernon, smiling; "and your happiness is ever near to my heart. I can trust your principles, my Flora; I believe that you will ever act in my absence as you would if my eye were upon you. And the Almighty may, and I trust will, make you, my love, a blessing to others, if you serve Him with a humble, devoted heart and a single eye to His glory."

CHAPTER VIII.

PLEASURES AND PAINS.

A few days after the conversation recorded in our last chapter took place, Flora, full of youthful hope and joy, sprang into the carriage which was to convey her

to the station, and waved again and again a fond farewell to the beloved parent who watched her departure from the gate.

It was with mixed emotions that the gentle widow beheld disappearing down the winding lane the carriage which held her dearest earthly treasure, separated from her for the first time. Mrs. Vernon took pleasure in her daughter's pleasure, and had, perhaps, secret pride in the thought that her beauty, talents, and virtues, would now be more widely known and appreciated. But there was pain also in parting; pain with which the meek parent reproached herself–that Flora could be so happy in parting! There was a secret fear, which Mrs. Vernon thought want of faith, lest the different scenes into which she was entering should, were it even in the slightest degree, change one who, in her partial love, she thought could scarcely change for the better. Mrs. Vernon also suffered from the cares and anxieties of life, which she now must bear alone; for she was not one to complain, even to her most intimate friends, of the secret trials of her home. The peevishness, the selfishness, the heartlessness of Emma, the wayward passions of her ill-taught children, the loss of the quiet repose of a well-ordered dwelling, were a cross to Mrs. Vernon as well as to her daughter; if to the latter it formed the most painful burden, it was because she murmured, struggled, and chafed under its weight, while the widow bent meekly under it, remembering the divine hand that had laid it upon her.

So, quietly and unostentatiously, never dreaming either of merit or reward, the widow went through her round of daily duties, ordering her household, teaching the children, caring for her guest, nursing the infant, and never forgetting the poor. Emma's total indifference on the subject of religion often grieved Mrs. Vernon; but trusting in God, and not in herself, the simple Christian would not despair even of a heart which seemed like the beaten highway, on which the good seed fell only at once to be carried away. There was no use in lending religious works to Emma; the volumes lay unopened beside her. She never considered herself equal to the fatigue of attending service in the house of God. Mr. Ward and his wife paid her more than one visit. The good man spoke, as was his wont, out of the abundance of his heart; while Mrs. Vernon listened meekly with her clasped hands resting on her knee. But even he was chilled by the affected nod and meaningless smile with which the daughter-in-law received his words of holy consolation; while his wife felt uncomfortable under the dark eye which seemed scrutinizing every article of her simple apparel.

Not every one bore as patiently as Mrs. Ward this scrutinizing survey of dress from the fashionable and extravagantly-attired young widow. Miss Butterfield, who had a character and a temper of her own, was irritated by the close attention paid to her large poke-bonnet and rusty shawl. She made some observations, more true than polite, about heads like band-boxes in a milliner's

shop, intended to hold nothing more weighty than quilings and puffings; which brought an angry tinge to Emma's sallow cheek, and made her bitterly comment, when the guest had departed, upon the insufferable vulgarity of Mrs. Vernon's country acquaintance.

"How can I win Emma's attention to anything serious?" such was Mrs. Vernon's frequent thought, till one day the happy idea struck her mind of reading to her Flora's manuscript hymns. "If any human writings can interest her, these will," thought the simple-hearted mother. "She will listen to them first for the sake of the authoress, and then their own beauty must touch her heart;–I am sure that it always does mine!"

Emma could not, of course, refuse her assent to the proposal to read aloud the verses of her sister. She declared that she would be charmed to hear them, secretly hoping that the infliction might not be long, and that her mother-in-law would not think it necessary to go through the volume from beginning to end. Mrs. Vernon read with great impressiveness and feeling; every touching sentiment, every graceful idea, gained added beauty from her earnest expression. She was pleased and gratified by the profound silence of her listener, and read on, and on, warming with her subject, till in one favourite hymn, which described the blessedness of living for eternity, her eyes filled, and her heart overflowed, and she turned, as she wiped away a thankful tear, to see if Emma shared her emotions. The widow lay fast asleep on the sofa!

The only things to which Emma listened with real interest were portions of Flora's letters from London. These, written to amuse her mother in her seclusion, and full of lively descriptions given with freshness and vigour by one to whom everything which she beheld was new, were, even to a stranger, extremely entertaining. By Mrs. Vernon the arrival of the post was looked forward to as bringing the one great treat of the day, and never once was she disappointed of it. She feasted on the letters of her daughter with unmingled delight; for she saw in them proofs of the conscientious regard which Flora paid to her wishes, and of the tender affection with which, in the midst of her amusements, her heart clung to the parent whom she had left.

All the little circle of friends in the quiet village of Wingsdale shared in Mrs. Vernon's enjoyment. They listened to accounts of the first wondrous Crystal Palace, glittering like some fairy structure on the trodden sward of Hyde Park; the "sermons in stones" preached from the spoils of old Nineveh; descriptions of the treasures of art, all the things beautiful, curious, and rare, upon which the eye of Flora had rested delighted. They heard also personal descriptions of men with whose names they were already familiar–how Shaftesbury had spoken, and Guthrie had preached; whilst not least interesting to the hearts of her rural subjects was a graphic account of our gracious Queen from the enthusiastic pen

of Flora.

But never had the young correspondent expressed herself in such glowing terms of admiration and pleasure as in her description of Sir Amery Legrange, whom she spoke of as one of the leading writers of the day. She had been actually introduced to "the lion," had listened to the wondrous flow of eloquence which made his conversation an intellectual treat beyond any which she had ever known before. With his expansive brow, eagle eye, most poetical cast of countenance, his were exactly the face and form which a painter would wish to immortalize on canvas, as representing the beau ideal of a genius; and Flora could not but imagine that Sir Amery must have drawn himself in the hero of his famous *chef-d'oeuvre*, "The Master-Mind."

"'The Master-Mind!'" lisped Emma from the sofa; "Oh! I have read that–all the world has read it–it is a most charming work! I have it somewhere in my boxes, I think."

Mrs. Vernon was content to be classed with those not of the world, for she had never read, nor even heard of the book. She was pleased, however, that her child should have met one of the literary celebrities of London, and had thus added another to the pleasant recollections which she would carry with her from the metropolis.

The next morning's post brought a description of a *fête* at the Botanical Gardens; and this sentence occurred in Flora's letter: "We met our brilliant author just as we were entering the gardens, and he remained the whole time with our party. He has certainly wonderful powers of conversation; just such as might be expected from a writer whose pen seems dipped in the colours of the rainbow, and brightens whatever it touches. When he speaks, we can do nothing but listen."

"I think, Emma," said Mrs. Vernon, "that you mentioned that you had a copy of 'The Master-Mind' beside you. I should be obliged, if you would allow me to read it."

"Oh, certainly, when I can lay hands upon it; but all my luggage is still one mass of confusion, and whatever I want is certain to be at the very bottom of the very last box into which I should think of looking for it. But you really wish to see 'The Master-Mind?' Well," added the lady, with an affected laugh, "I should as soon have dreamed of Mr. Ward's dancing a polka, as of your sitting quietly down to a novel!"

Emma's promise to look for the work was speedily forgotten by herself, nor did more than one reminder induce her to take this slight trouble for one to whom she owed the comfort of a home.

Flora's subsequent letters contained scarcely any mention of Sir Amery. She occasionally quoted his opinion, or mentioned a brilliant remark made by him on some subject of general interest; but it was merely from such passing

allusions that her mother gathered that Flora was not unfrequently in the society of the literary "lion."

Mrs. Vernon had much to occupy her thoughts–much to engage her anxious attention. She was now patiently listening to the frivolous complaints of the hypochondriac widow; then quitting her to stand by the death-bed of a young school-girl–hear her last faint breathings of devotion–receive her last message of affection to Flora. The next hour would find Mrs. Vernon seated amongst the children, enduring their rough play and noisy glee, and ministering to their amusement as patiently as she had done to the wants of the suffering and the dying. But the wear upon her spirits and the strain upon her energies were too much for the strength of Mrs. Vernon. There was no one to watch her faded cheek, her weary step, her languid eye; no one, at least in her own home, to think for her, care for her–attend to the comforts of one who ever attended to the comforts of others. She might have been ill, she might have been dying, and Emma, absorbed in her own selfish cares, would never have observed that anything ailed her. Mrs. Vernon missed Flora each day more and more–longed more and more to hear her light step on the stair, her sweet song from the garden–to look again into those soft and loving eyes which were wont to rest on her so tenderly, so fondly. But Mrs. Vernon would not abridge a visit which afforded so much enjoyment to her daughter; she would not, even by the slightest allusion to her own failing health and spirits, throw a shadow over that enjoyment. She was content if Flora was happy; and if she herself needed comfort and strength, was not the source of all comfort and strength ever open to the Christian!

CHAPTER IX.

THE NOVEL.

One afternoon, Mrs. Vernon returned exceedingly wearied from a visit to a sick woman who resided at some distance. The walk was too long for her, and had her daughter been at home, she would not have been suffered to take it; for Flora, in the vigour of her youthful strength, appropriated to herself all the more distant visits. Certainly a feeling of regret crossed the mind of Mrs. Vernon, as she wearily ascended her own stair, and heard loud, angry sounds from above, that peace and seclusion were now hers no longer–that she could not have rest when she was tired, nor solitude when she was sad. But she struggled against

the feeling as against a sin.

As Mrs. Vernon approached the door of Emma's sleeping apartment, it was evident that the sound came from thence, and that the angry voice was the widow's.

"Tiresome monkey! you have destroyed it entirely! my beautiful India muslin! Was ever mother tormented as I am? Ah, is that you?" continued Emma, as Mrs. Vernon crossed the entrance to her room. "Just come in here, do, and see what this insufferable child has been doing!"

Mrs. Vernon entered, and beheld Lyddie, the little culprit, in the centre of the apartment, fancifully arrayed in all the finery which she had pillaged from a large trunk of her mother's. A yellow satin dress, with the body turned in, was fastened by a red scarf round the waist of the child; and being, of course, much too long, swept the floor on every side with its gaudy folds. Long feathers, scarlet and white, were stuck in the girl's lank dark hair; while an India muslin shawl, which had been twisted into the form of a turban, appeared, with a grievous rent in the middle, in the hands of the irritated parent.

"Did you ever see anything like it? The vanity, the folly, the absurdity of the child! Here I find her parading before the glass, dressed up like a May-queen, and in all the best clothes which I used to wear in my happier days! Take them off!" she cried in a shriller tone to the child, who stood biting the ends of her fingers, in mingled sulkiness and fear. "Take them off, I say! and if ever you touch them again, you shall have a whipping–such a whipping as you will remember to the last day of your life! I am sure that no one," she continued, turning towards Mrs. Vernon, who was silently disrobing the culprit–"no one but a parent can tell the incessant anxiety, plague, and worry, caused by children! It is enough to drive us out of our senses!"

Mrs. Vernon saw in the expression of the countenances of both mother and child something far more saddening to her gentle spirit than the destruction of anything that gold could replace;–anger in the one, sullen defiance in the other; not maternal solicitude grieving over the folly of a daughter, but selfish vanity irritated at the loss of a bauble; not filial love distressed at the displeasure of a parent, but pride rising against the threat of punishment. Emma would permit the gravest faults of her children to pass unnoticed, until their consequences affected her own comfort, and then the most trivial excited in her anger as unreasonable as her former indifference had been culpable.

