

STELLA OF THE NORTH.

A NOVEL.

LANE, MINERVA-PRESS, LEADENHALL-STREET.

STELLA OF THE NORTH,
OR THE
FOUNDLING OF THE SHIP.

A NOVEL.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF ADELAIDE DE NARBONNE, &c.

“Virtue can itself advance
“To what the fav’rite fools of chance
 “By fortune seem’d design’d;
“Virtue can gain the odds of fate,
“And from itself shake off the weight
 “Upon th’ unworthy mind.”

PARNELL.

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STELLA
OF THE
NORTH.

“Feeling does not stay to calculate with weights and balance the importance and magnitude of every object that excites it: it flows impetuously from the heart, without consulting the cooler responses of the understanding.”

GODWIN.

A TEMPORARY pause succeeded these reflections, which seemed to have somewhat tranquillized her late perturbed mind: she rose, and slowly ascending the steps, proceeded to complete its entire recovery, by continuing the task of self-examination a few minutes longer in the grotto.

Stella had already proved the fallacy of hope and the disappointment of hasty conclusions on this subject: success, however, appeared still within her reach; and with the short-sighted ardour of youthful impetuosity, the same system of reformation was once more adopted, while the bare possibility of an unsuccessful termination to the attempt was not permitted to damp expectation, or reckoned amongst other probable chances in the catalogue of human accidents.

On entering her favourite retirement, Stella placed herself amongst the flowering shrubs in the window, and pensively marked the last rays of the sun glittering on the distant bosom of the ocean. A passing shadow momentarily caught her eye; but the woodbine and sweetbriar that hung in festoons on the exterior side, prevented her from discovering by what it was produced. After leaning ineffectually forward for that purpose, she resumed her contemplative posture, and the incident was presently forgotten in reflections of a more interesting nature.

The door had been left unlatched on her entrance; it was now gradually pushed open, and a very beautiful spaniel appeared, whose motions indicated the loss of his master, for he traced the floor repeatedly with his nose to the ground, and then approaching the window, stopped before Stella, looked up in her face, wagged his tail, and seemed evidently to court particular attention by the fawning caresses and playful gambols with which he strove to attract her notice.

“Some sportsman from the grove is probably on his way home,” thought Stella; “perhaps Captain Montague; if so, he may now be in the Hermitage with Mrs. Bertram. But,” continued she, stroking the dog’s head while she spoke, “you have got a collar I perceive; by it I shall soon discover if I am right in my supposition.”

She bent downwards to examine the inscription, and the name of Major St. Vincent met her view! The truant heart of our heroine palpitated at the sight. The animal was invited to place himself on a part of the seat she occupied: she saw him now to greater advantage: he seemed the most beautiful creature of his species in the world; she caressed him with ardour, and felt gratified by the readiness and patience he evinced to remain with his head and his two forefeet resting upon her knee.

The name so unexpectedly discovered, and the spot where she was now seated, recalled to her remembrance the accidental interview that had formerly taken place in the vicinity. It might almost be considered as the first she had had with Montague or his friend; for the short

space the latter appeared to her in the shrubbery, was not of a nature to come under that denomination.

The unruffled ease of mind—the thoughtless gaiety of heart—the happy indifference respecting futurity, which then pervaded her bosom, when, blithe as the soaring lark, she carolled forth the note of harmony and content, officiously rose to her view, and presenting the sad contrast between past and present sensations, filled her breast with all the thousand melancholy images which retrospection ever produces on similar occasions; but the conscious existence of self-reproach withheld the powers of articulation from venting the poignant feelings of regret in words, and once more deluged her eyes in tears. The spaniel looked up, as if sympathizing in her sorrows, and placing his foot upon her shoulder, attempted to lick her cheek.

Stella now recovered the power of speech: she gently removed his foot, momentarily gazed upon him with an expression of the most interesting tenderness, and suddenly clasping her arms round the animal, gave way to a still more violent burst of anguish, exclaiming, as the drops chased each other down her face—

“Oh Heavens! this is too—too much indeed!—Would to God I had expired at the hour of my birth!—would to God I had been permitted to rest in my watery cradle!—then would my lacerated heart have escaped this continual warfare between prudence and inclination; then no even unintentional dereliction of principle would have torn it with perpetual remorse! Oh St. Vincent!—beloved St. Vincent! fatal to me was the moment that first presented you to my view; fatal the ill-starred night that conducted you to—”

She was proceeding in broken sentences to discharge some of the secret burthen that oppressed her saddened heart, when a profound sigh was heard from the door, to which her back happened to be turned: she started, and looking hastily round, perceived the shadow of a person slowly retreating from the threshold.

At this instant the dog gave a sudden bark, expressive of pleasure, and leaping from his resting place, sprung to the entrance.

Stella intuitively followed him in trembling emotion. The door was yet but half open; she laid her hand on the lock, but presently withdrew it, and shrunk from advancing upon hearing the sound of a voice that vibrated through her bosom.

A timid glance discovered Major St. Vincent leaning against a projection of the rock. The dog was placed in his arms, and he caressed it with the fondest expressions of affection.

“Oh happy—happy little animal!” he softly articulated, “what would I not give to be in thy enviable situation!—Free, unfettered, at liberty to follow the unchangeable dictates of inclination!—Oh God!” he continued, abruptly placing the dog on the ground, and striking his forehead in a paroxysm of despair, “why was I preordained to this late discovery of additional wretchedness? To be miserable alone was at least some consolation: even that solitary comfort is now removed; and, miserable myself, I am likewise doomed to constitute the misery of her, who, in spite of every tie, human or divine, is dearer to me than the air I breathe, than the ruddy drops that visit my sad heart!”

The dog continued to leap round him while he spoke, and at length bounded back to the grotto.

St. Vincent, agitated and unhappy, stood irresolute whether to advance or remain where he was. He raised his eyes to the door: Juba had pushed it further open in the hurry of his entrance, and Stella appeared supporting herself against the wall. Her face was covered from observation; but deep and convulsive sighs marked the acute nature of the sensations which now shook her frame to agony, and produced an effect no less painful on the feelings of the Major.

Propelled by the impulse of the moment, St. Vincent's former resolutions no longer fluctuated on the verge of propriety—they instantly and entirely disappeared from view; he sprung forward, and catching hold of the hand that hung almost lifeless by her side, pressed it to his lips and heart before she was aware of his intention.

Stella started from a reverie replete with anguish, and suddenly raising her head, gazed upon him for a moment with a look in which confusion and tenderness seemed struggling for pre-eminence. The deep shade of melancholy it spread over the face of St. Vincent was too legibly written on his fine features to be easily mistaken. Though the period for observation was short and transient, our heroine saw enough to recall her wandering senses from the dangerous direction they had taken: she withdrew her hand, and was hastily advancing to the door without uttering a syllable, when her visitor, in a voice of the most persuasive entreaty, implored her to hear him only for five minutes.

“No! not for one, Sir!” replied Stella, in a tremulous voice; “I have already heard too much!”

“Miss Bertram,” cried St. Vincent, in a solemn accent, “your peace, your honour are not, cannot be dearer to yourself than they are to me; nor would I injure you, in any respect, for the world! To bury in my own bosom the secret anguish that has long corroded it, has hitherto been the stern, the unalterable purpose of my soul. In that resolution I should have persevered—in that resolution probably died, had not the disclosure—the fatal disclosure I will call it, of your sentiments in my favour deprived me of all self-command, and—”

He was proceeding, when his trembling auditor, in spite of her recent hurry to retire, still remained stationary, unconscious of the magnetic influence that retained her steps, again interrupted him by uttering exclamations against her own folly, and the most pathetic entreaties to forget the imprudence of which she had been guilty.—“Never more, Sir,” added she, “let me see you here!—any further intrusions on your side can only be regarded in the light of an insult by me: and, be assured, however weak or unguarded you may think yourself entitled to imagine her whose sentiments are now supposed known to you, those principles of which she is nevertheless possessed, will ever protect her from failing in that respect which is due to her own character, and teach her to turn with virtuous abhorrence from the bare idea of listening to a married man on any subject that will not bear the broad glare of day, and the approving ear of an impartial world! Adieu, Sir!—we meet no more, or only meet as strangers!”

“Meet no more!” repeated St. Vincent, in a voice of unrestrained anguish. “Heavenly Powers! what a sentence! But I submit to the imperious *fiat* of necessity;—I know my fate is consummated, and my destiny ir retrievable! You shall therefore be obeyed: yet not unconditionally, for my bursting heart pants after comfort, however inadequate the allotted portion may prove to assuage its sorrows. Stella, then—dear, angelic Stella! one word—only one word more, I beseech you!—Quit me not without affording the much-valued gratification of knowing you will not be a sufferer on the occasion.—Say you will endeavour to be happy, whatever becomes of the wretched St. Vincent! Oh give me this satisfaction before we part for ever! Will you not speak to me!—not accord the poor indulgence of one consolatory sentence? Inhuman Stella! you commiserate not the woes you inflict; your heart is alike callous to pity, as your determinations are inflexibly severe!”

He grasped her reluctant hand, of which he was again in possession, in order to prevent her farther retreat; and once more rivetted the imploring eye of misery on her varying and agitated countenance, as he stopped her on the first steps that led from the grotto.

CHAP. II.

“Aimas-tu comme moi?—Sous mes maux je succombe.”

STELLA, thus in a manner forcibly detained, felt at once the necessity of some exertion to liberate herself from a situation so trying and painful. She attempted to speak, but distress and confusion held her silent, and the inarticulate sentence died on her lips before it reached his ear.

Abashed and disconcerted by the state of her feelings, and the situation to which she was reduced, she covered her face, and, in spite of every endeavour to suppress her emotion, wept aloud.

Once more inconceivably affected, and no longer able to restrain the impulsive violence of those agonizing reflections that tumultuously throbbed in his bosom, he snatched her abruptly to his heart, and as abruptly relinquishing his hold, dropped on one knee before her, in order to deprecate the resentment which evidently flushed her late pallid cheeks, and darted from eyes yet humid with sensations of a very different description.

At this interesting moment a rustling noise was heard amongst the underwood near the grotto, and immediately a person rushed from behind some of the neighbouring bushes, who suddenly turning into the adjoining plantation, disappeared amid the gloom of the overshadowing foliage, now considerably deepened by the sombre tint of retiring twilight.

Astonished, confounded, alarmed, by a circumstance that seemed to mark them for objects of particular observation, St. Vincent instantly started from the ground, and, like Stella, followed with his eyes the direction apparently taken by the fugitive, in silent consternation.

After the lapse of a few minutes, our heroine in a firm voice, and with an air of impressive dignity, thus silently addressed her musing companion—

“You see, Sir, the consequence of your ill-judged intrusion! The appearance of that person at so late an hour; the concealment from whence he emerged; his evident solicitude to elude discovery; all—all evince more of formed design than casual accident, on the occasion! Yes! the reason is but too obvious:—your steps have been watched, and my hitherto unspotted fame—that first of female treasures, and, till now, almost my sole possession on earth, must probably henceforth be sacrificed to your rash, your unjustifiable proceedings. Such, alas! is the cruel effect of a single deviation from any of the moral duties, that the innocent is often unavoidably involved in punishment of the guilty!”

The voice of Stella here began to falter; she paused for a moment, wiped off a conscious tear, and then proceeded in a firmer tone—

“Shame, remorse, and self accusation are the sure attendants on premeditated error. From the latter, however, I am free: of the three former I cannot, perhaps, say so much; it is fit, therefore, I suffer for my unguarded folly. In the light of correction I shall consider whatever evils may arise from the degradation to which I have incautiously subjected myself, by weakly condescending to listen for a single moment to the prohibited professions of personal regard from a married man!”

St. Vincent’s emotion increased, and he attempted to interrupt her in extreme agitation.

“One more, and for the last time, adieu!” cried our heroine, hastily waving her hand with a repulsive motion. “Reflect on the past; amend the future; and remember however deficient in

the adventitious circumstances of rank or fortune, Stella Bertram is at least your equal in the superior advantages arising from a sense of conscious rectitude, and a rigid adherence to those principles of virtue and morality, which alone lead to happiness through every station allotted for our sphere of action to move in below.”

The solemn accent in which these words were uttered; the look of inborn worth that accompanied them; the bright beam of intelligence that irradiated her countenance while she spoke, all conspired to make a forcible impression on the mind of her unhappy auditor, who, totally overpowered by the intensity of his feelings, permitted her at length to depart without exerting any farther effort to procure her attention.

Apparently rivetted to the spot, he retained the same position for some time after her departure. With folded arms and a dejected air, her retiring form was mentally traced long after it had ceased to become visible, and as the farthest gate of the garden was heard to close on the woman he must henceforth endeavour to exclude from his thoughts, a chilling sensation pervaded his whole frame, and ran with distressing, but resistless rapidity through every vein. Slowly he returned to the grotto. From the landing-place at the porch a view was obtained of the Hermitage: a light soon appeared in one of the little apartments; his eye insensibly rested upon it. The window shutters were left open, and a female figure was distinctly perceived pacing the room with irregular steps. By the handkerchief which she frequently raised to her eyes, she seemed to be weeping; and every movement, as far as could be ascertained by the distance, indicated some internal agitation. The heart of St. Vincent whispered it was Stella whom he now gazed upon; and again he remained stationary. At the end of a short period the window shutters were closed—he sighed to find her no longer visible: a conviction of the lasting deprivation of hope, peace, and happiness seemed to have taken hold of his mind. He entered the grotto, the door of which our heroine had neglected to close in the moment of alarm and perturbation, and throwing himself upon the seat she had recently occupied, covered his face, and gave way to a sudden burst of uncontrollable anguish; from which having procured a temporary relief, the unhappy St. Vincent fled from the spot with the precipitation of confirmed despair, and reached Rossgrove in a state of mind easier to be conceived than described.

On his arrival, the voice of mirth and gaiety resounded from the farther end of the hall. His heart sickened at the idea of mingling, in its present situation, with the votaries of mirth. He knew several guests were then in the house, with some of whom he was but little acquainted; and to use the exertions politeness rendered requisite should he join them, appeared at this juncture impossible.

While he yet paused to consider on his next motions, the parlour door suddenly opened, and approaching footsteps were heard. St. Vincent retired behind one of the pillars till the person, or persons, had passed him. It proved to be Mrs. St. Vincent, who was met by her maid at the opposite end of the lobby, and after a whisper from the latter, the purport of which he could not distinguish, they retired together.

This discovery at once determined his motions. He concluded his wife was gone to her own apartment; and the momentary, half-formed intention of retiring for the night under-pretence (indeed it was more than pretence), of indisposition, instantly vanished before the reluctant sensation he felt to her presence in the existing situation of his mind. Equally unwilling, however, to gain the happy group from which she had just retired, he opened a glass door that led to the shrubbery, and taking the first path that offered, slowly pursued his way, in the hope of tranquillizing his thoughts so far as to escape the chance of any particular observation on the singularity of his present dejected appearance.

With this object in view, he exerted his best efforts for its accomplishment; and absorbed in mental cogitations, entered a walk which, from its solitary and secluded situation, seemed peculiarly adapted to the soothing purpose of meditation, even at a period of the day more liable to intrusion than the late still hour in which it was now visited.

At length, conceiving his mind sufficiently composed to join the family, and anxious to return home, lest his absence, already too much prolonged, should subject him to the very scrutiny he felt solicitous to avoid, St. Vincent crossed the shrubbery, and was proceeding along a path that lay on one side of a small pavilion, surrounded by tall overhanging trees, when the sound of his own name, pronounced with uncommon emphasis, caught his ear from an open window under which he was passing at the moment.

Astonished by a circumstances so totally unexpected, his progress was instantly arrested, and instinctively he stopped to ascertain from whence it originated.

A temporary pause succeeded; but his suspense was not permitted to be of long duration.

CHAP. III.

“Une éternelle chaîne
“M’impose le tourment d’une éternelle peine.”

“WHAT! clasped in his arms!—on his knees before her! You rave, Jenny—it cannot be possible!” said a voice, which he speedily recognised to be that of Mrs. St. Vincent.

“You may depend upon the truth of this information, Madam; James never told me a falsehood since the first moment of our acquaintance,” was the reply.

Mrs. St. Vincent said something in return, which the Major could not distinctly make out; but what followed tolerably supplied the deficiency, for the girl immediately answered—

“Yes, indeed, Madam. James left them together, I do assure you; and from the hints he dropped, it seemed more than probable the Major would pass the night with her.”

Mrs. St. Vincent’s rage now burst forth in the most violent exclamations against the supposed perfidious conduct of her husband, which Jenny, either from folly or design, continued to augment by sympathy she attempted to administer on the occasion.

The Major had heard enough, however, to convince him that the idea of Stella was well founded in regard to the intention of the man whose abrupt appearance had recently alarmed them. Shocked at the meanness of his wife, who could thus condescend to bribe a domestic to watch the motions of her husband, his first impulse was to enter the pavilion, to acquaint her with his knowledge of her ill-judged proceedings, and not only to insist upon a change of measures in the first instance, but likewise the immediate dismissal of her female confidant, as a preliminary step to the prospect of future reformation; while, on his side, their auxiliary, James, who was one of the grooms, should instantly receive a similar order, and be discharged from his service with every possible mark of ignominy.

This resolution was upon the point of being put into execution, when the design was speedily relinquished, from a momentary reflection on the consequent evils which would probably accrue to the innocent Stella, should the transaction be attended with any degree of public *éclat*; and that such would prove the case could scarcely be doubted, since the two inferior culprits would naturally tell the story in the light they conceived most favourable to their own individual share in the business, while he had every reason to apprehend they would be supported in the attempt by their employer, who, it evidently appeared, was capable of adopting any measure for the accomplishment of her project.

Another consideration perhaps weighed equally strong on this side of the question. The principal facts alledged against him were certainly incontrovertible, and he was incapable of adding falsehood to error, by denying what he knew to be true, if interrogated on the subject. Should he happen to be placed in this predicament, his veracity might or might not be established, according to existing circumstances; but no succeeding effort would be sufficiently powerful to protect the guiltless and noble-minded Stella from the malice of the calumniator, or the effects of her jealous suspicions, which, he was but too well convinced, would perpetually be levelled at her unoffending head, and bursting forth with renewed violence on the most trivial occasions. Besides, it would not be denied that appearances were extremely against them; and the late hour, no less than the secluded situation of the spot where their interview had been witnessed, were circumstances particularly inimical to the fair fame of our heroine, under the probable supposition that both were fixed upon by her own appointment, for the purpose of a

premeditated assignation. Such a representation of the affair was by no means unlikely, especially when recollected that neither of the foregoing incidents could have been effected by force, nor apparently conducted without the knowledge, or, at least, acquiescence of Stella.

Averse to risk conclusions eventually so fatal to the character of her he adored, and at the same time so well calculated to gain unlimited credit in the present depraved state of society, St. Vincent checked the propelling impulse by which he was at first actuated, and adopting one less hostile to his fears, prudently determined upon leaving the result of the whole to chance, without dropping any hint by which the extent of his knowledge might be ascertained, till necessity obliged him to alter the system of forbearance, for one of a less pleasing description.

In pursuance of this design he stole softly past the pavilion, and reached the house while some of the guests were yet too much occupied by the orgies of the gaming table to notice his absence.

No regular supper was served up at Rossgrove; but a well furnished sideboard, abundantly replenished with the choicest delicacies, stood ready prepared for those visitors who might be inclined to partake of its various accommodations. Fortunately for St. Vincent, the parlour in which it stood was unoccupied by any person when he entered it. On the mantelpiece lay two letters which had arrived during his absence. One of them required an immediate answer: inclination led him to delay it till the following morning; but second thoughts are said to be best, and having swallowed some wine and water, he determined to put them in execution without farther loss of time.

Writing materials were always at hand in this room; and St. Vincent was occupied in obeying the injunctions of his correspondent, when some of the company from the other apartment came to pay a visit to the sideboard.

It was a rule under the Nabob's roof to leave every person master of his own time and actions; little notice was, therefore, taken of the Major's absence, and his present companions naturally concluded that business, similar to what he was engaged with on their entrance, had hitherto deprived them of his presence in the drawing-room, whither, after having finished his letter, he accompanied them, and at the particular request of one of the ladies, took his place at a card-table.

St. Vincent's mind was not much in tune for any occupation that required a superior degree of attention at this juncture. The stakes were high, and he would soon have found himself a considerable loser, had not what is usually called goodluck, that undefinable, but propitious friend, proved his better genius, and by almost constantly supplying an uncommon run of successful cards, remedied the mental abstraction which otherwise must have created no small degree of surprise, and rendered him an object of embarrassing observation to those who were accustomed to regard him as their superior on similar occasions.

The clock had already announced the hour of midnight, and expectation hovered eagerly over the conclusion of a game on which a large sum of money depended, when the door opened, and Mrs. St. Vincent appeared in the room! The Major raised his eyes at the noise caused by her entrance: a sudden flush overspread his features, and the card he was in the act of playing dropped from his trembling hand on the floor. He stooped to take it up, and during the momentary pause it produced, self-recollection resumed its usual station in his bosom.

Mrs. St. Vincent's surprise and agitation was not inferior to that experienced by her husband. She had not the smallest idea of finding him in the house; but strongly prepossessed with the notion that he would pass the remainder of the night at the Hermitage, had already formed several resolutions on the nature of her future proceedings, relative to his supposed

reprehensible conduct, with which she was secretly determined to acquaint her father on the succeeding morning; and in the interim, by the calmness! and dignity of her manner, evince how little the meditated separation (for she condescended to think of nothing less at present), from one, now indubitably unworthy of her affections, would cost her.

To discover him stationary at a card table, apparently in good spirits, and, to all appearance, much interested in the fate of the game which he was then engaged with, seemed wonderful—most wonderful, after all heterogeneous mass of information so recently received. The capricious Margaret began to question the evidence of her own senses: she advanced nearer; his embarrassment had vanished, unperceived by the company, and given place to the usual easy elegance of manner for which he was so generally admired.

“How long pray has St. Vincent been of your party?” said she, in a low whispering voice, as she leaned over Mrs. Arabin’s chair.

“Upon my word, I cannot precisely say,” replied her friend, arranging her cards as she spoke; “but we have all reason to wish the period had been of shorter duration than it was proved, for he wins our money most unmercifully.”

“You know not then at what time he entered the drawing-room after I left it?”

Mrs. Arabin turned quickly round on this second interrogatory, and fixed a look of silent surprise on the enquirer, without paying any farther attention to her demand.

The survey, though transient, convinced her there was more than met her eye in the case, and on stealing a momentary glance at the Major, she perceived he was regarding them with some degree of interest and anxiety, in spite of the careless air he chose to assume on discovering he was observed.

Impatient for a satisfactory answer to her query, and conceiving Mrs. Arabin’s attention too much engaged by her cards to obtain it from her, Margaret now made a similar application to another lady at a neighbouring table, whose reply shewed her equally deficient on the subject.

One of the gentlemen, however, who had found him writing in the parlour, overheard this latter enquiry, and immediately observed, that though the Major himself was certainly the proper person to gratify her on the occasion, yet he would venture to take the task upon his own shoulders, by informing her that Mr. St. Vincent had been occupied during a great part of the evening in letter writing, after which he had joined them in the drawing-room.

“And where was he thus occupied in letter writing?” demanded Margaret, in a quick tone of voice.

“In the parlour, Madam,” was the laconic answer.

“You no doubt saw him there?” returned Mrs. St. Vincent, with a look of supercilious incredulity.

“I certainly did so,” said the gentleman, in a manner that seemed not much calculated to encourage any further suspicions of his veracity.

Margaret remained for the succeeding minute silent and thoughtful.

Meanwhile Mrs. Arabin contrived to get her place supplied at the card-table, and putting her arm through Mrs. St. Vincent’s, let her insensibly to the other side of the room.

Her efforts, however, to dive into the thoughts of the latter proved abortive; either ashamed of the confidence reposed in her domestics, or nearly convinced that her husband had in this instance been wronged by their intelligence, Margaret parried every attempt made by her friend for an explanation of her late apparent solicitude respecting the Major’s motions, and secretly determined to be sure of the ground on which she stood, before she laid herself open, once more, to the severity of those animadversions Mrs. Arabin had formerly made upon her

conduct, in a situation similar to the present one.

CHAP. IV.

“Ye must never taste
“The sweets of Hymen.”

MAURICE.

IN about half an hour after Mrs. St. Vincent's re-appearance in the drawing-room, the ladies retired to their respective apartments for the night, and the gentlemen soon followed their example.

Mrs. St. Vincent was in her dressing-room, attended by Jenny, when the Major entered that usually occupied by himself. A thin partition divided them; but his lady happened to be too much occupied by the topic nearest her heart to recollect his probable vicinity, by which means he obtained a pretty tolerable knowledge of the nature of their conversation, and discovered the fluctuating opinions entertained by his fair helpmate, whose ardent wish was now to find him innocent of the accusation lately preferred against him.

This inclination in his favour was no sooner ascertained by the penetrating and artful Jenny, than her sentiments seemed to undergo an instantaneous change on the same side the question. The burthen of her recent communication was therefore speedily saddled on the shoulders of their late coadjutor, James, the groom, who, Jenny had now discovered, to be unworthy of credit, and ever ready to perform any foolish action, provided the reward was commensurate to his expectations.