"I do not see that your English nurse manages the children any better than old Chloe. I always said, and I always will say, that it was a great pity to make any change," cried Emma fretfully, willing as usual to blame anybody and anything but herself.

"We can scarcely expect wonders to be worked in three days," replied Mrs.

Vernon, as Lyddie, released from her cumbrous finery, made a hasty exit from the room, glad to escape from the presence of her mother. "To change old ways, and to introduce habits of order and obedience, must ever be a work of patience and time. And does it not appear to you, Emma," continued Mrs. Vernon, cautiously approaching dangerous ground, "that children insensibly imbibe more from watching the example of those who are with them, than from any direct instruction?"

"I do not comprehend what that has to do with the question," said Emma, stooping over the trunk to replace its contents.

"If our dear children see by our conduct how little we care for the petty vanities of this life, if they see that our minds are fixed upon nobler objects than the adorning of our poor perishing forms, they will learn to estimate at their true value such trifles as these"–Mrs. Vernon was handing the feathers to her daughter in-law–"and are not likely to fall into the childish folly into which our poor Lyddie has to-day been betrayed."

"Ah! here is 'The Master-Mind'" cried Emma, suddenly, diving into the lowest recess of her trunk, and bringing from thence two old soiled volumes. It is not impossible that a desire to change the subject of conversation had quickened her perceptions, and led her to make the discovery which turned it into a more agreeable channel. "This is the *novel* which you are so impatient to read. Here are the first and third volumes; I think that the second must be lost; but doubtless it is all the same to you, you could never spare enough of your valuable time for the perusal of more than two."

Mrs. Vernon took the work, and laid it aside; she had not at that hour leisure for reading. But when the children had gone to rest, and their mother retired to her own room, when the day's duties had all been fulfilled, and the still summer night had closed in, Mrs. Vernon, in her own quiet apartment, opened the first volume of the work of Sir Amery.

She soon became strongly interested both in the characters and the plot. "The Master-Mind" had been written by a master's hand; the author's powers had not been over-rated. Sir Amery described his hero as one distinguished by birth, but yet more by exalted talents. He was generous, humane, chivalrous and constant, possessing every virtue but piety, every grace but the grace of God, every gift but "the one thing needful." Not that he was represented as one destitute of every sentiment of religion. He was made to revere with lofty devotion an almighty Creator, but not a righteous Judge; one so merciful that he could not punish, so lenient that he would not destroy. The hero was not a believer in revelation–his lofty mind could not bow to the mysterious truths which his reason could not grasp; but his scepticism was represented as candour, his pride as greatness of soul–he was placed in bright contrast to hard, narrow-minded

bigots, who denounce sin because God hath condemned it, and fear hell because divine truth hath declared that its terrors await the impenitent.

Mrs. Vernon read on and on, and wondered as she read. She had seen very few novels in her life, and all appeared to her strange and new. Sometimes she was filled with admiration by a generous sentiment or a noble deed; then she was startled by some idea, veiled in sublime language and beautiful imagery, but which, as it appeared to her, was contrary to the simple truth of the Scriptures.

The close of the first volume left the hero deeply, passionately loving a fair and highly-principled girl, the daughter of parents who, under the garb of great sanctity, were drawn as worldly, heartless and unforgiving. He was resolved to win her under circumstances of difficulty which, to love less ardent and a spirit less firm, must have presented obstacles insuperable. Mrs. Vernon closed the book and glanced at her candle. It had burnt quite down to the socket. She rose and lighted another. Was it a strange fascination that made her sit down again, with her pale cheek and her heavy aching eyes, to resume her unwonted occupation? Was the interest of a mere novel so strong that it could render her careless of needful rest? It was that in the hero Mrs. Vernon was reading the character of the author–that she, almost unconsciously, connected the gentle heroine with her own fondly-loved child.

"I see the moral of the tale," said the widow to herself: "Virgilius, ennobled by his affection for a worthy object, enlightened by experience, and improved by trials, will find out the errors into which his fine mind has been led; he will become religious as well as moral, and all will end happily at last."

All did end happily in the novel, but not in the way which Mrs. Vernon expected. Hypocrisy was unmasked, bigotry disgraced, but infidelity triumphed in success! The brilliant winding-up of the work was almost a paraphrase of the celebrated line,

"He can't be wrong whose life is in the right;"–

as if any life *could be right* in which the chief end of our existence, *the glory of God*, is disregarded! It is as though we should speak of the perfection of the ocean without water, or of the universe without the sun!

The dim light of morning was purpling the sky before the widow had finished the book. She sat for some moments with her brow resting upon her hand, and the open volume on her knee.

"Perhaps I have read until my mind is too much wearied to form a correct judgment," she murmured to herself. "Perhaps I have mistaken the meaning of the author, and have done him injustice. I am a weak, ignorant woman, not capable of appreciating all the beauties of this work; I will lean on a stronger

mind than my own, ask the aid of a better judgment. I will take the books to Mr. Ward to-morrow, and see if he views the work in the same light as I do. And now I must go to my rest; I have done wrong to waste so many hours over a novel!"

But even in sleep the mind of the mother pursued the same theme; the scenes of the novel were repeated in her dreams, only the actors were Sir Amery and Flora. Mrs. Vernon arose unrefreshed and uneasy, and before many hours were over, she was on her way to the little vicarage, bearing with her "The Master-Mind."

"How foolish I am to take these anxious thoughts!"–such were the lady's reflections as she wearily toiled up the lane, which had never seemed so long before. "I have no reason to fear that Sir Amery is anything more to my child than an admired author, an agreeable acquaintance. He is above her in birth and position; flattered as he is by the world, why should I fancy that my simple moss-rose should attract the regard of one who is the idol of all the circles of fashion! It is a mother's weakness, a mother's vanity, which make me believe that all who see her must view her with eyes like my own! But oh! is she not my earthly all, and can it be wondered at that my heart should tremble at the most distant prospect of danger to one so beloved!"

CHAPTER X.

RECALL.

"Well, my dear Mrs. Vernon, this is a singular request, and one which I never anticipated from you," said the aged clergyman, with a smile, as, fixing his spectacles on his nose, he glanced at the title-page of the work which Mrs. Vernon had placed in his hand. When he raised his eyes, however, to the countenance of his friend, he was struck by its worn look and anxious expression–he felt that no light curiosity had led the widow lady to desire his opinion of a novel, and gravely and kindly he promised to give his attention to her request.

"To-day is Saturday, and I have much upon my hands," said the minister, whose desk was heaped with papers; "I shall not be able to look at the volumes at once, but my first leisure hours shall be given to their perusal, and you shall have my candid opinion upon their contents."

Often, very often, did the thoughts of Mrs. Vernon recur to "The Master-Mind" during that and the following day. She was distressed to find that even in

the house of prayer she was haunted by the remembrance of the novel. On the Sabbath afternoon she was so unwell as to be confined to her room; not to remain there, however, in undisturbed peace, for again and again the door was burst open by Johnny, who clambered upon her bed to give her news of the chicken that had been nearly drowned, or to repeat to her a beautiful new verse which he had learned "just to please grandmamma." Mrs. Vernon's head throbbed so violently that she could scarcely raise it from the pillow to give the child a kind smile and a kind kiss. Once her eyes closed for a few minutes in sleep; when she opened them, Lyddie was standing beside her, looking on her with a strange, earnest gaze. The girl had brought a tangled bunch of wild-flowers, which she laid silently beside the suffering lady, and left the room with her orphan heart warmed by the sweet words of thanks with which her ill-timed little offering had been received.

Monday, as usual, brought no post; but on Tuesday came the envelope directed in Flora's well-known hand, which it was Johnny's delight to carry at full speed to his grandmother, demanding the postage of a kiss. Mrs. Vernon eagerly broke the seal, but the enclosure, for once, disappointed her; there were merely a few hurried lines, containing little more than an excuse for their own brevity. Flora, however, mentioned that she was to pass the Tuesday at Richmond; that she expected the excursion to be a delightful one; and that she trusted that the weather would be fine, as Sir Amery had ordered his boat.

Mrs. Vernon silently replaced the note in its cover, and after going through the usual routine of her household duties with a preoccupied mind, again sought the quiet dwelling of the vicar.

All there looked peaceful and cheerful–the thick shrubbery, the neat flower-beds with their border of box, the closely-mown lawn spreading its carpet of velvet beneath the shadow of sycamore trees. Mrs. Vernon passed on without noticing aught. The vicar's wife, she found, was making her round in the village, but the vicar himself was in his study. She entered it unannounced save by her gentle tap at the door, and was kindly welcomed by her friend.

"Mrs. Vernon, my dear lady, this is a warm morning for a walk, but glorious weather for the crops. Pray take a seat," he wheeled round for her his own arm-chair; "and let me release you from your bonnet and shawl. We shall detain you here a prisoner till the cool of the evening, and talk over your novel together," he added, with a smile, glancing at the book which lay open on the table.

"What do you think of it?" said Mrs. Vernon.

"I confess that I think very ill of it," replied the old clergyman, seating himself beside her. "It is well written, very cleverly written; but so much the worse for the reader. It is ill to plant flowers by the edge of the pitfall."

"And yet there are such beautiful passages, such noble sentiments–some

parts seem calculated to do so much good–"

"My dear madam," said Mr. Ward earnestly, laying his hand on the volume, "there is no good here that will weigh against one tithe of the evil which such a work is calculated to produce in young and enthusiastic minds. It appears written to show that there are some men of natures so noble and hearts so pure, that they require no Saviour, no sacrifice for sin; men of intellect so large and exalted, that Revelation is by them unneeded, they can walk securely in the light of their own reason, and pity poor, weak, bigoted fools, who seek a guide in the Scriptures. If the Almighty had blessed me with children, most anxiously should I have endeavoured to guard them against the art which invests with strong interest such characters as that of the hero of this tale, that makes human pride appear at the root of all virtue, instead of being, as it is, at the root of all sin. My dear friend, believe me, this is a dangerous book, and its author is a dangerous man."

Mrs. Vernon made no reply, but drawing out Flora's last note, gave it in silence to the clergyman. He read it twice before he made any observation, his brow slightly contracting as he read; then returning it to Mrs. Vernon, he said, "I think that Flora has been long enough absent."

"It seems an age since she left me," said the mother, her eyes filling with tears. "I miss her more than I can express. But then she is so happy in London, and in a house full as ours is at present I cannot prevent little trials–"

"Believe me, dear lady, these trials are no evil; they are the gentle discipline by which our heavenly Father trains the hearts of such of His children as are spared the more terrible furnace of affliction. Send for your Flora home. Home is the sphere of her duties; it should also be that of her pleasures. She is too young to mingle unharmed in the society of such as Sir Amery Legrange."

Mrs. Vernon left the house of her friend; he could neither persuade her to wait till the heat of the day was abated, nor to partake of the simple refreshment which the vicarage could afford. The fierce rays of the noontide sun poured down upon her head, the road was dry and dusty, the birds had stilled their songs, all was silent save the drowsy hum of some summer insects, nature lay panting and breathless in the glaring heat. Mrs. Vernon was almost exhausted ere she reached her dwelling. The cottagers whom she had met on her way shook their heads when she had passed, and declared that the good lady had never looked like herself since dear Miss Flora went away!