James, the groom, must nevertheless be spoken with, before his mistress could possibly think of retiring to rest, and accordingly Jenny went in search of him.

Unfortunately, the stipulated reimbursement for his services had been paid down on the execution of his mission; and being afterwards sent to the post-house by Mr. Ross, he could not resist the temptation of depositing a part of the cash on a tenement seldom much celebrated for the productive nature of its interest.

In plain English, James had encountered some of his acquaintances, with whom he adjourned to an ale-house, and afterwards returned to Rossgrove “as drunk as an Emperor.”

Mrs. St. Vincent was therefore obliged to resign her intention of interrogating him till a more favourable opportunity occurred for the purpose; and incapable of submitting to necessity or disappointment, with a good grace, she retired to bed, half-doubting, half-satisfied, sullen, and restless.

When the Major, on joining her, made some commonplace enquiry relative to her health, she answered him captiously, that whatever might be the state of her health, she had not, at least, injured it by rambling on secret excursions at midnight.

The Major carelessly answered, he hoped she had more prudence than to risk it by making so injudicious an experiment.

“Some people's prudence,” she replied, with quickness, “was not to be much applauded on that score.”

He presumed she did not include her own in the number.

She was sorry she could not return the compliment.

The Major professed himself ignorant of her meaning.

His, she protested, was infinitely more incomprehensible.

“Since our understanding appears thus equally defective, had we not better try to remedy

the failure by a few hours' repose: I never was more drowsy I think."

"The pretense is convenient, and on a footing with its prototype, letter writing," retorted Margaret.

This was what might justly be called a broad hint; but St. Vincent permitted it to evaporate in silence, and the lady, finding her rhetoric remained unnoticed, soon after followed his example.

On the following morning he left his chamber at an earlier hour than usual, and on enquiring for James, was informed he had returned to the ale-house on the family retiring to their apartments, and had not again re-appeared at the Grove.

Major St. Vincent had already taken his resolution in regard to this man from what had transpired relative to his inebriety on the foregoing night. This additional intelligence, therefore, only served to strengthen that resolution, and both combined to finish a plausible pretence for his immediate dismissal; which took place on his return to the mansion.

Neither the fellow nor his late employers entertained any suspicion of the real cause in which his discharge originated; and as he was gone before Mrs. St. Vincent left her apartment, no probable opportunity remained for procuring the necessary information from himself on the subject.

Some incomprehensible, intuitive sensation seemed continually to haunt her thoughts in respect to Stella however, and the dread of any accidental circumstance throwing her once more in the way of St. Vincent, frequently occurred to disturb her most tranquil moments. Under this impression a thousand plausible reasons were assigned to Mrs. Ross for the prolonged absence of our heroine; while the latter continued ignorant of that lady's ardent desire to see her, every invitation intended to procure her company at the Grove, being carefully concealed from her knowledge by the particular direction of Mrs. St. Vincent.

The perturbation of mind, and that interesting air of dejection that usually accompanies secret sorrow, would have proved inconceivably distressing to Mrs. Bertram, as she contemplated the pale face and tearful eye of poor Stella on her appearance after the last interview with St. Vincent, had not a flying report previously reached her of the meritorious conduct she had exhibited in behalf of the little girl during the transaction of the field-day. To this circumstance therefore, the altered looks of her darling were ascribed; for common report, as usual, had magnified the danger, and exaggerated the consequences which were supposed to attend it, far beyond the real state of the case; and Mrs. Bertram was upon the point of dispatching a messenger to Mr. Adair's, in order to learn her situation, when this design was rendered abortive by the arrival of Captain Montague, who assured her, whatever agitation the spirits of Stella might have suffered, her personal enquiries were happily of too trifling a description to create a moment's uneasiness on the subject of their speedy and fortunate termination.

Though sufficiently acquainted with the magnanimity of her *protégée's* mind to be convinced she would make light of circumstances under the pressure of which numbers would sink overwhelmed with anguish, this knowledge did not contribute to relieve her fears; on the contrary, she felt them increase as the evening advanced without returning the object of her solicitude to the maternal bosom that throbbed for her safety; and her apprehensions were become almost insupportable as the lingering hours lagged heavily along, when the sound of the closing gate caught her ears, and Stella in the succeeding moment stood before her.

But Stella was not long able to stand before her:—she sunk into a chair, overcome by contending emotions, even more acute than those formerly experienced on a similar trial of her

fortitude, and would instantly have fainted, but for the timely assistance afforded her.

Mrs. Bertram forbore to fatigue her by requiring any repetition of the past transaction at Wigton, till she was in a condition better calculated for the office of an historian; and in the meantime exerted herself with her usual good sense, to recompose her mind and spirits, by every means most likely to produce that effect.

The benevolent exertion was not unattended by success. Stella became gradually better, and on separating at an early period of the night, insisted on accompanying her beloved benefactress to her apartment; from thence she proceeded to her own little chamber, with a heart softened by the pious benediction bestowed upon her by the worthy Mrs. Bertram, and would possibly have enjoyed the soothing calm which it infused into her bosom for a much longer period, had not her eyes, in crossing the floor, rested upon the fatal spot on which she had parted, perhaps for ever, from the only man who had hitherto ever interested her feelings. The candle had been placed in a corner of the room near the door, and interfered not with the bright and beautiful moon-beam that shed its silvery influence over the prospect, exhibiting the grotto and its vicinity distinctly to view.

A burst of agony again swelled the heart of Stella: she tore herself from the torturing contemplation, and paced the room with an agitated and irregular motion.

The night proved a sleepless one to our unhappy heroine. There were moments when she resolved to open her whole heart to Mrs. Bertram, and implore her advice and direction for the line of conduct that ought to be adopted in future; but the idea was speedily checked from an apprehension of the pain it would probably occasion, and the conviction that, in all human likelihood, no repetition of the same occurrences would ever again take place to put her fortitude any longer to the test; in which case it would be no less cruel than unnecessary to create uneasiness in the mind of her kind benefactress, respecting the result of evils, which, perhaps, had ceased to exist on one side, while it was a certain duty she owed her own character to prevent their baneful progress on the other.

If Mrs. Bertram, nevertheless, obtained any superficial or accidental knowledge of the foregoing transactions, and ever questioned her on the subject, it would then be time enough to become explicit, and explicit in that event she undoubtedly meant to be; at present her conduct must be ruled by circumstances, and these, if no longer of a pressing or critical nature, might as well be confined to her own bosom, already sufficiently wretched, as promulgated, for the purpose of rendering a dear and valuable friend almost equally so.

Sleepless, faint, and languid, she found herself totally incapacitated to appear below stairs, and Mrs. Bertram, extremely alarmed, insisted on procuring medical advice without further loss of time.

To this proposal Stella, however, would by no means agree: she knew the whole *materia medica* could not reach the seat of her disorder, and wished not to expose herself to enquiries she was inadequate to satisfy without trenching either on delicacy or truth. Two days she remained an invalid, confined to her chamber; on the third she was able to quit it for the parlour, to the no small joy of her worthy benefactress.

Mrs. Wallace, the first and early preserver of her youth, had now for some years been settled in Ireland, but happened to be at this juncture on a visit to her niece Sally, who, it may be remembered, was in the service of Mrs. Bertram at the period of our heroine's infant introduction at the Hermitage, and had latterly been married to a respectable farmer in the neighbourhood. For her little foundling the good woman still retained all the affection of a tender mother; and her attachment met with the most lively gratitude from Stella, on whom she insisted upon attending

during her illness, not more with a view to indulge her own feelings, than to spare Mrs. Bertram from the fatigue of a sick room, which in her precarious state of health she was ill qualified to undergo.

CHAP. V.

“Care sat on his faded cheek, but under brows
“Of dauntless courage.”

MILTON.

BEFORE the conclusion of the week, Stella, assisted by youth and a tolerable, though not strong constitution, once more resumed her usual occupations in the family: but though her health was apparently restored, the same could not be said of her spirits; and she found it, at times, utterly impossible to struggle against the overwhelming sensation of dejection that occasionally oppressed them.

Captain Montague had called on the second day of her illness, with which she had particularly requested he might not be made acquainted: some plausible reason was consequently assigned for her absence from the parlour; and an order he received on the succeeding morning obliging him to set out for a distant part of the country, where one of the troops happened to be quartered, prevented a repetition of his visits at this juncture.

This circumstance, therefore, accounted for the apparent neglect of a man, whom she wished, yet feared to see, from a knowledge of the intimacy that subsisted between him and the person whose image she was striving to efface from her memory.

Another incident, however, surprised her in a far greater degree. About the period of Captain Montague's departure, two ladies had called at the gate of the Hermitage, who expressed much polite anxiety to see her. Mrs. Wallace remarking the solicitude of Stella to conceal her indisposition from the knowledge of her male visitor, concluded the request might possibly be intended to implicate his female successors, whom, she understood from themselves, to be strangers. Prepossessed with this idea, she apologized for the absence of Stella, and regretted that Mrs. Bertram (who was then sitting by the bed of her *protégée*), could not have the pleasure of attending their commands from the unfortunate interference of a prior engagement. She then opened the gate (from whence she was retiring when their approach prevented her) and offered to conduct them to the parlour: this, however, they declined, under the supposition she was only an occasional visitor, like themselves; and after expressing their admiration of the situation and surrounding scenery, they turned into the plantations, through which she perceived them enter one of the winding paths that led to the Grove.

This little incident was mentioned to Stella on her recovery; but she could form no probable idea of those to whom it alluded, for she had not the smallest intercourse with any of the inhabitants at the mansion-house; even Mrs. Ross herself, as it now evidently appeared, having totally ceased to remember her.

Mrs. Bertram, whose ill health seemed much improved of late, was one evening absent from the Hermitage, where she had left Mrs. Wallace in the parlour with Stella; from whom, however, the former was soon under the necessity of separating by the arrival of an unexpected summons from her niece.

Our heroine, thus consigned to her own meditations, seated herself in a small bow window, overshadowed by the spreading foliage of the creeping honeysuckle and jessamine. Her only companion was the beautiful Seasons of Thomson, by the charming pages of which she was entirely occupied, when the closing sound of the garden gate reached her ear, and she imagined

some voices issued from that direction. The window at which she was placed, did not afford a competent view of the entrance to the house; but she naturally concluded Mrs. Bertrams' return was the cause of what she heard, and her undivided attention once more rested on the volume before her.

In a few minutes the maid threw open the door, and Captain Montague appeared on the threshold! He did not seem alone: and the book dropped from her trembling hand as she rose to receive him, while her eyes were directed to the door in fearful apprehension of what was to follow.

Montague hastily advanced, took her hand, and, after the compliments customary on similar occasions, requested permission to introduce two ladies whom he had had the pleasure of accompanying from Rossgrove.

"Ladies!" burst faintly from the faltering lips of Stella, while conflicting sensations throbbed in her bosom, and an expression of something bordering on disappointment seemed to mark her features with the idea of a very different visitor.

The momentary look of surprise this repetition of his words called forth from Captain Montague restored her recollection, and a rosy blush suffused her late pallid countenance as he led her to the door.

A deeper shade of the same colour succeeded when Miss St. Vincent was announced as one of his companions. The other lady proved likewise a guest at the mansion-house.

Uncertain of the motive in which their appearance originated, Stella was at a loss what judgment to form on the occasion: the presence of Captain Montague a little reassured her mind however, and by degrees she recovered her self-possession, convinced nothing inimical to her tranquillity would be permitted to molest her in his company.

Stella entertained not a thought which angels need have shrunk from acknowledging; but the semblance of guilt seemed to pursue her, when the circumstance of the person who had evidently watched her motions at the grotto glanced across her memory; and she knew not how far Miss St. Vincent might, or might not, be acquainted with that mysterious and disagreeable affair.

But though this degree of uncertainty on a subject so important to her peace, gave an air of timidity and embarrassment to the manners of our heroine which had seldom before been the case, it lessened not the prepossession in her favour already entertained by the strangers; on the contrary, it only served to render her more interesting in their eyes; and the lapse of a very short period had scarcely been concluded, ere the visitors and the visited were equally at their ease, and equally charmed with each other.

"But tell me," cried Montague, looking earnestly in the face of Stella during a pause in the conversation, "what is become of the rosy hue that formerly was stationary on your cheeks?—It has fled, I think, since our arrival, and left not a trace behind!"

"Upon my word," said the lady who accompanied them, "this observation reminds me of a similar circumstance relative to your brother, Louisa.—Don't you think he is much altered of late?"

Stella caught the eye of Montague steadily regarding her with a serious pensive look. On perceiving he was remarked, it was instantly withdrawn, and he turned to address an evasive reply to Miss Williams, before Louisa, affected by the idea of her brother's supposed ill health, could return her an answer.