Mrs. Vernon opened her desk and wrote to her daughter. The letter was a short one, but full of tenderness, rather hinting at than openly telling of the feeble state of her own health, and her longing desire to have her child beside her again.

Flora received that note the next morning; in the evening, just as the first

tremulous star appeared in the darkening sky, Flora's step was on the threshold of her home.

CHAPTER XI.

DOUBTS.

"Sweeter, lovelier, dearer than ever!" thought Mrs. Vernon, as she pressed her daughter closer and closer in her fond embrace. When the flush of excitement at the first meeting had passed away, the eye of affection observed that Flora had become paler and thinner, that there was a thoughtful, preoccupied expression on her gentle brow, as though her mind were wandering far away; but there was deeper feeling in those soft blue eyes, more beaming sweetness in that smile, than even her mother had ever seen before.

Flora retired early to her room, pleading the fatigue of her journey. She had scarcely been able to give even the semblance of attention to the multifarious questions of Emma on the amusements and fashions of London, and had answered them almost at random; but when she found herself in her own apartment, the door closed, and only Mrs. Vernon beside her, she threw herself again on her mother's bosom, buried her glowing face on her parent's neck, and, trembling with joyful emotion, uttered, in scarcely articulate accents, "Mother, dear mother, he has spoken!"

"Sir Amery Legrange!" faltered Mrs. Vernon.

"I must tell you all," continued Flora, without raising her head. "It was yesterday–only yesterday–at Richmond. I did not know–I had scarcely dreamed–oh, mother!" she exclaimed suddenly, bursting into tears of delight, "I never never believed it possible to be so–" the bright, sparkling drops told the rest.

Mrs. Vernon grew very cold. There was a sinking at her heart and a rising in her throat, which made her for the moment unable to speak.

"And he will be a son to you, mother, the most tender and dutiful of sons! He will never separate us–he is so generous–so good!"

"And is he"–said Mrs. Vernon, speaking slowly, as if fearful to break by one word the spell of happiness thrown around her daughter–"is he one who holds the same blessed faith in which your dear father lived and died?"

Flora was silent for a short space. "He does act, I believe–indeed, I know–he does not in all things hold the same opinions as those which I have been taught;

She threw herself on her mother's bosom.

he is too candid, too honourable to make false professions; he–he does not view everything in the same light which you do; but his character, his life are beyond reproach; his actions prove that his creed cannot be far wrong! It is from you, mother, that I have learned to value deeds far more than words. Was it not our Saviour himself who said, '*By their fruits ye shall know them?*"

"He did so, my child; and where the fruits of the Spirit are found, there we may be sure that a blessing abides. But the first fruit is love, supreme love towards God, the love of the redeemed for their Redeemer, of pardoned sinners for their Saviour: where this is wanting, what cause have we to hope that the soul has been 'born again' unto God?"

Flora raised her head: her cheek was painfully flushed, and the tears of joy which had glistened on her lashes were followed by bitter drops, as she exclaimed, "Some one has been prejudicing you against him; some one has been maligning him, mother!"

"It is himself, then," replied Mrs. Vernon, calmly; "I have been reading 'The Master-Mind.'"

"And do you not think it beautiful–sublime–the transcript of a noble heart, an exalted mind?"

"Not the heart of one converted–not the mind of a Christian!"

There was a long and most painful silence. Flora was wounded to the quick, and that by a hand that she loved. Blinded by her affection, she regarded Sir Amery with an enthusiastic admiration which could see no fault, a tender devotion which would have regarded the sacrifice of life itself but a small one for his sake. Every fibre of her loving heart seemed to have twined itself round its new idol, and to breathe even a slighting word of *him* was to wrench and lacerate those tender heart-strings. She again buried her face, but this time it was not on the bosom of her mother.

"Mamma, you know not how wretched you make me with your doubts!"

"My child–my own child–I would give my life's blood to render you happy!" Mrs. Vernon took the cold hand of Flora, and pressed it convulsively to her heart. "But I cannot–I dare not–trust you to one who is not treading the same path towards heaven: I cannot–dare not–let you break the command which bids our unions be '*only in the Lord.*'"

"You will refuse your consent?" exclaimed Flora, starting to her feet, and gazing on her mother with a look of wild dismay.

"Oh, God help me!–God guide me!" murmured the unhappy parent, pressing her hand tightly over her brow.

"You will refuse your consent?" repeated Flora, more wildly and passionately than before. "Mother, mother! you know not what you are doing!–you may break my heart, you may lay me in my grave; but"–her manner suddenly

changed to one of clinging, confiding affection, as she sank at the feet of her mother, and looked imploringly up into her face–"but you will not, dear mother, you will not; you will let us be happy together. When you see him–when you know him–all these terrible doubts will pass quite away; you will look on him as I look–you will love him: only wait till he comes–till to-morrow."

"To-morrow! is he coming?" gasped the lady.

"Mother, dearest mother, you are trembling!"

"Oh, this is a very, very bitter cup! God give me strength to drink it," exclaimed the widow.

"He will bring sunshine with him; he will plead his own cause–"

"Thankful, most deeply, profoundly thankful will I be, Flora, if he can indeed satisfy my mind that he is a faithful servant of our divine Master! I can pass over minor differences–the outer garb of religion–the forms which man hath appointed–we may hold various opinions here, and yet be one in the Lord. But if I find that my fears are but too true–that Sir Amery, gifted and noble as he is, has chosen a path of his own, which is not the narrow one which leadeth alone unto life; that he rests upon a hope of his own, which is not trust in the merits of his Saviour; that he has formed a standard of his own, which is not the standard of the Word of Truth; whatever grief, whatever anguish it may cost me, my duty is plain before me–I must not resign the treasure committed by God to my charge to the keeping of one who is not His disciple."

And so they parted, the mother and the daughter, and many and bitter were the tears which wet their pillows that night. Mrs. Vernon sought and found relief in prayer–Flora, in thoughts of him whose idolized image stood between her and the light of Heaven.

CHAPTER XII.

DECISION.

Before sunset on the following day, while yet the bright orb darted his beams, like glittering lances, through openings in the foliage, and the jasmine blossoms trembled in the breeze and scattered their silver stars on the ground, an elastic step trod the path which led to the door of Laurel Bank–a tall graceful form ascended the steps; and the children in the garden wonderingly gazed from a distance on the lordly stranger who came, an unwonted visitor, to their home.

How fast throbbed one trembling heart at the sight of that form, the sound of that footstep! Flora had spent an exciting and agitating day. She had been for hours alone with her mother, those fatal volumes before them which they had perused with such different feelings. Flora had listened, argued, and wept, her judgment half convinced, but her heart altogether unpersuaded. Sir Amery was still the hero of her fancy, the idol of her affection. His very imperfections, like broken rocks in wild scenery, were to her invested with a charm which made the virtues of others appear tame. If he had errors, she thought, they were the errors of a noble mind, the wanderings of a glorious river, pursuing its bright course at its own free pleasure, not confined to one long, dull, straight line, like a canal made by measure and rule.

"And oh, my mother!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "think of the privilege, the blessing, of helping to draw such a noble spirit nearer to religion and to God!–of winning him to love what I love–to serve whom I serve! How can I, weak and helpless as I am, so benefit my fellow-creatures as by employing such influence as Providence has given me over the heart of one of the most gifted of men, to lead him to devote his high powers to the cause of piety and virtue? Does not this appear to be the special work which God has appointed me to do? is it not for this that I have been given favour in the eyes of one so far above me in all things? I have heard Mr. Ward preach upon providential calls, doors of usefulness opened to God's servants, opportunities offered which it is sin to neglect: is not a door now opened to me, an opportunity granted of serving the Lord in a wider sphere than I could ever hope to occupy here?"

"My child, your feelings and not your judgment now speak. A plain commandment of the Almighty is before you–'*Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers.*' Do you believe that in breaking the law of your God you can expect his blessing, that blessing without which it were as impossible for one being to change the heart of another, as it would be to bring waters from the stony rock or call up fire from the ocean?"

"But," pleaded Flora through her tears, "did not the apostle write that '*the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife; for what knowest thou, O wife! whether thou shalt save thy husband?*' is not such a blessed hope as this held out to encourage feeble women like me?"

"It was held out to such as were themselves converted after marriage, to such as had already formed the tie which bound them to unbelievers, before the grace of God was shed abroad in their own hearts. Can you mention a single verse in the Bible that encourages us to do evil that good may come, to break God's law that we may aid others to keep it?"

Flora looked down and sighed heavily.

"Oh, my daughter! while you hopefully regard the effect which your in-

fluence may have upon the man whom you love, you forget the influence which he will assuredly exercise over yourself. You trust that you will be the means of drawing him nearer to the Lord–you overlook the danger that he will draw your own heart away. When we wilfully throw ourselves into temptation, what assurance can we have that the Almighty will preserve us from its effects? Who dare say, 'I will stand fast in the Lord,' when, through our tenderest affections, our closest ties, the danger presses on our souls?"

Little did Sir Amery dream of the cloud that was rising to darken the sky which was so bright before him! Little did he dream of the conflict which awaited him, as with an exulting heart he approached the home of his beloved! He knew that her heart was his own; and from her family, judging by his knowledge of the world, he deemed that he could have nothing to fear. He was conscious of high talent, and of that strange, undefined power over the feelings and passions of others which is exercised but by few, and which makes its possessor take a lofty position in society even when not, as was the case with himself, entitled to such by birth. Sir Amery knew that he might contract a brilliant alliance–that, in the object of his choice, rank, wealth, and beauty, might unite, and that the proudest families in the land would deem connection with him an honour. He knew all this; and when he who had been the observed of all observers–admired, envied, courted–he whose fame had spread into distant lands, whose works were quoted in foreign tongues–when he turned from the glittering circles of fashion to choose for his bride a simple maiden, who possessed neither rank nor riches, he felt that the world might regard his disinterested attachment as romantic folly. But for the world's opinions on the subject he cared little; he was almost satiated with its applause, and he was content, and more than content, to stoop from his pinnacle of fame, to rest on one gentle, loving heart, that he could make entirely his own, and mould according to his will.

Had the idea been suggested to Sir Amery that his suit for the hand of Flora would meet with opposition in her home, he would have smiled at it as something more improbable than the wildest flights of his fancy; but the thought that such opposition might be dangerous, nay, successful–that his hopes might be blighted, his happiness marred, and that by an instrument so feeble as the conscientious scruples of a merchant's widow–such thought would have been at once dismissed from his mind as beyond the bounds of possibility. When, therefore, the anxious, trembling mother, received him with an emotion of which he at first misinterpreted the cause–when, by an effort which sent back the blood to her heart, she told him of her doubts, of her fears, shrinking from meeting the bright eye which rested so keenly upon her–the first sentiment awakened in his breast was one of surprise, succeeded by something akin to indignation. Was he to be called upon to explain his views, to give an account of his opinions!

Were the depths of his mind to be sounded by the feeble thread of a woman's judgment! What was it to her what he thought or believed–it was not to be expected that she should understand *him*! Why was theology dragged in at all, where the question was between heart and heart! "Such matters might suit," as he observed, with a sarcastic smile, "the discussion of grave doctors at convocation, but could scarcely occupy now the attention of him whose mind was absorbed by but one object–the deep, passionate love which he bore towards her in whom all his hopes of happiness centred!"

Sir Amery had at first suspected Mrs. Vernon of throwing frivolous difficulties in the way, in order to enhance the value of the prize which he sought, and to prevent the baronet from feeling that the merchant's daughter was too easily won. Flora's silent anguish, however, and her mother's quiet decision, soon undeceived him on this point. He saw that the danger was real, the opposition which he encountered, sincere. He then changed his position altogether; and dropping the calm, almost sarcastic manner in which he had at first replied to Mrs. Vernon, he burst into a strain of fervid, glowing eloquence, pouring forth those impassioned words which excite the feelings and confound the judgment. He pleaded his own cause as those only can plead whose more than life is at stake.

To Flora, such words were irresistible. If doubts or scruples had been raised in her mind, they were swept in a moment away, as the rushing cataract, dashing from a height, whirls along the autumn leaves that have dropped on its surface! But as easily could that roaring cataract break the arch of the rainbow that glistens at its foot, as the torrent of eloquence to which she listened warp the settled judgment of the parent. She needed not to be persuaded that Sir Amery loved–she believed Flora to be worthy of the warmest affection which ever glowed in the heart of man; but no sentence which he uttered altered her conviction that he was one who, however gifted with earthly wisdom, was yet a stranger to the knowledge which alone can make man wise unto salvation.

Sir Amery read in the expression of her sad eye that, as far as regarded Mrs. Vernon, all that he had spoken had been uttered in vain. Repressing the fierce resentment which swelled in his breast, he addressed himself more exclusively to Flora, whose tears were her only reply. Mrs. Vernon saw that the love of her only child for one whom, some few weeks before, she had met as a stranger, was overcoming even that affection which had grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength; she felt herself the only barrier between her daughter and a danger to which Flora was blind, and she dreaded lest that barrier might be passed. Her nerves overstrained, her feelings wounded, her fears for the moment overmastering her faith, Mrs. Vernon sank back on her chair, the paleness of death overspread her face, a feint sigh burst from her whitening lips!

The sight of her mother in this state roused all that deep affection which Flora had ever borne towards her parent. In a moment she was at her side, supporting her drooping head, covering the pallid brow with her tears.

"Oh, mother, mother!" she sobbed forth, "look not thus. I will do anything–everything that you will! Leave me, leave me, Sir Amery!" she continued, in tones of passionate grief; "I never can–I never will–marry without the consent of my mother!"

"You do not bid me despair?" exclaimed Sir Amery, grasping the unresisting hand which trembled in his. "Flora, you do not bid me despair?"

"Go–go. Perhaps a time may come–perhaps–only leave me–for pity's sake, leave me!"

"You shall be obeyed," replied Sir Amery, pressing her hand fervently to his lips; "Flora, my heart's life, you shall be obeyed. But notwithstanding all the obstacles which narrow-minded bigotry would raise up between us, did all the powers of earth combine to separate those whose hearts are united, love like mine should trample down those obstacles, and, in defiance of the opposition of the world, you should be mine: yes, Flora, idol of my soul! you shall be mine!"

He was gone!–gone with burning words on his lips, passionate, indignant emotions in his heart: he was gone, and left desolation behind him!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MOTHER'S TRIAL.

"Sweet are the uses of adversity," writes the great poet of Nature. Experience confirms the blessed truth proclaimed by Revelation, that "they who sow in tears shall reap in joy." The lips that meekly kiss the rod find that, like Aaron's, it will blossom, and bear the fruits of peace, and even joy. Sorrow has so often been the step to sanctification, that we can scarcely wonder that the means have sometimes been mistaken for the end–that it has been thought that grief has in itself some purifying power, until much suffering on earth is almost regarded as a passport to heaven!

And yet how mistaken is this view!–how contrary to the warning in the Scriptures, that there is a sorrow of the world that worketh death? If some tears are like the dew that descends on the earth, shedding fertility and beauty on all sides, others are like the waters of the Dead Sea, bitter and unblessed: buried joys

lie beneath, and a desert spreads around!

Such were the tears of Flora, on this blighting of her fondest hopes–this separation from him whom she regarded as the lode-star of her existence. Earth to her held nothing more to live for. All was a weary blank like that before the darkened eyes of the blind. She no longer found pleasure in aught that had pleased her before: her flowers drooped neglected, her instrument was dumb, her books were unopened, her pencil untouched. And as with her pleasures, so with her duties–all were alike disregarded. The poor listened in vain for her well-known step; her pupils wondered at her absence from the school; Emma openly complained of unkindness and neglect; while her children were shunned by Flora, or their presence endured with scarce concealed dislike and irritation. She noticed not, cared not, for the improvement wrought in them by Mrs. Vernon's patient care; she only felt that their noisy merriment jarred on her wounded spirit; she was almost angry to think that they were happy! Flora was a changed being–changed even to her mother. The parent's fond glance never met an answering smile; her tender words received short, sullen answers. Flora saved no pang to the gentle breast which maternal love gave her such power to wound. Not that she uttered a murmur–pride would not have suffered that; but there was reproach in the downcast, tearful eye–reproach in the tone of the mournful voice, in the languid step, the drooping form. By neglect of her own health, by sullen yielding to despair, Flora was revenging herself upon her mother.

And what was the state of her heart towards her heavenly Father? Alas! could the thoughts and feelings of the unhappy Flora have been written down, she would have started and trembled to see how near the breathings of a repining, gloomy spirit approached to blasphemy! She deemed herself hardly, unmercifully dealt with. She marvelled why she had been raised for a moment to the very pinnacle of human felicity, to be dashed down into the deep gulf of despair! Was the Almighty indeed a pitying Father? Had He led her into the paths of peace? Had He not rather filled her cup with bitterness, and withered her soul with disappointment? Nay, was it not religion that lay at the root of all her misery? Were not the conscientious misgivings of her mother as the worm that had destroyed the gourd that she delighted in? Had Mrs. Vernon's views been less strict and puritanical–less *bigoted*, as Flora called them, in the anguish of her soul–would not her daughter have been the happiest of women?–would not she herself have been the proudest of mothers?

Such thoughts were sinful, marked with the deepest stain of ingratitude; yet Flora indulged in them freely. She almost accused Providence in secret of having exposed her to trials beyond what she could bear; unmindful of the fact that she had herself, in impatience of petty annoyances, chosen the path which, however flowery at first, she had found to be strewn with sharp thorns. If she was

conscious that her faith was growing weak, and her love towards God becoming cold, she laid the blame upon the cruel circumstances of the position in which the Almighty had placed her. She had loved and served the Lord–at least so she deemed–when she was happy; but when His hand lay so heavy upon her, she was ready to forget all past mercies, all present blessings, all bright hopes of a blissful future. With Jonah her spirit exclaimed, "I do well to be angry:" with Elijah, "It is enough; take away my life!" Impatient to throw down the burden which her unchastened will refused to sustain, she longed, almost prayed, for death–little deeming in her present state how unfit she was to die. The sun of trial was now indeed glowing with intense and burning heat on the seed which had been sown in rocky ground; the plant which had shown in the world's eye so fair, unwatered by grace, having no root in itself, in the time of temptation withered away.

Deep was the affliction of Mrs. Vernon; darker and darker grew the path before her. She had stood firm against the sophistry of human wisdom, the power of human eloquence; she had resisted even Flora's pleading tears: but to see, week after week, and month after month, her child wasting to a shadow before her, was a lengthened torture to her loving heart which wore away the very thread of her life. In vain medical advice was sought for Flora. There was no physician to "minister to a mind diseased;" all the skill of man was unavailing where the patient chose death rather than life. There was an awful possibility before Mrs. Vernon, too terrible to contemplate, but which recurred to her mind again and again, as she gazed on the fading form of her child. There was nothing which appeared to rouse Flora, or to excite in her a moment's interest, except the letters which she received from Ada, and which were perused only by herself. Mrs. Vernon never sought to know their contents; she felt that her daughter's confidence and affection were now given to another, and that she herself stood in the position of a tyrant towards one who was far dearer to her than life!

"Have I indeed done what was right? or have I mistaken my duty–sacrificed to blind prejudice the happiness of my child–destroyed her health, her peace–ruined her hopes, in my ignorant, misguided zeal?" Such were the bitter reflections which recurred again and again, and ever with increasing bitterness, to the mind of the unhappy mother. In vain her pastor endeavoured to support her with the consolations of religion–to assure her that she had not only acted faithfully, but wisely: she could not endure to see the consequences of her own decision, still less to contemplate what might possibly be its final result.

Autumn rain was fast descending, streaming from the heavy black clouds, while ever and anon a wild gust of wind stripped the boughs of their faded leaves, and scattered them far and wide. Emma tried to beguile the weary time with a novel, but looked up from it every five minutes with a languid sigh, to complain of "the horrid weather," and contrast the English climate with that of her native

island. The children were restless and noisy, impatient of the confinement of the house, till Mrs. Vernon found employment for them all in looking over the curiosities of an old cabinet.

Where was Flora? Her mother sought her in the small sitting-room in which her daughter usually pursued her occupations. Her books, her piano, her desk, were there. The room was not, however, now occupied; Flora was in her own apartment. Mrs. Vernon noticed that an album was laid on the desk, in which Flora usually wrote her poetical effusions; and the sight of it made the mother hope that at least one favourite occupation had not been relinquished by her daughter. Often had Mrs. Vernon copied out verses from that album, and shed tears of pleasure over them. She opened the book to see if Flora had recently added to their number. Between the last written pages there were compressed flowers, their beauty faded, their life gone; yet precious, perhaps, as relics of the hours when they had bloomed as freshly as the hopes which, like them, had withered. The last verses in the volume were new to Mrs. Vernon; they bore the date but of yesterday; and she with anguish perused them as the transcript of the feelings of a young being whose life had not yet numbered twenty years.

LINES.

Is it sinful to gaze on the morning sun,
And wish that the gates of the west he had won–
That life's day were over, its labours done?

Is it sinful to mark the first silver hair
'Mid dark tresses touched by the hand of care,
And wish time had shed all his winter there?

Is it sinful in life no joy to take,–
To feel like a captive bound to the stake
By a chain that galls us, and will not break?

Some fear to die: 'tis not so with me;
Rather, O Death, I pine for thee!
I long in the quiet grave to be!

"Oh! this is too much–too much!" exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, wringing her hands. "I can endure anything myself, but I cannot–oh, I cannot break the heart of my

child!"

She hastened to Flora's apartment with a quick and agitated step. She unclosed the door–she saw Flora on her knees, her hair dishevelled, her bosom heaving with sobs, as she pressed again and again convulsively to her lips a little diamond locket which she held in her hand.

Flora started to her feet at the sound of her mother's entrance: as she did so a letter fell to the ground. Mrs. Vernon's eye rested upon it for a moment: the handwriting was not that of Ada.

"Oh! mother–mother–forgive me; it was–from him!"

"He loves you still?"

"More than ever!" exclaimed Flora, bursting into a fresh flood of tears.

"Then let him be happy with you!" cried the mother, folding her child in her arms, and kissing away her tears, while her own flowed freely and fast. "I can resist no longer. Oh, God forgive me if I do wrong! Flora, my own beloved! be united to the husband of your choice; you have your mother's consent and her blessing!"