The cheek of Stella grew paler, and the transient tint produced by the intelligent eye of Montague, vanished almost in the very moment of its creation.

She and Louisa, now equally silent, seemed solely absorbed in their own individual reflections. Not so with their two companions:—in that quarter the conversation by no means flagged: it was indeed studiously supported by Montague, who at length turned to Stella, and requested she would shew the beauties of the place to her fair guests.

Any change in her present situation was desirable, and might conduct her thoughts into another channel; she therefore acquiesced, and retired to procure her bonnet.

Meanwhile the strangers employed themselves in taking a more minute survey of the little apartment than had yet been the case. The walls were covered with blue paper, of a shade peculiarly favourable to a number of very fine drawings, the workmanship of Stella, which hung round in plain, but neat looking frames. A small recess, opposite the window, was fitted up for the reception of books, and seemed well stored with many of the most valuable productions of the press. The window itself afforded a most romantic, though rather limited prospect, as it extended but a short way beyond the garden; and the mantelpiece was adorned with a great variety of spun and shell work, fancifully formed and arranged by the elegant taste of our heroine. The chairs, and a sofa near the recess, exhibited similar proofs of taste and industry in the well-designed pattern and close imitation of nature displayed in the shading of the various flowers judiciously chosen to adorn them.

This room, though commonly known by the appellation of the parlour, was in fact the principal apartment in the house: Mrs. Bertram thought her situation not sufficiently exalted to sport any other in the superior style of a drawing-room; but its appearance nevertheless well entitled it to that distinction. It was never used as an eating place, a still smaller chamber on the opposite side being appropriate to that purpose, and, except in name, bore no resemblance to any thing of the latter description. The family usually sat in it during the summer season; in the colder days of winter the lesser apartment was preferred, as more comfortable for the small number by which it was occupied.

In a few minutes Stella again appeared, and conducted her guests through the garden towards the grotto. Had this been the first time of her visiting the spot since the unfortunate interview with St. Vincent, Stella would have required all her fortitude to support her under the scrutinizing eye of Montague, and in the presence of Louisa, whose name and striking resemblance to her brother perpetually recalled his image to her view; but sensible she could not renounce her favourite retreat without producing an adequate reason for such a step, or at best creating much food for curiosity by the singularity of her proceedings, Stella wisely concluded that of two evils, it was most prudent to chuse the least, and accordingly determined the first excursion she ventured upon after her recovery, should be to the grotto and its environs.

But though this wise resolution had been put in practice, the recollections that occurred were of two painful a nature to inspire any wish for indulging them by prolonging her visit: and gladly would she have observed the same line of conduct on the present occasion, could such have been adopted with proper regard to the rules of politeness; but of that there appeared little likelihood, for her companions, delighted with all they saw, seemed far more inclined to remain than depart; and Stella, accustomed to extract good from evil, found herself in some measure rewarded for this tax upon her feeling, by the sensation of returning ease that gradually spread over her mind, while the ladies kept her constantly employed in answering questions relative to the various objects that attracted their notice, and by that means prevented her thoughts from dwelling on a subject that might otherwise have too keenly engrossed their attention.

Louisa St. Vincent, an enthusiastic admirer of the beauties of nature, seemed highly gratified by those which were now presented to her view in the grotto and its surrounding

romantic scenery. The air of elegant simplicity that reigned through this favourite retreat of our heroine—its appropriate furniture, singular situation, and the lovely interesting girl who seemed to preside over and direct the arrangement of the whole—a whole so well calculated to make its due impression on a heart formed of materials congenial with her own, spoke forcibly to the feelings of Louisa, and seemed already to bind her to Stella by that strong, but imperceptible ligament of sympathy which connects kindred souls with each other, before its secret, though irresistible influence, has had time to develop the nature of the new-born sentiment, or try its undefinable sensations by the criterion of reason.

From the objects around her, Louisa alternately turned a look, expressive of admiration and pleasure, on the face of her beautiful conductor, who, on her part, seemed particularly attached to her new acquaintance, and gratified by the opportunity that now offered for evincing her solicitude to oblige her; while Captain Montague, sensible that her modest, unassuming character required the assisting hand of considerate friendship to shew it in all its genuine lustre, missed no possible opening to render her merit conspicuous, or place the superior advantage she possessed, in the most favourable light on every occasion that occurred for the purpose.

CHAP. VI.

“To a mind resolv’d and wise
“There is an impotence in misery
“Which makes me smile, when all its shafts are in me.”

YOUNG.

OPPORTUNITIES for rendering her this service were not indeed difficult to be met with at present; for the topic which proved most propitious to his design seemed to be the spontaneous effects of situation and existing circumstances, while the discussions to which they led were exactly of that description best suited to the taste of Stella, and peculiarly calculated to draw her genius and abilities for conversation into public notice. The distant view of the cascade, and its monotonous sound—the lengthened shadows of the old ruin, and the fantastic forms of innumerable rocky projections in the vicinage—the white walls and cottage-looking aspect of the Hermitage, placed on a small adjoining eminence, beneath the sheltering foliage of a few aged and wide-spreading trees, with its little Gothic casements just visible amidst the creeping tendrils and fragrant boughs which nearly concealed them from observation on this quarter of the building—the mansion-house and fine plantations of Rossgrove, towering in proud magnificence over every similar object in the neighbourhood—the distant ocean, here and there dotted with a smooth-gliding sail—the mild refulgence of a setting sun, that fringed the edges of a few scattered clouds with the most beautiful colours, while its oblique rays danced on the bosom of the deep, and silvered the woods with its passing and chastened radiance—all, all exhibited room for contemplation, when sensibility and taste united to discriminate their various beauties, and estimate them according to their intrinsic value.

Neither did the fine echo amidst the rocks escape their notice: Louisa and Montague happened to be scientific performers in the musical line, and were easily prevailed upon to try their powers on the present occasion. Stella, who had lately made some progress in the same way, aided by the friendly instructions of the latter, took up the harp in her turn, and though her execution might not perhaps equal that displayed by Miss St. Vincent, the melody of her vocal strains were certainly superior.

The air she sung was particularly requested by Captain Montague, and happened to be one of those he had formerly heard her warble in the grotto, on the evening when the military band played at Rossgrove. In one of the most interesting parts of it, her eyes insensibly fell upon the splendid residence of the Nabob, and her voice became all at once tremulous as she perceived the principal door suddenly open, and several ladies and gentlemen issue from the house. Mrs. St. Vincent made one of the number: she leaned upon the arm of Mr. Jones (the Lieutenant whose free address had so much disgusted our heroine at the old Castle of Wigton), and appeared entirely engrossed by some interesting conversation, in which they were evidently engaged as they wound through the walls in the pleasure grounds, and separated from the rest of the party.

The door yet remained open, and the eyes of Stella still dwelt involuntarily upon it. In a few minutes her voice became more agitated; it grew fainter, and in the following instant entirely ceased. Her auditors, wholly occupied by the charms of her harmonious notes, and inattentive to every other exterior circumstance, finding she remained totally silent, at length raised their heads from a listening attitude, and looking at her with astonishment, were upon the point of

expressing the alarm her pale countenance and altered appearance created, when Louisa, following the direction of her still immoveable eyes, turned abruptly round, and immediately discovered her brother's tall elegant figure deeply engaged in conversation with Mrs. Arabin. They seemed not to have observed the party at the door of the grotto, and entered a path that led directly to the vicinity of the Hermitage.

"It is my brother!" exclaimed Miss St. Vincent in a joyful accent: "see—he and Mrs. Arabin are certainly coming this way to join us!"

Stella, sick at the bare idea of such an event, tried to suppress a sigh; which, however, burst forth in spite of her wishes to the contrary: and retreating backwards, she sunk upon the window seat.

Previous to this last movement, she assured her guests she was perfectly well; in consequence of which the ladies had advanced a few steps to observe the motions of St. Vincent and his companion, with whom they seemed solicitous to meet; but their hopes speedily vanished, for he and Mrs. Arabin struck into another path, and soon after disappeared at an angle of the grove.

Our heroine, who had secretly watched their steps in fearful expectation of the event, found herself happily relieved from the embarrassing situation such an interview must have placed her in; and starting from her seat in order to join Louisa and Miss Williams, who appeared to be returning to the grotto, she was hastening forward from the recess of the window, when, to her no small confusion, she perceived Captain Montague leaning on a stone pillar near the door, and regarding her with every mark of the deepest attention.

This was not the first time a similar circumstance had occurred to disconcert her. Montague's manner and looks had more than once struck her as singular and incomprehensible; and conscious but of one cause that could produce this effect, she felt the pride of secret innocence swell her heart, on the supposition that her emotion might be ascribed to a wrong motive, when the genuine source from whence it sprung remained no longer problematical.

Occupied by this idea, she remarked not that the ladies seemed to have changed their recent intention, and instead of ascending again to the grotto, were amusing themselves with examining some cavities in the adjoining rocks. Roused from the temporary pause that succeeded her observations on the conduct of Montague, she again prepared to join them, when, hurt by the expressive glance of mingled displeasure and vexation which passed over her countenance, he abruptly seized her hand as she attempted to quit the threshold, and arresting her progress, protested he could not permit her to leave him in anger, or allow of her departure till the reason of his apparently extraordinary behaviour was explained, which, he flattered himself, it was possible to accomplish without subjecting his motions to the imputation of officious curiosity.—"I have frequently, my sweet girl," continued he, "been astonished at the undefinable nature of my sentiments in your favour—but be not alarmed, the confession that follows is not of a description to call up your blushes: yet, perhaps, it requires some apology; and did I not believe you superior to most of your sex, I should certainly consider such as necessary preliminary before I venture to avow, that it is not love, in the common acceptation of the word, which binds me to you:—no; it is something less turbulent than passion—less ardent than attachments of the heart; yet it is warm as the emanations of friendship, and calmly tranquil, like the sensations existing between the nearest and most affectionate relatives: it is such, in short, as I never experienced before for any other casual acquaintance, and can only be accounted for, I will not say entirely on the score of real merit, though that has undoubtedly no small share in it, but from a most striking resemblance you bear to a person who—"

Montague abruptly paused—hesitated when he attempted again to proceed, and seemed unusually agitated. At length he thus renewed the subject:—

“Often has this incomprehensible similitude forcibly struck me; but never before the present evening did it appear in so conspicuous a point of view. Domestic occurrences are uninteresting to those not naturally connected with them, otherwise—but, no!—it cannot be! the idea is absurd!—”

Again he paused, apparently absorbed in thought: an air of pensive dejection stole over his countenance, and his eyes continued for some time rivetted on the ground.

Wounded pride and every sensation of displeasure vanished from the bosom of Stella as she contemplated his whole appearance; while a faint resemblance to some person she had seen likewise occurred on her side, and she wondered this expression of his features had never been discovered till the present moment, when melancholy recollection taking possession of his mind, spread a sombre hue of chastened sorrow over the *tout ensemble* of his face and figure, and recalled to her fancy the image of those she entertained a confused recollection of having formerly seen, but where she knew not, though that such did, or had existed, she thought could not admit of a doubt.

“There appears a strange coincidence in opinion,” said Stella, after a short pause: “you hint at my resemblance to a friend of yours, while the same notion has taken hold of my mind in regard to a similar occurrence, on your account; for your features this moment exhibit a something, though faintly portrayed, yet (now that you call my attention to the subject) of such a description as to convince me the idea does not altogether proceed from the effects of an ardent or mistaken imagination. It is singularly strange, however, that the discovery has never been made, on my side, before; while yours, you tell me, it is not a new one. Perhaps it may partly be accounted for by never having remarked your face with an equal degree of observation, or seen you in a mood so very serious as at this juncture: from whence,” added she, smiling, “it is to be presumed the original of our imaginary similitude is some mighty humdrum character, whose general disposition happens to be nothing less than cheerfully inclined.”—But, see—the ladies are at length approaching; I must join them.”

“Your remark, Stella, has increased my curiosity, without furnishing one single item to gratify it; for it is exactly the serious expression of your own countenance that conveys the likeness I mean, most forcibly. I shall call at the Hermitage very soon, but unaccompanied: the present topic can then be more fully discussed.”

He was going to say something further, but the vicinity of Louisa and Miss Williams put a stop to his words, and the two latter, having requested permission to repeat their visit, soon after took the road to Rossgrove, escorted by their male attendant, having previously confessed themselves much gratified by their ramble to the Hermitage.