On the scenes that followed I will not dwell, but leave them to the imagination of the reader. On the day when the first snow fell, Flora was the bride of Sir Amery.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VISIT.

More than two years had now elapsed since the day when, in the little church of Wingsdale, Flora had plighted her troth to him whom she so deeply loved, while many a fervent prayer arose for her happiness from the poor whom she had tended, the young whom she had taught. The interval between her engagement and her marriage had been one of brightness to Flora. A mountain's weight seemed to have been removed from her spirits, and with the elasticity which youth and hope give, they had more than rebounded to their former elevation. Again she had smiles and kind words for all, and she appeared resolved by her winning sweetness of manner to deepen the regrets of the village at losing its "sunshine." Mrs. Vernon had stifled her own misgivings, that she might cast no shadow on the bliss of the young bride; and no one could have told from her outward manner how heavy lay the heart within. Even Emma had shaken off a little

of her languor, roused to something like interest by the excitement of a wedding. Her children had brought their little offerings, prepared in mysterious secrecy with the assistance of their grandmother, who was to them teacher, companion, and confidant; and Flora's surprise and thanks on receiving their presents almost realized their juvenile expectations.

More than two years had rolled their course since that exciting, joyous day, when a cab drove up to the door of a large house in Cavendish Square, and a lady stepped out and rang the bell. She was attired in habiliments which once had been handsome, but which had decidedly seen their best days; the rich silk dress had been dyed, the shawl was faded, the sable boa showed tokens of age, and neat fingers had repaired the Lisle lace veil which gave grace to the bonnet of straw. In the staid manner and somewhat care-worn face, where certain lines were traced across the brow which was smooth some two years ago, we mark a change beyond that which time would have made in our old acquaintance Ada.

"Ada! oh, how delighted I am to see you! What an age it is since we met!" cried Flora, as the visitor was ushered into the elegant apartment of Lady Legrange, and the cousins exchanged an affectionate embrace.

Has Flora also been altered by the plain gold ring, which often works wonders as strange as those wrought by an enchanter?

Flora is lovely as ever, her beauty enhanced by a womanly dignity which beseems the baronet's wife. But she too has lost the joyous brightness which rested on her gentle countenance when Ada first visited Wingsdale. An expression of thought, almost of melancholy, is there; and she certainly looked far happier in her gipsy bonnet, seated on the gnarled roots of the old oak, than she does now in her spacious mansion, robed in velvet and surrounded by luxury.

"I could not resist the temptation of coming to see you!" cried Ada, sitting with Flora's hand clasped in her own, and surveying her with a look of affectionate interest.

"I hope that you have brought your twins to London with you?" said Flora.

"Oh, the little cherubs! how I should delight to show them to you! But we left them in Wiltshire; it is a serious matter to travel with two infants not a year old."

"Then I am afraid that your stay in London will be but short," observed Lady Legrange, "with two such powerful magnets drawing you away."

"Only two!" laughed Ada; "you forget my husband's children,–a whole scale of magnets, from five feet five to three feet nothing! I thought that I should never have managed to get away at all! But the Major was obliged to come to town to fit out his middy, and I took such a longing to revisit my old haunts, look at old faces, hear the sounds of carriage wheels, and knocks at the door, and street cries, and hurdy-gurdies again, that, like a dutiful mamma, I must see Jack

off myself, and pay a flying visit to dear smoky London."

"I can scarcely fancy you the staid, sober mother of such a large family!" exclaimed Flora.

"Very odd–isn't it? reversing the order of nature; instead of the quiet spinning caterpillar turning into the gay butterfly, the butterfly doffing its silken wings and beginning to crawl through the routine of daily duties, a prisoner to its cabbage-leaf. Only imagine me, Flora, mending stockings, shaping out pinafores, bandaging cut fingers and broken heads, scolding tradespeople, keeping servants in order, paying bills, and dancing babies till my arms ache!"

"I should think the last a very delightful occupation," said Flora, suppressing a sigh.

"None but a mother can tell how delightful," replied Ada; "but I do not take so kindly to all my domestic employments. I never yet took pleasure in solving the problem how far a shilling would go, nor finding out how it is that boys are always wanting new shoes, and how elbows and knees are perpetually running a race as to which should first run through the clothes. I believe that children have found out the secret of perpetual motion, to the great discomfort of those who have to look after little rogues!"

"But children make a house so cheerful," said Flora, abstractedly.

"And now, my dear child–ah! you see that I can't get over my old way of talking to you yet–do give me your last news from Wingsdale. You know that I'm such a shocking correspondent that I know as little of what passes in the world beyond Salisbury Plain as if I were a denizen of the moon."

"Poor old Mrs. Ward, my mother tells me, is now a confirmed invalid, and unable to leave her bed."

"And your sweet mother herself?"

"She never mentions her own health; her letters are full of the children."

"Ah! the whity-brown legion of little horrors, who like a swarm of hornets literally drove you out of Laurel Bank, and compelled you to take refuge in Grosvenor Square! I suppose that they have been undergoing the process of taming, at which my aunt is so famous, and that Johnny now does not scratch out any one's eyes, and that Lyddie may be trusted in a store-room full of treacle and sugar. I should think your mother a first-rate hand at bringing up children, judging from the charming specimen before me!"

Flora neither smiled nor blushed at the flattery now.

"But tell me how they all appeared when you were last at Laurel Bank."

Then, indeed, the colour rose to Flora's pale cheek, and it was with an appearance of some embarrassment that she replied, "I have not been there since you were there, on the day of my marriage."

Ada suppressed the exclamation of astonishment that was upon her tongue,

for she saw that its utterance would give pain.

"My dear husband has been so much engaged–of course I could not leave him–it is so difficult sometimes to make arrangements–but I hope soon–" Flora stopped short, for her lips were not accustomed to utter an absolute untruth.

"How your mother must be longing to see you! I should not have thought that she could have lived so long without you!"

"Words cannot express how I long to see her!" exclaimed Flora, with tears in her eyes.

"I think that it might be managed in some way. If you could not visit Wingsdale, she might come to London–"

Flora looked so uneasy at the proposition that Ada changed the conversation in pure good nature, wondering much in her mind what could have occurred to separate a parent so much beloved from so dutiful a daughter.

"I hope that you have not given up your pen, Flora; that you don't think that your talented husband the author does enough in that line for you both?"

"Oh, I write a little sometimes," said Flora, in a tone of indifference.

"I never read anything so pretty as your hymns. Do you know, Flora," Ada added more gravely, "that I have often thought over the verses which you wrote during my first visit to Wingsdale, after we heard that solemn sermon from Mr. Ward on the subject of the sower and his seed!"

"I had almost forgotten them," said Flora.

"And the sermon too?"

"Well–I have heard so many since."

"Ah! that is the thing, you have lived in such an atmosphere of piety."

"Oh, don't speak so!" cried Flora hurriedly.

"It does seem to me," observed Ada, folding her hands, "that it is a great deal more difficult for some people than for others to lead a religious life. Look how differently you were brought up from what I was; is there any wonder that we are so different now? I had been taught to think of nothing but gaiety, and shining in the world, and making a sensation, and all that sort of thing; I lived in a perpetual round of amusements: so pleasure was my danger then, and I fancied that when the time for pleasure was past, my difficulties would vanish, and that I should grow serious as I grew old. Well, I follow your example, and marry, and am taken completely from the world; but I am plunged into a little bustling world of my own, and I have so much to think of, so much to do, that I have really no time for religion. Instead of the pleasures, come the cares of this life."

"Cast your cares upon Him, for He careth for you," faintly murmured Lady Legrange.

"Ah, Flora, you were never like any one else; I always feel better when I am near you." Flora's brow contracted a little, as if she were in pain, and she turned

her head away from the speaker.

"I wish that I could always have you beside me," continued Ada; "it would be such a comfort to have your wise, calm advice!"

"It is so much easier to give advice than to take it home to ourselves," said Flora, with something like a sigh.

The ladies then conversed for some time together on topics of general interest. Flora really enjoyed seeing her old companion, and would gladly have invited both Ada and her husband to her house, to remain there during their stay in London; but she did not venture even to ask them to dinner. Sir Amery, she knew, would have had no objection to the society of the lively Ada; but the Major, a simple, blunt man, with more kindness in his heart than polish in his manners, did not suit the refined taste of the baronet, and must "be kept at a proper distance." All that Flora could do was by the cordiality of her own manner to endeavour to smooth away from the mind of her cousin any sense of unkindness, or even of ingratitude, which might arise from no invitation being given; and Ada left the house satisfied that Flora was not changed, though with a rising doubt as to whether she were happy.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WIFE.

And was Flora happy in her new life? She had much to render her so, according to the opinion of the world. She had made what would be called a brilliant marriage; she was united to one who loved her, and whom she passionately loved; she was surrounded by all that could please the eye or charm the taste; she had leisure for every graceful occupation; she was not weighed down by a multiplicity of home-cares; she had a life of ease, it might be deemed of enjoyment: and yet, with all this, Flora was not happy. The sunshine of her existence seemed to have passed away.

Let us examine more closely into the causes of the melancholy which often rested like a cloud on her soul.

In the first place, Flora was childless; and this, to a loving spirit like hers, was no light trial. She would have given all the grandeur of her home, all the jewels which glittered in her hair, all the beautiful things which met her eye wherever she turned it, to feel little arms clasping her neck, to hear infant lips lisp

the sweet name of mother! Flora had never yet, amidst all the outward forms of religion, acquired that which is the very essence of it, submission to the will of the Almighty. Her own will had never been brought into the quiet subjection which is the result of confidence in God's wisdom and love, and which is the source of true peace and joy. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, she "murmured," not with her lips, but in the depths of her heart.

And Flora pined for her mother; she longed again to rest her weary head on a parent's bosom, and to be blessed with a parent's counsels. She could not conceal from herself that her marriage had separated her from the home of her childhood. It was not so much, perhaps, that Sir Amery could never quite forgive Mrs. Vernon's opposition to his marriage, as that he feared her influence over his wife. Flora had, he thought, too many narrow prejudices, acquired in her puritanical home: he had no wish to see them strengthened. He had no wish to have a praying, sermonizing wife who would see sin in what he thought harmless, and who would always be attempting to convert him to her own peculiar views of religion. He had put down, sometimes with a jest, sometimes even with a frown, the few feeble attempts made by Flora soon after their marriage to win him to pay more attention to the outward observances of religion. The Lord did not bless these attempts–they resulted in failure and disappointment; and Flora bitterly recalled her mother's words, that it is as impossible for one human being to change the heart of another, as it would be to bring water from the stony rock, or to call up fire from the ocean.

Flora's deep love for her husband, even though returned, was no source of unmingled happiness. She could not rest in calm confidence upon the hope that all was well with him whom she deemed the most gifted and the most attractive of men. Blinded as she was by her admiring affection, Flora had yet many a secret misgiving and pang, when she heard words pass the lips of her husband which confirmed the opinion of her mother. She was ever struggling to persuade herself that the path which he pursued could not be far wrong; that it was her education which had narrowed her own mind; that he whose intellect soared to such a height must see more clearly and widely than others. But it is difficult to overthrow at once the fabric of opinion which has gradually been forming from infancy; most difficult when that fabric is founded on truth, and has the strong though secret support of conscience!