Mrs. Bertram was at home when Stella returned to the house, and the warmth with which she dwelt upon the praise of Louisa St. Vincent made her regret the unavoidable call which had taken her from home, when that young lady honoured them with a visit; but a repetition of it being promised, she consoled herself with the idea of its arrival; and meanwhile secretly mused over those other parts of our heroine’s intelligence relative to the resemblance hinted at by Montague, which she could not help thinking might possibly allude to that already discovered between her and the miniature picture in Mrs. Bertram’s possession: of any or the smallest similitude it bore to Captain Montague no recollection, however, had hitherto struck her; though, like Stella, she sometimes imagined the cast of his face not totally unknown to her.

CHAP. VII.

“Hope! beautiful as are thy visions, in how much anguish
and agony do they clothe the terrors of disappointment!”
GODWIN.

IT may perhaps appear strange that a woman of Mrs. Bertram’s steady and prudent character, should not only tolerate, but, in a manner, authorize the occasional visits of a young, gay officer, like Captain Montague, whose appearance and behaviour were peculiarly pleasing, and whose unremitting attention to her *protégée* evinced the warm interest he took in her happiness and welfare.

Mrs. Bertram, whose knowledge of the world was founded on long experience, and whose acute penetration seldom failed her, had reasons for her conduct, which, in her opinion, sufficiently justified the proceeding. Stella was not, she knew, one of those very susceptible ladies who are continually in danger of forming attachments with every new acquaintance; on the contrary, she proved rather remarkable for an uncommon degree of indifference on all such occasions. It is true, no man possessed of so handsome a figure, or manners so fascinating, had, as yet, been a visitor at the Hermitage; and when this circumstance, in conjunction with the natural delicacy of her taste, was taken into consideration, it could not have appeared surprising if the consequence had been fatal to her future tranquillity: but, according to a French proverb, “the first step is the most critical,” and from this first step Mrs. Bertram soon discovered there was little or nothing to be apprehended. She paid the strictest attention to their every look and action for some time after his introduction under her roof, and clearly perceived no due object for rational alarm need be dreaded on his account; while many advantages accrued to Stella in other respects from the obliging solicitude he constantly evinced to add to her stock of useful knowledge, or to render her acquisitions in the ornamental parts of education more conspicuous. Drawing and music were favourite accomplishments with Montague: he was himself a proficient in each of these sciences; and the instructions she received from him were of a description to render her equally so before much time was elapsed.

This circumstance was of no small importance to the future success of Stella in the line of life her maternal friend had eventually destined her to fill; and as she usually made one of the number when he was engaged with his scholar, it was presumed no censure could attach to the conduct of our heroine while thus occupied under the eye of her benefactress.

In addition to this reason for authorizing his presence, another powerful one lent its co-operation. At the commencement of their acquaintance it one day transpired, during some conversation on trans-Atlantic affairs, that he had had an opportunity of rendering a very essential piece of service to a British lady, unexpectedly left a widow with a large family, in the vicinity of Charlestown. Mrs. Bertram knew that the preservation of this lady, who happened to be her sister, with the critical protection afforded her fatherless children, was solely due to the humane interference of a military gentleman; but that this military gentleman should prove to be Captain Montague was never even suspected, till the circumstance became known in the course of some anecdotes he was relating for their amusement soon after his introduction at the Hermitage.

Captain Montague at the period alluded to, was in the infantry; and the corps to which he belonged, was reduced on its return to Europe, at the conclusion of the American war.

Warm, gentle, and strongly attached to the memory of an unfortunate sister, who, together with her family, had after-wards lost their lives at sea, while returning to Britain, Mrs. Bertram considered herself particularly indebted to her guest for his friendly exertions in her behalf. The disclosure of the above-mentioned incident, therefore, confirmed the favourable impression already received of his character, and ever afterwards secured him a welcome reception at the Hermitage.

But while Montague enjoyed this indulgence, he, who was by no means deficient in penetration, more than his hostess, soon perceived that the utmost circumspection and undeviating propriety of behaviour were expected to be strictly observed on every occasion; and consequently, it was easy to see that an attempt to procure a similar introduction for any of his corps, would be disagreeable and difficult of attainment. Convinced of this fact, the experiment was not made; and he submitted with the utmost *nonchalance* to the inundation of witticisms which were continually poured forth at the mess, on the topic of his solitary rambles to the habitation of "the lovely Stella Bertram," for by that appellation she was frequently toasted at the convivial board since the transaction of the field-day, which had procured her some degree of celebrity.

At the Hermitage, Captain Montague tasted those pure and tranquil enjoyments calculated to charm the mind of genuine sensibility; but which, as we have formerly observed, are seldom to be met with in the more splendid, though less happy scenes of fashionable life: he tasted them, too, unalloyed by any apprehensions for futurity, any latent presentiment of after regret; for the society of Stella continued to be courted more for mental, than personal attractions.

Another consideration induced him to persevere in a repetition of his visits, which, though not of a selfish description, was not less capable of influencing his actions. This proceeded from a friendly solicitude to prevent any farther intercourse between St. Vincent and our heroine, or, rather, the chance of such an occurrence again unexpectedly taking place; for he imagined himself sufficiently acquainted with the excellent principles of each party, to apprehend an event of that nature would happen from any other source than some unfortunate or unforeseen accident, the effects of which, if not totally done away, might nevertheless be greatly mitigated by his watchful care and presence.

Attached to the Major by ties stronger than those of blood, and on his side equally dear to his friend, their bond of union seemed mutually strengthened by the delicate embarrassing situation of the one, and the unceasing attentions of the other, even though those attentions were actively employed to disappoint the secret inclinations of him for whose honour and future peace of mind they were put in practice.

The nearly uniform indifference evinced by the Major, and his freedom from all tender attachments of the heart, prior to his marriage, afforded Montague but a slender cause for congratulation. He knew the mind of St. Vincent was of that description which only receives the most forcible impressions, and when received, was formed to retain them with strong and lasting perseverance. Margaret Ross was not likely to inspire a passion of this kind; and should another woman have the power to effect it, and at period unfortunately too late for its honourable gratification, he trembled for the fate his friend, whose terrestrial happiness must, in that case, be inevitably ruined.

When he called on the following evening, his countenance had assumed a more serious cast than usual, and an air of uncommon melancholy marked his whole deportment. After the first compliments were over, Mrs. Bertram and Stella resumed their work, and a momentary

silence ensued, during which their visitor paced the room with an agitated and irregular step. At length he became stationary before the latter, who, on looking up from a flower-piece she was painting, perceived him regarding her with a look of the deepest attention. His arms were folded, and his whole deportment bespoke some secret sorrow that preyed upon his heart, under which he seemed undetermined how to conduct himself.

“Good God! Captain Montague, are you not well?” cried Stella, in a voice of the utmost astonishment.

Mrs. Bertram suddenly dropped her knitting, and turning hastily round, made a similar enquiry.

Roused from his reverie by their friendly solicitude, he started from his musing posture, and apologizing for the unfounded alarm he had given, endeavoured to assume a more cheerful air; but the effort appeared forced, and again his face bore testimony to a mind ill at ease.

The anxiety of his female friends was no longer to be partially repressed; a second time it broke forth in yet more excessive terms. He raised his head from the table on which he was now leaning, and fixing a steady eye on Stella, reminded her of the hint respecting a resemblance between her and a near relation of his own, which had been noticed by him on the preceding evening.

“I recollect it perfectly,” replied she; “but the subject appeared of a painful nature, and I wished not to obtrude it unnecessarily on your memory; though,” continued she, with a smile, “my curiosity is by no means silent on the occasion.”

“It was—it ever must be a painful subject,” rejoined Montague, in a faltering voice; “but—to see you without recalling it, is impossible! The similitude I formerly mentioned daily increases, and though sensible of the absurdity and final disappointment unavoidably attendant on the investigation I am about to enter upon, still I can no longer refrain from commencing it. Pardon me then, my good friend, (turning to Mrs. Bertram as he spoke) if I begin the distressing task by entreating to know the exact nature of those family ties which connect my young favourite, Stella, with her worthy relative: pardon me, likewise, when I add that some unsatisfactory reports which have recently reached me on this head, in conjunction with a secret cause only known to myself, stimulate an enquiry you may possibly deem impertinent, and, which, I confess, certainly carries that appearance while the motives of it remain hidden from your view. You may safely trust me, however, when I solemnly aver that nothing less than idle curiosity actuates me on the occasion. Condescend, then, to indulge me with an explicit answer to the foregoing question, I beseech you.”

Mrs. Bertram seemed at a loss what to say: she fixed her eyes upon the floor, and for some minutes remained entirely absorbed in silent reflection. Stella, during this momentous pause, appeared strongly agitated, and alternately regarded her two friends with a look of the deepest interest, without venturing to utter a single syllable, lest the smallest interruption should retard the expected eclairsissement which apparently hovered over the next sentence that would issue from their lips. The long regretted mystery which had hitherto enveloped her birth was now perhaps on the verge of being removed for ever and her real rank in society finally ascertained! With its hitherto dubious nature she had for some time been made acquainted; but the information Mrs. Bertram thought proper to give on the subject, was of too guarded a description, to inspire ideas superior to the station of life in which she had been educated: a certain something, however, now whispered that, on a full investigation of circumstances, it might appear she was born to hold a higher rank. Whether she was, therefore, to rise above, or sink below the level of her present condition, was a matter of not little importance; and she

waited the solution of the business in all the trembling anxiety of a youthful heart may be supposed to experience when an event of such magnitude is rapidly approaching its crisis.

CHAP. VIII.

“He took it up;
“But scarce was it unfolded to his sight
“When he, as if an arrow pierc’d his eye,
“Started, and, trembling, dropp’d it on the ground.”
YOUNG.

“YOU seem averse to gratify my curiosity, dear Madam,” said Montague: “if the question I have asked is an improper one, think no more of it, I beseech you; and I will endeavour to do the same, whatever self-denial the attempt may cost me.”

He gazed at her for a moment or too in silence; and then, after an ineffectual effort to dispel the mournful air of dejection that overspread his features, endeavoured to turn the conversation into a more chearful channel. The heart of poor Stella was too full, however, to second his design: she answered him not, but sat immersed in mental abstraction, her eyes bent upon vacancy, and her head turned towards the window. Mrs. Bertram continued equally absorbed by her own reflections; and another pause, as if by mutual consent of the parties, again ensued.

Captain Montague once more traversed the room in ill-concealed perturbation: he then seated himself near the table on which the drawing materials of Stella lay scattered. An accidental movement of his arm displaced a few loose sheets of paper, and something dropped from amongst them upon the carpet. He stooped to lift it up:—in a moment surprise shook his frame, and the darkest shade of crimson blushed every agitated feature. He started from his chair, and approaching Stella, hastily demanded by what means that picture had come into her possession. It was the miniature picture formerly made mention of, which had been left at the Hermitage by the mysterious travellers. Stella replied that it belonged to Mrs. Bertram.

To the latter therefore he now addressed himself, and solemnly conjured her to answer his question.

“First tell me,” said she, astonished at the evident emotion of his manner, “why you are thus solicitous for this information?”

“Because,” he returned in a hurried, yet faltering accent, “because the original of that picture is—my mother!”

Mrs. Bertram and Stella mutually regarded him with a look of increased surprise.

“Your mother!” repeated the former.

“Yes, too surely my mother!—my unfortunate mother! Oh tell me, I beseech you, what you know of her! Where is now this ill-starred parent? Would to God she may have seen and retracted her errors long ere this time!—If so, the past shall be buried in oblivion, and the future may yet exhibit happier days! Speak, dear Mrs. Bertram—I burn with impatience to learn her fate!”

Unwilling to add the pang of disappointment to the anguish that visibly wrung his heart by candidly confessing her total inability to gratify his wishes on the subject of his mother’s present situation, Mrs. Bertram knew not well what to reply. His enquiries, however, were too strenuously urged to be easily eluded: having therefore premised her communication with endeavouring to enforce the necessity of acquiring more composure and some degree of self-command, she proceeded to acquaint him with the limited nature of her knowledge, and the

accident by which she became possessed of the miniature. During the short recital he gazed alternately on Stella and the picture: the resemblance between them seemed to increase at every glance: the period of its being left at the Hermitage likewise tallied with the years she numbered; and Mrs. Bertram had tacitly confessed her birth was involved in mystery.

Occupied by reflections on a chain of events, the links of which appeared to his mind's eye inexplicably connected with each other, the narrator had already concluded her little story, and some minutes of silence elapsed before the sound of her voice appeared no longer to vibrate on his ears. At length he once more became a listener; but the historian, in her turn, was now mute, and seemed by no means inclined to continue the topic.

Though what he heard of the picture served to confirm the idea previously entertained respecting his mother having formerly been in that quarter of the country, still the most material part of the business remained uncleared up while left in ignorance relative to the real birth of Stella. To account for his present anxiety on that head, it is necessary to mention an occurrence which had recently taken place.