And there was one source of pain which Flora never owned to others, never even acknowledged to her own heart. She prized the affection of her husband beyond all earthly–alas! above all heavenly things; it was her pride, her delight, her treasure: but how could she trust to links which God had not rivetted? was not her treasure one which might take wings to itself and flee away? Who could insure that the love which beauty had awakened would not be perishable as that

beauty? It had not that firmness which arises from steady principle, that element of immortality which religion alone can give. Flora was painfully aware that many, and amongst them members of Sir Amery's own family, had deemed his marriage far below the expectations which such a man might have formed. Was it quite impossible that the same thought might sometimes cross the mind of her husband! There was no sweet babe, no dear pledge of mutual affection, to bind the baronet's heart to the mother of his child.

Flora's strength was not sufficient to enable her to share all the amusements of her husband, nor had she enough of mental vigour to enter into all his pursuits. He shone as a star in many places where his gentle wife was never seen. Many a lonely evening she passed, while at some festive board a brilliant circle was listening delighted to his ever-flowing fountain of wit. Might Sir Amery not sometimes find her society dull, her conversation insipid, after that to which he had been accustomed? would her love suffice to make him happy? could he be contented alone with her? Flora knew that the baronet had not married her "*in the Lord*," that his affection for her was not from the Lord; her whole felicity rested upon an earthly support–it might be shaken–it might bend–it might give way!

Even when accompanying her husband to scenes of festivity, neither his loved presence nor the pleasures around her always chased from the mind of Lady Legrange this phantom of undefined fear. But that which above all things oppressed the young wife with a sorrow for which the world has no remedy, was her consciousness of alienation from her God. What matter how fair be the surrounding landscape, if the heaven above be of dull leaden hue, if the sun be blotted from the sky? As regarded the most important of all subjects, the heart of Flora was cold and hard; and she knew it. No one can for long worship an earthly idol without feeling the withering effect. Sir Amery stood between his wife and her God. Flora was careful as ever to observe the forms of religion, when she could do so without displeasing her husband; her seat was not vacant in the pew, nor her name absent from the charity list: but her piety was like a petrified leaf–it could deceive even her own heart no longer. All that remained of her religion seemed a vague sense of fear, the fear of a slave for an offended master, who has the power, perhaps the will, to chastise. Sometimes Flora doubted whether she had ever been a Christian at all–whether from childhood she had not played a hypocrite's part, and whether she were not playing it still. She no longer thought of heaven as a blissful home, and even when bitterness of soul made her weary of life, she felt a shrinking from the thought of death.

And can we wonder that Flora was not happy–that pleasures failed to amuse her, even conjugal affection to bless? Had she rested with cheerful content, in that state of coldness, alienation, and wandering from God, it had been

a sign, indeed, that religion had utterly perished in her soul–that her mother's prayers, and teaching, and example, had all been in vain.

CHAPTER XVI.
RISING CLOUDS.

"Flora, my love, has anything occurred to distress you?" said the baronet, as he entered the breakfast room one morning in his embroidered dressing-gown and slippers, with the newspaper in his hand.

Flora looked anxious and unhappy, her eye rested upon an open letter which she had received by the early post.

"I have heard from Mr. Ward, dearest," she replied; "he gives me tidings which have made me very uneasy. Scarlet fever, of a malignant kind, has been raging lately in Wingsdale, and I grieve to say that two of my brother's children are ill with it now, and it is feared that the baby is sickening."

The baronet coughed slightly, stirred the fire, and sat down to sip his chocolate.

"My poor mother!" faltered Flora; "Mr. Ward writes that she is far from strong; the nursing will be so heavy upon her."

"Have not the children a mother?" said Sir Amery, abruptly.

"Emma has taken such alarm at the idea of infection, that she has actually hurried away, and engaged a room at a hotel in a town about ten miles distant from Wingsdale!"

The baronet elevated his handsome brows with an expression of contempt.

"I fear," continued Flora, with emotion, "that the anxiety and fatigue will quite break down the health of my mother. She will watch the children day and night, as she watched me in my fever." The voice of the daughter trembled as she added, "Oh, Amery! she needs me to help her; dearest, will you not spare me to her now?

"You!" exclaimed her husband in a loud tone of surprise, pushing back his chair from the table; "what could have put such an insane thought into your mind? Do you think that I would suffer you to go into the midst of infection–to take the place of an unfeeling woman–to act as nurse to a set of mulattoes–to risk your precious life for those whom their own mother has deserted?"

"My mother will never desert them," said Flora; "it is to assist her–"

(255) "Flora, my love, has anything occurred to distress you?" said the baronet.

"Flora, my love, has anything occurred to distress you?" said the baronet.

"We will send a nurse down from London to assist her; let that set your mind at rest," replied Sir Amery. Then he added, as his stern features relaxed into a smile, "It is easier to find an efficient substitute for you, Flora, in the sick-room at Laurel Bank, than at Lady Montague's soirée to-night."

"The ball!–oh!" exclaimed Flora, leaning back on her chair, "I have not the heart to go to it!"

"No heart is required," said the baronet, laughing; "we do not look for such commodities at balls."

Flora was ever submissive and obedient to her husband. She saw that it was his will that she should accompany him to the party, and she went, though with a joyless spirit. Decked out in jewels and costly array, and leaning on the arm of him who attracted every eye, the fair young wife might have appeared an object of envy to the proudest dame in the glittering throng. But there was a fount of sadness in her bosom, which mingled with and imbittered every pleasure. The music had to her a mournful tone; the gay dancers flitted before her like images in a dream; she felt it hard to wear a smile on the lips when the heart was depressed with care. Flora was glad to choose a quiet corner for herself, where it would be unnecessary to enter into conversation, where she might remain unnoticed and unknown.

She was seated beside some ladies who were strangers to her, and Sir Amery conversing with friends of his own in another apartment, Flora felt herself alone in a crowd, solitary in the midst of society. Her thoughts wandered back to her mother's home–she was treading, in fancy, well-known paths, seeing long absent faces, listening to the sound of the church bells which had once made sweet music to her ear; and, absorbed in her own recollections, had been at first inattentive to the conversation of the ladies beside her, till her ear was caught by the sound of the name which was to her dear beyond all others.

"And that is Sir Amery!" exclaimed one, leaning forward to catch a glimpse of him through the open folding-doors; "what a princely form! what a noble countenance! He looks like the statue of an old Greek demigod warmed into life!"

The wife felt a glow of pleasure at the words, and turned with interest towards the speaker.

"Did you not say that he was married?" said the companion of the lady who had spoken.

"Oh, yes; he married some time ago; made quite a mistake, if report be true–the usual fate of geniuses; he threw himself away on some insipid little rustic, who had nothing but a pretty face to recommend her!"

Flora had heard enough; she rose and left her seat, and made her way with difficulty through the crowd to another part of the ball-room.

But even here she was destined again to find her gifted husband the topic of conversation. An elderly gentleman was talking with a young man, who appeared to be eagerly arguing some point with him.

"But you must allow that he has very great power–"

"Just as I allow that the boa-constrictor has very great power," replied the senior, laughing. "This man envelops truth in the mighty folds of his genius, and squeezes the very life and shape out of it. I believe that writers like Sir Amery do a world of mischief, especially amongst young men. I, for one, will not join this worship of an author whose great merit seems to be, that he can mix up poison so skilfully that the victims take it for a wholesome medicine."

Flora, trembling, made her way into the adjoining room, and again was at the side of her husband, bearing in her bosom a sting which lay and rankled there for many a day.

The next morning brought another letter from Mr. Ward–Mrs. Vernon not writing herself, lest her epistles should convey contagion. Flora learned that the youngest child had taken the fever, and that Johnny was not expected to live. Mrs. Vernon had sat up with him the whole of the preceding night, and had never quitted the sick-room. Flora's only comfort was in the thought that the experienced nurse, whom without delay she had procured from an hospital, would relieve her mother to a certain degree; and she wrote a long tender letter to Mrs. Vernon, secretly wishing that she herself could take the place of her epistle.

Then followed two days of silence, weary, anxious days to Flora, whose absence of mind and restless longing for news called forth an impatient remark from Sir Amery. Submissive and fearful of displeasing, Flora sat quietly listening to his comments on a new work, even when she at last heard the double rap at the door; and she held the unopened letter in her hand, though it bore the postmark of Wingsdale, till her husband had concluded the brilliant review, of which his auditor had not comprehended one sentence.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Flora, as she glanced at the first lines, "all the children are likely to recover!"

"Did you feel any apprehensions on their account?" said the baronet drily; "empty casks always float, the full ones are those that are in danger of sinking."

"But, oh! how shocking!" exclaimed Flora as she read on further: "'*Your sister-in-law had scarcely reached the place of her retreat when she was seized with the terrible malady, all alone as she was, without a friend near her. Your dear mother could not quit the sick children; but she sent the London nurse on to Manton directly. From her account of the state in which she found her patient, serious apprehensions are entertained for the poor lady's life.*'"

"Oh, she'll recover too," said the baronet philosophically.

But the unhappy Emma did not recover. She had had her last warning–

had thrown away her last opportunity of returning to that God whom she from childhood had neglected and forgotten. Her harvest was over, her summer was ended, and she was not saved. She was not one who could be charged with any gross violation of the commandments of the Lord; but they had never had a place in her heart. The seed of the Word had not perished on the cold ice of unbelief, or the burning lava of passion, but on the track beaten and trodden down by selfishness–the highway of folly, on which the soft breath of counsel, or the keen blast of trial, had stirred nothing but the light dust of vanity.

CHAPTER XVII.
DARKENING CLOUDS.

It was not to be expected that Flora, though shocked by the sudden event, should deeply lament the death of her sister-in-law. As Sir Amery observed, Emma had passed the life of a zoophyte, with this difference, that the ocean anemone clings to something beyond self, be it only a rock or a seaweed. Lady Legrange wore black velvet instead of violet, clasped a bracelet of jet round her wrist, and, except for these reminders, might almost have forgotten that such a being as Emma Vernon had ever existed.

It was about a month after the death of her sister-in-law, on a dull morning in the beginning of March, that Flora sat alone in her boudoir, arranging some early primroses and violets. Sir Amery had been absent for two or three days on a visit to a nobleman in the country, but was expected home in the evening. As it was the birth-day of his wife, Flora felt sure that he would not fail to return.

"None of these are worth preserving," she said to herself as she put aside the fading flowers; "how soon they have lost their fragrance, and all their beauty is gone! Poor flowers–this heated room, the smoky atmosphere of London, has made them quickly wither; they would have bloomed longer on their own green bank!" Flora sighed as her mind pursued the train of association called up. "How I once delighted at this season to find the first violets in the copse, and carry them home to my mother! How bright and cheerful all things looked to me then; there was a freshness of enjoyment which, I suppose, only belongs to youth–yet I am but twenty-two years old to-day! There are no garlands now hanging on my myrtle; I wonder if the plant is living still! My mother will not forget the anniversary; she will have thought of her Flora in her prayers! I made so sure of

a letter to-day;" and Flora stood pensively looking at the fading blossoms, when the door unclosed, and a servant entering, announced a well-known name.