A short time before this period, the husband of Mrs. Bertram's maid, Sally, (who resided with her at the juncture when Stella first became one of the family) happened to be met by Captain Montague as he was crossing one of the farmer's fields on a shooting excursion. Affability and urbanity of manners in a superior seldom fail to fascinate the minds of the vulgar:—the Captain entered into conversation with his rustic companion, and the man, naturally of a talkative disposition, became gradually so much pleased with his new acquaintance, that he insisted upon being permitted to shew him the particular spots most frequented by the feathered victims of the sportsman. In the course of their perambulation, the Hermitage was occasionally mentioned; and, from less to more, the history of his wife's former attendance on Mrs. Bertram, with the detail of his courtship and marriage. One thing led to another:—Sally's regret at parting with the mysterious strangers, and the liberal remuneration her services obtained, were by no means forgotten; while the discovery of the little foundling by Mrs. Wallace, (with the particulars of which he was but partly acquainted, however,) and her subsequent introduction under the roof of her benefactress, formed features no less prominent than extraordinary in the domestic picture he loquaciously exhibited. Montague had private reasons for being struck with the *tout ensemble*, or, at least, some part of this communication, when more at leisure to reflect upon particular circumstances apparently connected with it.

On the morning of the preceding day he called upon the wife of this man, in order to learn something farther on the subject. Astonished at being questioned by a stranger on topics so long past, and ever so cautiously avoided by her old mistress, Sally shrunk from the scrutinizing eye of the enquirer; and by the evasive and confused manner in which her answers were given, together with the broken sentences which now and then unconsciously escaped her, fully confirmed what they were intended to conceal—namely, the existence of a secret, in which his heart unaccountably whispered he was himself somehow or other interested. The effect in this instance, however, preceded the cause, if we may venture so to express ourselves.

In fact, the increasing, though lately discovered resemblance Stella bore to his mother, served more than any other circumstance to establish an idea of this description when Mrs. Bertram's reserved manners, on every allusion to our heroine's birth, was recollected: suspicion was therefore created, but only received additional force from the recital and conduct of his new acquaintances; while some intelligence of a domestic nature, which had shortly reached him, rendered an investigation into the truth or falsehood of these incidents more than ever necessary to his feelings.

Fraught with this conviction, and strengthened in the design of enquiry by the unexpected discovery of his mother's picture, he determined to draw Mrs. Bertram from the strict reserve hitherto maintained on that topic, by hinting at one or two of the leading events particularly connected with her *protégée's* first introduction to her notice. This manoeuvre had the desired effect: she became more explicit, and finally rendered him master of the whole transaction as far as she herself was enabled so to do.

To be yet farther "puzzled in mazes, and perplexed with error," was nevertheless all the advantage he derived from her communication; for by it the fate of an unhappy parent still remained as undecided as ever. On the particulars of her unfortunate story he appeared extremely unwilling to dwell; Mrs. Bertram consequently forbore to press on the bruised reed, and merely contented herself with knowing that the errors of this misguided woman were of a description too painful to be enumerated by a son possessed of filial piety, or the smallest degree of sensibility.

As for poor Stella, her lot remained involved in its usual shade of obscurity; for no connexion could possibly be supposed to exist between her and the lady delivered of a dead child at Martin's inn: the gay dream of high-born relatives, and every splendid prospect for futurity, faded from her view as the subject was discussed; and the unacknowledged Foundling of the Ship speedily sunk from visions of imaginary grandeur to her former state of humble dependance on the bounty of the benevolent and friendly Mrs. Bertram.

In numberless situations of life the real vicissitudes of fortune, and the illusive deceptions of a sanguine mind, produce equal misery in the human breast:—such was not, however, the case with Stella: the pang arising from disappointed expectation was but of short duration, for her thoughts had not wandered far in the wide field of conjecture: ashamed at permitting them to approach even its fascinating verge, she gave a sigh to the past, and snatching the hand of her benefactress, pressed it to her lips with fervour.

"Yes, beloved friend of the orphan Stella!—parent, guide, supporter—every tender name in one!—still must the fatherless, unprotected foundling remain a burden on your charity! Yes, it must be so, I see!—The golden dreams of a foolish girl, whose principal wish was to possess the power of repaying your parental cares, are now over! Then, farewell to them! You, I know, want not any indemnification on my account: for myself, a change of condition would be instantly rejected, if attended with the necessity of a separation from you. My dear Madam, ease my heart by an assurance of your continued affection, for nature seems to have marked me for your own!"

Mrs. Bertram folded her to the most benevolent of human bosoms, while the scalding tears of affection and gratitude mutually mingled in one stream on their glowing cheeks.

Captain Montague beheld this scene with deep, but silent emotion: his feelings at length became too powerful to be suppressed: Stella, in every movement and look, seemed the express image of a long lost mother. The idea was not indeed new; but casual resemblances are frequently met with: it had therefore been hitherto carefully confined to his own breast; where it might possibly have died away unheeded, but for the strange combination of events which thus forced it into notice.

Those events still continued to haunt his fancy with a thousand chimeras on the occasion; and what part of his mother's conduct came within his knowledge, in some measure justified their encouragement. After the foregoing occurrences, he found it therefore in vain to attempt divesting himself of the notion that Stella was not an alien to his blood: but the circumstances under which their claim to propinquity might hereafter be established, appeared deadly to the honour of his mother, and such as in all human likelihood could never be acknowledged with

propriety.

The miniature picture lay uncovered before him as these reflections passed in sad succession through his mind: he snatched it suddenly from the table—gazed upon it, till a truant tear glistened on its glassy surface—then throwing it hastily down, darted from the room with his handkerchief at his eyes, and entering one of the more retired walks in the garden, continued to traverse it with a perturbed step and an air of the deepest dejection, till the shades of evening gradually closing around warned him to retire.

Having procured his hat by means of the maid, whom he encountered at the gate, he left his compliments to the ladies, and returned to Rossgrove, without attempting to bid them personally adieu.

CHAP. IX.

“Self-importance of man, upon how slight a basis do thy gigantic erections repose!”

GODWIN.

THE attention of the worthy Mrs. Bertram and her amiable *protégée* was speedily turned from individual considerations relative to their own feelings, when the situation of the agitated Captain Montague presented itself to their notice. Consolation, however, they knew not well how to administer, for the nature of the wound remained unknown to them; and while endeavouring to probe one part, they feared to lacerate another yet more severely: that it was deep and dreadful to the feelings of a man of honour, his actions sufficiently evinced. No common event, they were fully persuaded, could have taken so keen a hold on his mind; and they mutually regretted that it should have been his lot to have the sensibilities of his nature thus called into view by any accidental occurrence taking place under the hitherto peaceful roof of the hermitage.

The remainder of the night was spent in conversing on the foregoing transactions, and at a later hour than usual they resigned themselves to calm, undisturbed repose commonly (though not always) attendant on the slumbers of the virtuous and the good, happy in the consoling reflection that if a state of mediocrity was all they could boast of, it was yet uncontaminated by guilty pursuits, or the torturing pangs of a reproachful conscience, that worst and most insupportable of human afflictions.

Early on the following morning Captain Montague presented himself at their breakfast table: his look, though it still bore the traces of recent sorrow, and he sometimes relapsed into a temporary fit of abstraction, seemed now more tranquil. The subject of the preceding evening was, however, carefully avoided by all parties; and cheerfulness, or at least the semblance of it, soon appeared to have resumed its former residence at the Hermitage.

About an hour after the removal of the tea equipage, a note arrived from Mrs. Adair, entreating Mrs. Bertram would have the goodness to spare Stella for a few days, as one of her daughters was taken suddenly ill, and expressed a strong desire for her company. This request was immediately complied with, and an answer returned to that effect.

Captain Montague, on hearing her intention, declared his determination of being her escort. The walk was not to commence till the evening; he therefore remained with them till the clock warned him that their early dinner hour was rapidly approaching, and then returned to the mansion of the Nabob, but not before the period of Stella's departure for Woodside was precisely settled.

Montague, on his reappearance at the humble dwelling of Mrs. Bertram, seemed by no means exhilarated by the effects of Mr. Ross's splendid board, or the great variety of costly and choice wines with which it was always so plentiful furnished; on the contrary, his spirits seemed unusually depressed, and it was only by a forced exertion of fortitude that he evidently supported any share in the conversation.

Mrs. Bertram and Stella apprehended he was indisposed, and under that idea entreated he would not think of accompanying the latter. He pretended to laugh at the supposition, and declared his health never had been better.—A walk, were he even ill, would prove beneficial—in his present state it must consequently be doubly so; and Stella was requested to prepare for it without further delay.

Before they reached the second plantation the same gloomy influence again cast a shade over his countenance. A pause of some length succeeded, during which his companion repeatedly regarded him with a look of tender concern and the deepest interest. He once caught her eye while resting upon his face, fraught with the most lively expression of sympathy.

“Stella, my sweet girl,” he suddenly exclaimed, “you pity me, I see: but why that look of alarm?—nothing very new has occurred? One unfortunate affair is indeed drawing to a crisis little expected:—with this affair I have recently been made acquainted, and even wished to have consulted Mrs. Bertram on the occasion: yet I know not how it happened, my courage always deserted me on the point of disclosure. To you, I think, I can lay my errors open with less reluctance. They are not premeditated ones; of this you may be assured: start not then, my sweet friend, from the confession of the penitent sinner; but hear me with patience, and generously grant me that assistance which one human creature owes to another in distress!”

He paused, apparently waiting for a reply. Stella in a low, softened voice begged him to proceed. He pressed her hand to his lips, and heaving a deep sigh, proceeded.

“The error principally alluded to, might, perhaps, receive some palliation in the eyes of many people when the circumstances under which it was committed are duly considered; but the pleas of youth, of intoxication, and bad example, though they might be justly urged on this occasion, shall not be permitted to bias your opinion, unless I appear on trial to merit the indulgence—yet let me see—the second of these, when I reconsider the matter, cannot be entirely discarded, since, from the consequences of inebriety originate the chief part of my misconduct—but I keep you too long in suspense. Pardon what may bear the semblance of indelicacy in the following disclosure; and as I have ever supposed you superior to the generality of your sex in the possession of every feminine virtue, so let me find your friendship equal to the call now made upon its exertions in my favour.

“Soon after the corps to which I belong arrived in this quarter of the country, several of the officers were invited to dine at a gentleman’s house, where a numerous party of ladies were assembled for the purpose of having a dance in the evening. A few of them we had once or twice seen at the parrade; to the remainder we were strangers. The young lady who sat on my left hand during the time of dinner, happened to prove one of the former: I recollected her face immediately, and we soon became mutually pleased with each other’s conversation. I engaged her hand for the evening before the female party retired from the table, and as she rose to depart, promised to attend her at an early hour in the drawing-room.

“And here let me interrupt my little narrative to observe how necessary it is for parents, or those, of whatever description, to whom the care of the young and the beautiful belong, to prove ever watchful and strictly observant of the character, principles, and conduct of the company with whom they are permitted to associate. Unhappily, my new acquaintance had no guiding hand to warn her of the hidden quicksand towards which she was verging.

“My companions of the blade were by no means men of the strictest morals; on the contrary, every appearance of rigidness in that respect was considered as fair game, and treated accordingly. It was previously known that the mistress of the mansion had long renounced all private pretensions to the title of a reformer; although in the eye of the public she contrived to keep up appearances, and was visited by numbers who secretly despised her character and proceedings.

“The husband of this lady is a man of a very eccentric turn, and said to be easily duped by her artifices. He is much attached to his bottle, and fond of company. In consequence of this bias to conviviality, his table is usually well attended, and his house a constant place of resort for

all who chuse to become its inhabitants. Possessed of a weak head, in more respects than one, a small portion of the juice of the grape suffices to steep his senses in speedy oblivion; and the licence occasionally taken by the male part of the guests, when the master of the mansion is no longer able to control their tongues or actions, proves frequently far from pardonable. This happened to be the case on the day I speak of; and, to our shame be it mentioned, when we entered the drawing room, no human beings whatever could possibly be less calculated for the society of virtuous, or even commonly decent women, than those who, at this ill-judged period, approached them. Coffee and tea were handed round—our hearts became more composed; and at a late hour the dancing commenced.

“Perhaps I was at this juncture the least intoxicated man of the company: but if my faculties were clearer in one instance, in others they had little to boast of. A dangerous sensation pervaded my senses, produced no doubt by the loose and unprincipled language which had recently been sported in the dining-room. My partner, however, did not appear hurt by the freedom of my behaviour; and the passive forbearance of her manner (not to give it a harsher appellation) contributed to increase the delirium of mind, by the facility with which every succeeding liberty on my side was pardoned by this misjudging girl, with whom offence and forgiveness were apparently synonymous terms.