"Mr. Ward–can it be! Oh, how good in you," commenced Flora, hastening with unaffected delight to greet her old friend; but the aspect of the venerable clergyman, as he kindly but gravely returned her greeting, awoke a feeling of alarm in the bosom of Lady Legrange.

"You bring bad tidings–my mother!" she exclaimed, still grasping the hand of the old man, and looking up anxiously into his face.

"Mrs. Vernon is not so well as we all wish her to be," replied Mr. Ward, quietly but sadly meeting the daughter's earnest gaze.

"She wished you to come to me–?"

"She does not know of my coming, but I thought it best to let you hear all, and an interview is so much more satisfactory than a letter–"

"Oh, tell me all!" cried Flora in agony. "My mother–is she very–is she dangerously ill?"

Mr. Ward broke to the daughter, as gently as he could, that, in the preceding night, Mrs. Vernon had been suddenly and alarmingly attacked by a malady which threatened her life. He did not say–it was unnecessary that he should say what Flora too surely divined–that the overtaxed powers of her mother's frame were at length giving way; that her exertions during the illness of the children had, it was feared, irreparably injured herself; and that it was very doubtful whether, on his return to Wingsdale, he would find the sufferer yet alive.

Flora could not hesitate now; even the fear of displeasing her husband was swallowed up in a more terrible fear. She wrote a few hurried lines for Sir Amery to receive on his arrival, hastily made her slight preparations for the journey, and under the escort of her kind old friend, and accompanied by her maid, with a very heavy heart she set out for the home of her much-loved parent.

The journey by railroad occupied about three hours; long, painful hours were they to Flora. She could not but contrast this return to Laurel Bank with her last. Then, indeed, she had not been without anxiety, and even a shadow of self-reproach, but the prevailing feeling of her heart had been all-absorbing happiness. She loved and was beloved again, and might have expressed herself in the language of the great poet–

> "Come what sorrow may,
> It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
> Which one short moment gives me in his sight."

But her fair bud of hope had not blossomed into happiness. God had given

her her heart's desire, but *withal sent leanness into her soul.* Flora had learned by experience the hollowness of mere human felicity. "He builds too low who builds beneath the skies." And the change in the appearance of nature harmonized with the alteration in Flora's feelings. On that last journey to Laurel Bank she had beheld earth laughing in the sunlight, and decked in all the beauty of summer. The breeze had waved the broad fields of golden corn, and rustled in the luxuriant foliage of the groves; the gardens had been gay with a thousand flowers, and the wild rose had bloomed in the green hedge. Now, the trees reared their bare dark branches aloft, for the season was a late one; and Winter, driven from his throne for a few sunshiny days, was returning with increasing force to chase back the approaching Spring. From the gray lowering sky above the snow-flakes were beginning to fall, and, before Flora reached the place of her destination, a brooding storm was wrapping the world in premature night.

The snow was driving fast into her face, as Flora hurried up the gravel walk which her footsteps had trodden so often. She opened the door without ringing, for in that quiet retreat bolts and bars were deemed unnecessary. The entrance to the dining-room was open; she heard voices within, and paused an instant to glean from their tone the information which she longed but dreaded to receive.

"No, Emmie, you must not make a noise,"–it was the voice of Johnny that spoke; "don't you know dear grandmamma is ill? Come, sit here quietly, and I'll tell you a little story."

"Then she lives–thank God!" exclaimed Flora to herself, hastening with noiseless footstep up the stairs. In that house she required no guide.

She proceeded straight towards the chamber of her mother, her heart palpitating fast. As she reached it the door unclosed softly, very softly, and Mrs. Vernon's maid appeared with the doctor.

"Miss Flora!" exclaimed the old servant in a subdued tone of surprise.

The doctor glanced sternly at her, and raised his finger, then advanced silently to Lady Legrange.

"Is she–is she–?" Flora could not finish the sentence.

"My dear lady, she is in God's hands; He may raise her yet. Everything that can be done shall be done; but I cannot conceal from you that I entertain serious apprehensions." He spoke in tones too low to be heard in the chamber of the invalid.

"But I may go to her–nurse her–"

"Pardon me," replied the medical man, courteously but firmly interposing, "our patient is in a very critical state; the pleasure of seeing you after so long an absence would cause a degree of excitement which might be attended with fatal consequences."

Flora said nothing, but pressed her hand against her heart; she felt as

though it would break.

"Ann is most watchful and attentive," pursued the doctor, feeling for Flora's evident distress, "and Miss Lyddie will not quit the room for a moment."

"Lyddie!" thought the miserable daughter, with a sharper pang of envy than her gentle bosom had ever before known; "and she may sit and watch where I dare not enter; she may look on that loved face which I have come so far to see; she is the comfort, and I–and I–!" Flora leaned down her head upon her clasped hands and tried to stifle her sobs.

A miserable night was that for Lady Legrange–the most miserable which she had ever known. The cold became more and more piercing, yet no entreaties could induce her either to go to rest or to seek the comfort of a fire in one of the rooms below. She had a chair brought for her to the door of her mother's room, and there she sat, trembling and shivering, counting every stroke of the clock which at intervals–oh! how long and weary–told the lapse of time. She heard the wind shaking the casements, as though fiercely demanding entrance, and shrieking aloft in the chimneys with a wild and wailing noise; and sometimes her painfully strained ear could catch sounds from the sick-room–a light step, a soft rustle, a low voice, or, terrible to hear, the faint moans which told of irrepressible suffering. Flora also, as morning drew nigh, heard words, words from the lips of her parent, words which reason guided no longer–but not one word which it could have pained piety to hear. The unconscious sufferer uttered prayers for mercy, for pardon–prayers for those who were dear to her heart. Flora wept as she heard her own name repeated again and again in unconscious supplications. It seemed as though that which had been the habit of a life remained now as an instinct; the mind might be darkened, reason might have fled, but love and piety lingered yet in their accustomed home, the last to leave the sanctuary which had enshrined them so long. To apply to a nobler subject the beautiful simile of Moore–

> "Like a vase in which roses have once been distilled,
> You may break, you may ruin the vase if you will,
> But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

And Flora also prayed; she besought the Lord with a fervour and depth of feeling beyond any which she ever before had known. Her whole soul was poured out in prayer. Her self-righteousness crushed in the dust, she felt herself now to be a sinner indeed, and she came to the Friend of sinners with a broken and contrite heart. She implored the life of her mother; she besought the Almighty to grant her an opportunity of being once more a comfort and blessing to that

cherished parent–of repaying some portion, some little portion, of the deep debt of love which she owed to her. She prayed for herself, for grace and for strength–alas! she had proved her own sinfulness and weakness. She had been weighed in the balance and found wanting; and it was almost with a sensation of despair that Flora now contemplated the difficulties of her position–difficulties which had been of her own seeking, and which, however lightly she had once regarded them, now appeared almost insuperable. If heavenly love drew her onward and upward, she knew too well that earthly love would act as a clog on her soul. The partner whom she had chosen would never aid her weakness in the struggle against worldliness–rather would he side with the enemy. He would never warm the coldness of her devotion by the fervour of his own; his prayers and hers would never rise together to the throne of their Father in heaven. Flora's soul was full of anguish for her idolized Amery. If it was grief to think that her mother's gentle spirit might be now on the wing from this world of sorrow, what was it to think that the spirit of her husband might never rise, to the bliss of the world which is to come! If affection shrinks from the death of the body, it shudders over the death of the soul. Separation in time is to the loving heart a trial almost too painful to contemplate; what then must be separation throughout eternity–the sole parting which is indeed *for ever*!

The only time that Flora quitted the door of her mother's apartment was when she sought that which had once been her favourite sitting-room, to procure writing materials with which to pen a letter to her husband. The fast flowing tears which dimmed her eyes and blotted her page hardly suffered her to complete it. The letter gave a vivid and touching picture of all the emotions which were agitating her mind. Sorrow, contrition, tenderness, were expressed in the unstudied language of the heart. Flora told him whom she dared not deem a Christian how a Christian could die. She dwelt on her mother's piety; she left her husband to draw the inferences which she longed to place before him in such a light as might strike conviction even on his prejudiced soul. She wept and she prayed over the letter, but the darkness before her was scarcely illumined by one ray of hope.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DARK JOURNEY.

"Indeed, aunt Flora, you must go to rest; you look so pale and ill, you almost

frighten me," said Lyddie.

The appearance of the girl was much changed. She still looked sickly, from the effects of her own recent illness, and from her hair having been close cut during her fever; but the once wild neglected weed had not been cultivated in vain. Thought and sense were expressed in the large dark eyes beyond what might have been expected in a girl scarcely twelve years of age. All the latent tenderness of Lyddie's nature had been called out by Mrs. Vernon; grateful affection to an earthly benefactor had become a ruling motive in the orphan's heart, already strengthened rather than replaced by a motive yet more high and holy. The task which Flora had deemed hopeless another had performed; the once wild, wilful, untamed girl, had been brought to the feet of the Saviour.

"I cannot rest," replied Flora, sadly; "and you, Lyddie, you have been sitting up all the night!"

"No, I have been sleeping on the couch at the foot of the bed, while Ann watched by dear grandmamma. I could not bear to be far away. Now Ann is resting for a little on the couch; she has had no sleep these two nights, you know, and I am ready to call her up in a moment, if grandmamma should stir ever so little."

"Is my precious mother then sleeping?"

"Yes, she is sleeping now; isn't it a comfort?–she has been so restless, as if she were in pain; but she is quite peaceful now–so very peaceful!"

"Oh that I could but look at her!" faltered Flora.

"I think that you might, if you crept in very softly."

"If I were to awaken her!"

"Oh! she does not look as if she would awake!"

The simple words of the child sent a sudden, strange thrill of terror through Flora's heart! What if that deep sleep were a sleep which could never be broken! Lady Legrange entered the silent apartment chilled with the cold, faint and dizzy with watching, her trembling limbs scarcely able to support her. The early gleam of morning, dimly seen through the half-closed shutter, mingled its light with that of the flickering, expiring night-lamp. The curtains of the invalid's bed were drawn back to give her air–Lady Legrange again beheld her mother. She looked on the dear face, which she had not seen for years–ah! what a change time, sorrow, and sickness, had wrought there! Yet still beautiful it lay in its perfect stillness, white as the pillow on which it reclined. Every feature appeared sculptured in marble, in its calm, unearthly serenity. The lips did not move, the bosom did not heave, there was no quiver in the closed eyelids! Flora bent to listen: she could not distinguish the slightest sound–oh! the relief that even a moan would have brought to her then!

A little feather lay on the crimson coverlet; Flora raised it with a trembling

hand, placed it almost close to the lips of her mother, and then watched it as a perishing castaway might watch a distant sail, the one dim speck of hope on the dark waste of waters. It moved!–yes, yes–it moved! It was not the morning breeze that stirred the down; the breath of life had not passed away from those pallid lips; they might yet speak a blessing–they were not closed for ever!

Flora retired from the room with noiseless step, shedding silent tears of thankfulness and joy.

The doctor came, but would not disturb the sleeper. Every hour of quiet repose, he said, would do more to restore the sufferer than all the remedies which art could devise. He believed, he trusted, that the crisis was past. Should this slumber continue every hope might be indulged; but the house must be kept perfectly quiet.