“The elder part of the guests were placed in an adjoining apartment, and too seriously occupied in the orgies of the card-table to notice the gayer proceedings of their juniors. A variety of refreshments and rich wines of every description were plentifully supplied from the surrounding sideboards while the exercise of dancing was continued: of course, the blood of each individual became gradually more and more inflamed, and the effects of the draughts taken immediately after dinner were not permitted to evaporate. The same round of unrestrained festivity being repeated at the late supper hour, completely accomplished the overturn of reason and every remaining degree of reflection. The master of the house had long renounced all pretensions to either, and was now snoring off the fumes of intoxication in a distant apartment.

“My fair partner, it appeared, was a ward of our entertainer, and at this juncture on a visit to the family. She, and the few females who now formed the rest of the domestic circle, remained with us for some time after the guests of the day returned to their respective homes. Myself, and four others of the corps accepted an invitation to pass the night in our present abode, in order to accompany our host on a shooting excursion on the following morning. Relieved from the presence of her husband, his wife seemed to lose sight of every other consideration, the promotion of noisy mirth and a moderate freedom from fastidious restraint excepted. The inspiring song—the meaning sentiment—the sly *double entendre*, alternately succeeded each other; in short, liberty of thought, word, and deed appeared gradually establishing its voluptuous empire, unencumbered by any disguise, but a covering of the most flimsy texture. A little spirited romping at length commenced. The clock struck two: our hostess called upon her three female companions to retire: we opposed this design, and a violent struggle was the consequence. The candles were unfortunately extinguished during the contest; and our opponents better, better acquainted with the direction of the dark winding passages, effected their escape to different apartments in the gallery: unwilling to be outdone in generalship, the fugitives nevertheless were soon overtaken. Either from negligence or want of time, the first door I reached was unlocked: I opened it:—a faint exclamation convinced me my fair, but imprudent partner was the inmate. Darkness, solicitude, and opportunity formed a treacherous combination too formidable to the then state of my mind to combat: the disorder of my senses increased, and soon communicated its influence to my companion. In short, the remainder of this fatal night was

passed in one and the same apartment: and the consequences that have resulted from a proceeding so censurable and weak, have reduced me to the necessity of this humiliating detail.”

CHAP. X.

“What proof, alas! have I not giv’n of love?
“What have I not abandon’d to thy arms?
“Have I not set at nought my noble birth,
“A spotless fame, and an unblemish’d race,
“The peace of innocence, and pride of virtue?”

ROWE.

AT the conclusion of the last sentence the feelings of Montague seemed entirely to overpower him for several minutes.

Stella meanwhile maintained an obstinate silence: her indignation seemed directed more to the female, than male part of the offenders; and, in fact, they were certainly the most blameable of the number: but though this appeared evidently the case, still she felt averse to condemn even where acquittal was impossible. Her delicacy, too, seemed to be wounded by a recital so new, so unexpected; for that women in a superior rank of life should have so conducted themselves, and exhibited so total a dereliction from every principle of virtue or common decency, appeared perfectly inexplicable to the pure and uncorrupted heart of our heroine. To commiserate and pardon the failings of her fellow-creatures had been one of the first lessons imprinted on her young and ductile mind by the good and worthy Mrs. Bertram: but, in the present instance, premeditated depravity of manners in the erring female group, thus introduced to her knowledge, apparently steeled her bosom against them; and the pity, that under different circumstances would have throbb’d through every vein, was now too much mingled with contempt, to admit of immediate utterance.

Montague, who was sufficiently acquainted with the upright nature of her disposition to suspect the impression such a recital would make, had purposely dwelt on every palliating circumstance, in order to lessen the idea of guilt unavoidably attached to such a mode of conduct and cast the chief part of the blame on the preceding incidents, which had previously prepared the mind for the admission of error, and finally led to so great a defalcation from the general principles of moral rectitude. In vain, however, he waited to hear the sound of her voice: she continued to walk slowly on in silence.

“You seem too much disgusted to afford me any further attention, Stella,” said her companion at length, in a low, hesitating accent:—“tell me, am I permitted to conclude my unfortunate relation or not?”

“Well, Sir, proceed,” she replied, “and inform me in what manner my assistance can be required in such a business.”

He bowed, and thus continued:—

“Your own purity, my sweet friend, (for I must still presume to address you by that appellation) cannot hold the character of a practised seducer in greater detestation than the man before you has invariably done:—I reprobate—I abhor it; nor would I be answerable for the accumulated anguish of which it is productive, to obtain the empire of the world: but in this instance, as in every other of my life, I thank Heaven I stand self-acquitted on that account. Do not, however, suppose that by such an avowal I mean to exculpate myself from actual error at the expence of my unhappy companion in misfortune.—No; certainly I am the chief aggressor, however unintentionally; for I ought to have resisted the temptation thrown in my way; and but

for the fatal disorder of my senses, occasioned by antecedent events, I assuredly had done so:—yet, allow me just to hint that perhaps few young men so circumstanced, and meeting with an equal degree of—encouragement—dare I call it?—would, possibly, have conducted themselves better, or displayed any greater portion of self-command.”

“Spare your comments, Sir,” interrupted his auditor, who, while she tacitly owned the justice of the remark, deeply blushed at the idea of the light and disgraceful view in which a part of the sex were thus implicated— “spare your comments, Sir, and hasten to a conclusion: the distance from Mr. Adair’s house rapidly diminishes, you see.”

“I perceive it,” returned Montague, “and will not much longer encroach on your patience.—On the morning that succeeded this fatal adventure I let the roof of my host before the family, fatigued with the sports of the foregoing day, quitted their respective apartments. In vain were tears and entreaties alternately employed to break my declared resolution of returning no more: the momentary delirium of pleasure had fled, and its galling successor, self-reproach, was but ill calculated to soothe my tortured mind. Before our separation, however, I endeavoured to lessen the weight of that self-accusation which now pressed acutely on her feelings, by representing myself as the principal criminal, and one who undoubtedly merited her lasting displeasure. This latter sensation, nevertheless, seemed entirely absorbed in tenderness and attachment to her undoer; and I had the additional agony of perceiving myself alike the destroyer of her fondest hopes and honour.”

Montague here paused for a moment, unable to suppress the workings of the complicated feelings which agonized his bosom.

“It is impossible to express what my sufferings were on this discovery of her real sentiments in my favour, and the violent, but ineffectual remorse that agitated her frame on every recurrence to her recent dereliction from virtue. Reflections on the past were now, however, of no farther avail than as far as they contributed to guard her conduct against similar events in future. I have reason to believe the heart and intentions of this unfortunate victim to malign circumstances are naturally good; but the force of example is great, and has been known to effect a change in the dispositions of those possessed of more experience and fortitude than fell to her share. Her occasional and frequently too much prolonged residence with the second wife of her guardian, who concealed a corrupted and unprincipled mind under the most specious and fascinating manners, certainly pleads in her behalf; especially as I have since learned she has little or no claim for advice or protection on any other human being beyond the limits of this artful woman’s power, or her husband’s jurisdiction.”

“Alas!” cried Stella, involuntarily sighing, “how I pity the lost, infatuated girl!”

“Yes, my sweet, benevolent Stella!” exclaimed Montague, extremely agitated—“yes, I knew you would finally commiserate her sufferings, however the commencement of the communication might offend your delicacy! But how will pity, that emanation from the Divinity, be augmented, when subsequent events reach your ear—when I add that the consequences of our mutual folly must speedily become known, if proper measures are not quickly taken to elude the chance of public notice!”

Stella started, and changed colour at this, to her, unexpected intimation:—the pangs of unrequited love, in conjunction with the whispers of a lacerated conscience, seemed sufficiently terrible without any additional aggravation; that aggravation, nevertheless, was destined to be her portion, and contempt, lasting as ignominious, was ready to overwhelm all her future prospects in life! Our heroine became suddenly sick at heart, and after seating herself on the road-side, Montague was forced to procure her some water from a neighbouring brook in his

helmet.

The application produced almost an immediate effect: she soon found herself able to pursue her walk, assisted by his offered arm, which was now readily accepted, though it had been repeatedly declined at a more early period of his narrative.

CHAP. XI.

“From public haunts,
“And all the gay delights of social life,
“Driv’n with disgrace.”

MAURICE.

“THOUGH I have hitherto strictly adhered to my first formed resolution of avoiding all future personal intercourse with this unhappy girl,” resumed Montague, “several letters have, notwithstanding, passed between us, in spite of every wish on my side to the contrary. Two, recently received, confirm the existence of the foregoing circumstance, which in others had only been obscurely hinted at.

“To expose her to public infamy is not to be thought of. Stella, my dear Stella! say, how shall I conduct myself in this trying emergency?—how afford the advice or assistance she pathetically implores me to grant? Every better particle of human nature revolts at the bare idea of inattention to the sufferings of my own creation. Speak—tell me how the apprehended evil may be avoided—how the publication of her shame may be prevented, ere it prove too late to make the attempt!”

“One mode of safe, of honourable, and timely reparation alone remains,” said his youthful counsellor to this solemn request. “I am sorry you should find it necessary to consult me, or any person whatever, on a subject so obvious to every right-judging mind: your hand can solely effect a cure—it must and ought to be exclusively hers whom you have injured.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Montague, in a firm, yet agitated voice; “it is already promised to the sister of my dearest friend—to Louisa St. Vincent! and must not be separated from the heart that has long been in her possession!”

“I have done then, Sir,” returned Stella, slowly withdrawing her arm from his, and proceeding at a quicker pace: “further, or other advice, is beyond my ability to bestow!—Was it generous to distress me, however, by the recital of irremediable evils, which you previously knew I had not the power to mitigate?”

“Oh, yes, you have the power!” cried Montague, again seizing her half-reluctant hand, and replacing it as before. “Though Maria’s principles have suffered a temporary perversion, her heart, as I have before observed, is not a corrupt one, and her intentions I believe to be good: she sees her former errors, and, though perhaps unable to separate them entirely from an ill-fated attachment to their principal cause, would yet willingly regain the path to virtue, if a restoration can possibly be accomplished without the *eclat* of notoriety—a circumstance, the dread of which is particularly formidable to her feelings. Say then, my noble minded friend, say you will rise superior to the misjudging weakness generally imputed to your sex on similar occasions;—tell me you will see, and seeing speak comfort to the repentant sinner—that you will endeavour to raise her from her present state of sorrow and humiliation, not precipitate her farther down the gulf of error by the stern look of silent reproach, or the repulsive hand of cold, unforgiving prudery!”

“I have already told you, Mr. Montague, that whatever may be my inclination to serve you, the ability is wanting for that purpose.”

“And I have already told you the reverse,” he replied, with quickness. “Though a representation of this case to Mrs. Bertram might excite in her breast feelings repugnant to my

purpose, yet the influence you possess over that worthy lady might be exerted in the most beneficial manner, to the arrangement of this vexatious affair:—would she but condescend to undertake the management of the wretched girl's situation, at, and during the term of her approaching confinement, every apprehension on her account would instantly subside, and my gratitude for the kindness be inexpressible as lasting.—Is it not possible to accomplish this point, think you?

“Why did you not personally make the proposal?” asked Stella; “it would have come better from yourself than a second person.”

“Perhaps so,” he replied; “but, upon my soul, I had not sufficient courage to attempt it! After hinting at the miseries entailed on her family by a like conduct in my unhappy mother, was it possible to acknowledge myself so lost to all feeling and example, as to be the means of reducing an innocent girl to a similar state of guilt and wretchedness?—No: to one so much my senior as Mrs. Bertram, I could not prevail with myself to make the humiliating confession, though able to accomplish it to her gentle, unassuming Stella, on whose goodness and humanity I rest my cause for absolution, and something of even more importance in the existing state of affairs.”

Our heroine was on the point of returning an answer, when a casual glance was obtained of one of the Miss Adairs, apparently advancing to meet her.

“Tell me quickly what I have to hope from your friendly interference?” whispered Montague, in a hurried and perturbed accent.

“Every thing, be assured, it can possibly effect,” was the satisfactory, but laconic reply.

A tear dropped upon her hand as he silently raised it to his lips in token of acknowledgment.

“I shall call at Mr. Adair's to-morrow; in that event may I hope for a few minutes private discourse with you?”

“Certainly, if practical to accomplish it.”

“Enough, my sweet friend—my gentle Stella!—may Heaven, for Heaven alone can do it, reward such unexampled goodness!—You know not the burthen your humanity has removed from my bosom!”

The near vicinity of Sally Adair now put an end to the subject. He proceeded with his companions to the house, and after paying a short visit, returned to Rossgrove.

Stella was welcomed with their usual kindness by her worthy hostess and all the family; and on entering the chamber of the invalid, she had the unexpected gratification of finding her by no means so bad as her fears had represented her.