And perfectly quiet it was kept. Even the sound of children's voices was hushed, and little feet crept noiselessly down stairs. Johnny took off his shoes ere he passed his grandmother's room. Flora still continued at her melancholy post–watching at the door which she feared to enter, weeping, praying, and reviewing her past life with deep humility and contrition.

The sun had reached his noonday height, though remaining invisible behind the clouds, which had been ceaselessly pouring down their white, flaky showers upon the earth, when, with a rapid step and flushed countenance, Johnny hurried towards Lady Legrange. He needed not the gesture of her finger on her lip; he uttered not a word, spoke not a question, but he thrust into her hand an open paper which had just been brought from the telegraph office. Flora felt dizzy and confused; she passed her hand across her eyes before she could read the paper, and when she had read it every object appeared swimming around her. It was brief, as such messages always are, but how terrible in its stern brevity,–

"*Sir Amery has been thrown from his horse. Return home without delay, if you would find him alive.*"

That was all that was written, but it was enough–enough to wring the heart, to fill the cup of anguish to overflowing! Flora started from her seat–she was pale as death; but she uttered no cry–but one object was before her now. Oh! for the lightning's wing to fly back to her husband!

When the spirit is burning with an impatience which would make the swiftness of the eagle appear slow, how intolerable are the petty difficulties, the unavoidable delays which constantly interpose. Where was a conveyance to be found in Wingsdale to take Flora to the station, which was barely two miles distant? Johnny, a willing messenger, started off in the snow-storm; but though the boy exerted his utmost speed, it appeared a weary age to Flora before he returned. He came back heated and tired, with disappointment in his glowing face. The conveyance which Flora had employed on the previous day had returned

to the town, ten miles distant; the doctor, who alone boasted a little carriage in Wingsdale, was out, and might not return before evening; the farmer's horse had fallen lame;–there was no vehicle of any kind to be procured.

"Then I will go on foot. Oh! that I had not delayed!" cried Flora, wringing her hands; "I might have been at the station by this time."

In vain the wondering maid of Lady Legrange ventured to expostulate with her mistress, pointed to the cloudy sky and the fast descending snow. No earthly persuasion could stay the wife, not even the anxieties of the daughter. These anxieties, indeed, had been in a certain measure relieved; Mrs. Vernon had awoke calm and refreshed, and had dictated to Lyddie a message of affection to be sent to her Flora, little dreaming that at that moment the same roof covered them both.

Flora, accompanied only by her maid, set out on her gloomy journey. The violence of the wind was so great, that umbrellas were left behind as useless, while the falling snow so obscured the view, that the travellers could see but a few yards before them. To Flora, however, the path was so well known that she could have found her way blindfold. The fields were one white level, save where, beside the glistening hedges, the wind had drifted the snow into heaps. Flora's feet sank into the white mass at each step, she toiled with difficulty along the path; yet urged on by love and fear, she paused not for a moment even to take breath, or to shake the snowflakes from her mantle. She thought not of weariness, she thought not of suffering;–her whole soul was wrapped up in her husband. Surely the road had lengthened since she last trod it–would she never arrive at the place of her destination!

At length–at length the station is in sight, the little red-brick building, standing alone where the telegraph posts, with their straight black wires, stand in sharp defined outline against the white back-ground. Ha! there is a sound! Flora starts with an exclamation of distress–it is the shrill scream of the railway whistle–a long black object is rolling away into the distance, swift and swifter! Flora gazes after it with straining eyes, then sinks exhausted on a snow-heap beside the road; no need to hasten on now–she has missed the train–she too late!

Slowly and sadly, conscious now of utter weariness and exhaustion, Flora made her way to the station. "When may the next train be expected?" was her eager question when she arrived there.

"The next? about three hours hence."

How sank Flora's heart at the reply! Those hours might have been spent beside her mother might be so still; but no, fainting nature refused the effort; not the smallest hazard must be run of missing the next–the latest train. Flora warmed her shivering frame at the fire in the one bare little waiting-room at the station, then seated herself by the small table, and leaning her arms upon it,

bowed down upon them her drooping head. She remained so long in this position that her maid believed that she slept. Then Flora arose, and paced up and down like a caged leopard, looked at her watch again and again, and gazed impatiently out on the snow. The railway man was whistling an air; it struck painfully on the lady's ear; in her utter misery it seemed strange to Flora that any human being could be happy.

An express train rushed past with a roar like thunder, awakening for a moment a hope which vanished like itself into darkness. Flora sat long with her eyes fixed on the telegraph-paper, as though she could draw from the lines, which she knew by heart, the information which their brevity denied. Alas! her fears supplied its place too well.

The three hours passed–Time does move on, even when his wings are of lead–but still no sight of the longed-for train.

"It is late," said the railway official; "doubtless its progress has been delayed by the snow."

Flora could sit still no longer; she was in a fever of restless expectation, and sorely her patience was tried. The train was long behind time; night closed in before at length the welcome bell of preparation was heard. Lady Legrange felt something almost resembling joy when she found herself seated at last in the train with her maid. A gentleman, whose features she could scarcely distinguish in the gloom, was their only fellow-traveller in the carriage. He made some common-place observation on the weather, which Flora neither comprehended nor answered. Her thoughts were becoming a wild chaos: she could not collect them sufficiently even for prayer.

On, on through the darkness and gloom–surely never train moved on so slowly before!–surely never were so many vexatious delays! Flora wept no longer; her fount of tears appeared to be dried up. Her brow was throbbing with a burning pain; a band of iron seemed pressed across her temples She was scarcely conscious of what was passing around her, when the weary journey ended at last.

Bewildered and confused, the hapless Lady Legrange found herself in the midst of the bustle of an arrival in London at night. Friends and servants were there waiting for travellers; but, either from neglect on the part of her own household, or from her having been expected by the earlier train, no one was in waiting for Flora. In vain she strained her eyes to find some familiar face, to see some one who could relieve her agony of suspense, by giving her tidings of her husband. After some delay–and delay was torture–a conveyance was procured, in which the miserable wife was slowly jolted through narrow, gloomy streets, towards the home at which she yearned to arrive. The cab stopped at her own door; Flora sprang from it–herself rang the bell, gently, fearfully, for was not suffering

within the dwelling? No answer! She rang the bell again, and, before the sound died away, the door was opened by a servant. He started at seeing his mistress; his face answered the question which she could not speak; he uttered but the sentence, "Too late!" and Flora sank senseless on the threshold.

CHAPTER XIX.
CONCLUSION.

The newspapers on the following day all dilated on one theme–the genius, the brilliant career, and the sudden death, of Sir Amery Legrange. Each had its paragraph of praise, not in every case unmingled with censure, but censure tenderly, sparingly dealt forth; for the melancholy fate of the gifted young author had wrung compassion from literary critics and theological opponents. In the gay saloons and haunts of fashion, of which he had but a few days since been the ornament and pride, his name was upon every tongue. In a brief space the news spread far and wide, like circles on a river when some large object has been suddenly plunged into its waters. But the current of society flowed on as ever; soon not the faintest ripple on its surface told that one of its proudest names had become a word of the past–that one of its loftiest spirits had gone to the "bourn from which no traveller returns."

But there was one being, weeping in her darkened chamber alone, in whose almost broken heart a void was made which nothing earthly could ever fill–one crushed beneath the weight of a grief for which even religion has no comfort. What mattered it to her that the voice of nations swelled the tribute to departed genius–that he whom she so passionately loved would occupy a niche in the temple of Fame! Blessed mourners are they who weep for the dead translated to a more blissful existence; thrice blessed they who, when all the pride of this world shall have passed away like a fevered dream, shall hear the voice of the Saviour pronounce the sentence, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!" But Flora sorrowed as one without hope. Oh! that those who, in defiance of the command–the merciful warning of their God–choose to twine the dearest affections of their hearts around an earthly pillar, on which "holiness to the Lord" has never been inscribed, would anticipate the anguish of that day when, beneath the stroke of the angel of death, that pillar shall lie shattered in the dust; and Despair, gazing on the broken relics of all that was

dear, fair, talented, and brave, shall utter the mournful wail, "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!*"

Little was it to the bereaved young widow that, with the loss of her dearest treasure, wealth also took wings to itself and fled away. Sir Amery's income had principally consisted of life-rent; careless in money concerns, little anticipating so sudden and speedy a close to his career, he had left a very scanty provision for his survivor. There was, indeed, a new work of his, almost completed, for which contending publishers were ready to offer sums which would have materially enlarged the scanty resources of Lady Legrange. The posthumous work of an author so renowned was certain to command the eager attention of the public; and Flora received various communications on the subject. She read the manuscript, wept over the lines which had been last traced by the loved hand now cold in death; she then folded up the papers, enclosed and sealed them, and, resolved that no eye but her own should ever peruse the unhallowed creation of a mind which had made fatal progress in error, she endorsed the packet with a command that at her death other hands should burn, unread, that which she had not herself the heart to destroy. "These would be his orders, could he speak from the grave," said Flora to herself, as she locked up the papers in her cabinet's deepest recess. "Oh! would he not desire to obliterate in all his writings every page which could injure others when he is himself no more–every page which could witness against him! O God! my God!" exclaimed the widow, suddenly raising her clasped hands with a cry of anguish wrung from the depths of her soul, "they cannot be obliterated–they cannot be recalled–it is too late!–oh! misery! it is too late!"

The first thing which served in any degree to restore composure to the unhappy Flora was her return to her early home. Mrs. Vernon, who had been too ill to hasten to her daughter when the tidings of her bereavement arrived, or even for some time to be permitted to know of her loss, was now convalescent, and welcomed her beloved child with a depth and intensity of loving sympathy that poured balm into Flora's bleeding heart. She had thought, in the first transport of her anguish, that all had been rent from her at once; but she found that one of earth's most priceless blessings was left to her yet–the deep, unchanged, holy love of her mother.

Mrs. Vernon received back her Flora as a precious treasure restored; and it was a treasure purified, beautified, refined. The furnace of affliction, seven times heated, had not been heated in vain.

Gradually Flora resumed her daily round of occupations, and passed a life closely resembling that which had been hers at the period when our story opened. She visited the sick and the poor, comforted the sorrowful, taught the ignorant–neglected none of the duties of home. But in how different a spirit were those

duties performed! With what altered feelings did the chastened mourner now repeat the confession of the sins of whose existence she had then scarcely known! Shrinking from the idea of resting on her own righteousness, her own imperfect and polluted works, Flora's only hope was in the merits of her Saviour–her greatest solace the remembrance of His death–her aim and object in life to show her humble gratitude to Him who had loved and given Himself for her. She was no more as a sunbeam in the dwelling–her sparkling brightness was gone for ever; but rather like the gentle moonbeam that illumines the night, shining with a soft lustre, borrowed from the only true Source of happiness and of light.

We have seen how the seed of the Word had sprung up in a shallow soil, made a fair show, and then withered away; how the plant of earthly love had succeeded, striking deep its roots, spreading wide its branches, obscuring the light of heaven, darkening the earth with its fatal shade. God in mercy had torn up that plant; and though the uprooting of it had appeared to wrench asunder the very heart-strings that had twined so closely around it, to lay bare the deepest recesses of the soil, it prepared that soil, through the divine blessing, for the precious seed of truth. The word of God, now received in humility and meekness, rested in the ground which the Lord had rendered good, and brought forth abundantly the fruit of holy living, to the praise and glory of the Giver of all grace.

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