Although our heroine kept her station by the bed of her friend through the chief part of the night, she was nevertheless dressed and ready to receive Captain Montague on his arrival.

A favourable opportunity for a private interview was not long unattained: under pretence of procuring a little fresh air, Stella repaired to the garden, accompanied by her military friend. Here the topic of the preceding evening was speedily introduced, and underwent a second discussion. With the family to whom the unfortunate Maria owed the original perversion of her principles, Stella was personally acquainted; but it had frequently been mentioned in her hearing as no less noted for what is vulgarly termed hospitality, than the gay and dissipated manners of its mistress. The ward of her husband happened to be an orphan, who possessed not one near relative on the face of the earth, and who, by the express terms of her father's will, was under the necessity of spending two thirds of every year under the roof of her guardian till the completion of her minority was accomplished. Unhappily for her, his first wife expired in child-bed soon

after she became an inmate of his house; and the successor of the deceased was but ill calculated to supply her place as a moral instructress to the young and uneducated Maria. The natural consequences which too commonly result from such an example and situation have already been detailed; may they serve as a beacon to others in similar circumstances!

Placed by the silent pillow of her sick friend during the preceding night, our heroine had sufficient time to think on the different circumstances related by Captain Montague, and to weigh causes and effects in the impartial scale of cool, unbiassed reflection. The conclusion of this investigation proved indeed rather more favourable to the male than female culprit, as the temptation to error apparently originated on her side of the question; but, upon the whole, everything being considered and re-considered in the most charitable point of view, neither of the parties appeared quite so unpardonable as more fastidious judges, in the effervescence of untried virtue, might probably have deemed them: she therefore determined to use her best endeavours in their behalf; and was not long in communicating this intention to her pleased and grateful auditor.

Before they separated, it was agreed that Stella should make some plausible excuse for a short visit to the Hermitage in the course of the succeeding day; when Mrs. Bertram (from whose benevolence and prudence he was desired to expect every thing) was to be entrusted with the whole detail of this distressing business, and, if willing to accept of the task, have its future arrangement entirely confided to her care.

Montague would gladly have prevailed with Stella to promise a private visit to poor Maria (whose place of residence lay at not great distance) prior to the intended disclosure of her condition to Mrs. Bertram; but this appeared a step of too much importance to be taken without the knowledge or approbation of her benefactress; and finding his arguments decidedly ineffectual on the subject, he forbore at length to urge it any further, but left his young assistant to the guidance of her own better judgment, persuaded he might safely rely on its unerring dictates where the cause of humanity was implicated, or relief required for the unfortunate, of whatever description.

CHAP. XII.

“Of all the paths which lead to human bliss,
“The most secure and grateful to our steps
“With mercy and humanity is mark’d.”

GLOVER.

WE trust our readers are long since convinced that Mrs. Bertram was not one of those rigid moralists, who, (self-supposed) beyond the fear of temptation themselves, disdain to make any allowance for the effects of its influence on others of a less happy temperament. She heard our heroine with patience, though not unmixed with some unavoidable portion of regret, approved of her conduct in the affair, and promised to consult her pillow on the proper measures necessary to be adopted for the regulation of her future motions. Stella, gladdened by the exhilarating smile of this excellent woman, and enriched by the blessing that followed it, received, with heartfelt pleasure, her permission to request a visit from Captain Montague at the Hermitage, and again departed for Mr. Adair’s, accompanied by a little girl in the neighbourhood, who, when not otherwise employed, sometimes attended her to the opposite side of the plantations.

Before the limits of these were nearly attained, Captain Montague appeared in view. To him the success of her embassy was speedily related, and the invitation from Mrs. Bertram was no sooner delivered, than accepted with delight. Peace once more seemed to shed her tranquil influence over his mind, and Stella was overwhelmed with a profusion of acknowledgments, as the principal source from whence it flowed.

To conceal the nature of his transgression from the ear of Louisa St. Vincent was an object no less momentous to his view for the future, than the assistance so ardently wished for on Maria’s account. He knew her character was of that description, and her notions of moral rectitude so religiously strict, that the positive renunciation of his hand, in favour of Maria, would prove the certain consequence of a discovery, whatever might be the acute nature of her own feelings on the occasion. Apprehensions of this kind now, however, began gradually to subside: the forced semblance of cheerfulness which for some time past he had obliged himself to assume in company, was no longer fictitious. Stella saw and felt, with infinite satisfaction, the importance of the mission with which she had been intrusted, and mentally experienced that “to do good to others, is to be ultimately happy ourselves.”

Though Miss Adair was soon in a convalescent state, she could not think of parting with Stella till the perfect reestablishment of her health was effected: of course, our heroine’s visit at Woodside was prolonged much beyond its original limits. Meanwhile Mrs. Bertram and Captain Montague had several consultations on the business which the former had agreed to arrange; and the principal outlines of their plan were no sooner compleated, than she prepared to put them in practice.

In the life time of the first Mrs. Harris (the name of Maria’s guardian) she had been a visitor at Green-Bank, and rather on a footing of intimacy with the family, by whom she was much esteemed. On the second marriage of that gentleman, their former intercourse gradually ceased; for the gay and fashionable manners of the present Mrs. Harris accorded but ill with her notions of propriety, or the quiet, retired manner in which time smoothly and rationally glided along at the Hermitage.

Before a woman is allowed to possess too much influence over the mind of her husband,

he ought to be well assured of her inclination and ability to exert it properly. Mr. Harris was too greatly infatuated with the personal charms of his fashionable wife to suppose this inquiry a matter of any moment. Unfortunately, the lady soon perceived his inattention in this respect, and her empire was speedily established on a foundation too secure to be easily shaken. The consequences of this circumstance may be readily imagined:—ever thing underwent a total alteration at Green-Bank: the house, the furniture, all was modernized; for how could a high-bred dame, born and educated in the metropolis of the three kingdoms, possibly exist amidst the Gothic barbarism of such antediluvian objects, as every where surrounded her. Here had she stopped, however, all might still have been well; but the spirit of innovation was not to be so easily satisfied; and the master of the house gradually became converted from a character of respectability, to one somewhat the reverse: at least such happened to be the opinion of the thinking and sensible part of his neighbours on the occasion; to which, however, his female helpmate evidently paid very little attention.

His ward, the unfortunate Maria Campbell, had been consigned to his care at a very early period of life by her father, who died in the island of St. John, and left his countryman, Mr. Harris, then in Nova Scotia, his sole executor.

Had the first Mrs. Harris survived a few years longer, it is probable that her instructions and example, in conjunction with the natural upright bent of Maria's mind, would finally have preserved her from the subsequent misery, by which, from a different mode of education, she was now overwhelmed.

Mrs. Bertram knew and loved her when a child, not more on her own account, than on that of her departed friend's, with whom Maria was a particular favourite. After that lady's death, she was placed at a boarding-school in the north of England, and on her guardian's second appearance at the altar, removed to one of the most fashionable seminaries in London, where she was taught every modern accomplishment, and untaught every moral one formerly acquired.

Mrs. Harris, to whom the entire direction of her conduct was now entrusted, found it necessary, however, to take her home before the second year of her residence in the metropolis terminated. To Maria the change indeed proved of little consequence, for the force of bad example was destined to be equally her portion. On the part of her guardian's wife the case happened to be widely different; for the annual sum allotted for the maintenance of his ward, was, like the education of poor Maria, left, without restriction or superintendance, at her command. The expensive and vain disposition of this woman frequently involved her in occasional difficulties, against which she soon judged it convenient to guard herself by appropriating the whole amount of Miss Campbell's yearly allowance to her own use. The result of this prudent determination brought Maria back to Green-Bank before the critical period of fourteen summers had been numbered from the first period of her existence; and the tender plant, which had just begun to expand its leaves in one hothouse, speedily arrived at its last stage of maturity in another.

To hear that Maria Campbell was thoughtless and giddy, had long ceased to be new intelligence in the neighbourhood: no imputation of a more criminal nature, however, had yet fixed a stigma on her name, though now in her nineteenth year; and whenever she was mentioned at the Hermitage, Mrs. Bertram still secretly hoped that the early rudiments of virtue instilled into her young and ductile mind by her first worthy instructress, would yet prove sufficiently powerful to preserve her from continued error, in spite of the bad example perpetually before her eyes. The mistress of the Hermitage encouraged this idea from a mistaken notion that

“Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
“As to be hated needs but to be seen.”

An assertion certainly true where an uncorrupted heart first views it in all its natural deformity; but the case becomes altered when the youthful mind is habituated to all its various gradations, and the insinuating influence of pleasure permitted by imperceptible steps to establish its dominion in the bosom.

Mrs. Bertram, though under any circumstances she would deeply have regretted the fall of a fellow-creature from the paths of virtue and the station in life she seemed born to fill, felt her concern doubly increased by the knowledge that Captain Montague proved an equal sharer in her guilt: however, it was vain to moralize where active exertions could alone be serviceable, and these she had promised to adopt without farther loss of time.

On fixing her final residence at the Hermitage some little affairs of her husband’s remained unsettled, and the advice of Mr. Harris had often been usefully followed on the occasion. One or two of the papers relative to the business had been left at Green-Bank: these were considered at the time of small or no importance, and therefore never enquired after. It now, however, occurred to her, that, under pretence of asking for them, she might form a plausible excuse for renewing her former intercourse with the family. The scheme succeeded to the extent of her expectations; and a few introductory lines from Captain Montague soon procured her the unlimited confidence of Maria, whose situation was already become critical and alarming.

CHAP. XIII.

“All things invite
“To peaceful counsels, and the settled state
“Of order.”

MILTON.

IT was not, however, without infinite difficulty that she could prevail on this infatuated girl to suppress the self-deluding hope of a legal connexion with her undoer. Attached to him by the strongest ties of affection, her passion seemed to acquire additional force as the dreaded time approached when she was to become a mother. On Montague she fondly doted—to Montague still looked up as her future partner through life, the source of her own felicity, the indulgent father of her unborn offspring, who, by acknowledging a private marriage, would hereafter restore their innocent child to all the privileges of legitimacy. The sensibility of mind possessed by Montague had prolonged this deception, till the idea almost formed part of her existence. Conscious of the injury he had done her, and his inability to repair it according to her wishes, and shocked at the effect an explicit declaration of the latter circumstance would probably produce on the intellects of a woman whose letters contained the most violent and unqualified professions of unalterable love, Montague had fatally augmented the evil by the very means he took to soothe it. The few unavoidable answers she received, though an impartial reader could

not easily have mistaken their tenor, were willingly misapprehended by poor Maria, and every entreaty they contained for her forgiveness converted into a certain proof of an intended reparation, legal as honourable.

Mrs. Bertram, on a perusal of these short and affecting epistles, was astonished at the persevering obstinacy with which she continued to delude herself, and sometimes felt disposed to undeceive her at once, by procuring an incontestible acknowledgment of the truth from the hand of Montague; but, on second thoughts, she renounced this design till the hour of confinement was elapsed, lest the final destruction of her fondest hopes might be attended with fatal consequences in her present precarious condition.

Though continually occupied in parties of pleasure with the military, and daily immersed in the vortex of folly and thoughtless dissipation, Mrs. Harris could not fail to remark the alteration which had latterly taken place in Maria's spirits and appearance. If the real source of that alteration, however, was suspected by her, she either chose to preserve the semblance of ignorance, or affected to believe it proceeded from the late hours and ricketing style of life which people of fashion (she sometimes condescended to allow) were frequently necessitated to comply with. On a second declaration of this opinion Mrs. Bertram determined to profit by it, and in the course of her third visit at Green-Bank, easily prevailed with its mistress (who detested the idea of an invalid in her domestic establishment) to indulge her with Maria's company for a few weeks under the calm and orderly roof of the Hermitage.

It had been preconcerted by the parties most interested in obtaining this leave of absence, that every apprehended obstacle to its success should be done away by an assurance from Maria that the advantages accruing from her residence with her guardian should be continued, without any deduction, in the same manner as if she was still an inhabitant of his house.

This intimation settled the matter at once; and Maria, two days after it was concluded, accompanied Mrs. Bertram to her peaceful retreat at the Hermitage, in somewhat more than the seventh month of her pregnancy.

Maria, from a knowledge of friendship entertained for her present hostess by Captain Montague, now fondly cherished the hope of procuring that interview with the latter which had hitherto been so often ineffectually attempted. But she little knew the woman she had to deal with, when such an idea took possession of her mind. Mrs. Bertram's disposition, though fraught with the milk of human kindness where the tearful eye of misery besought her interference, was yet inflexible to what she conceived the voice of persevering error; and she declared her decided resolution of renouncing all further share in the approaching event, if her arrangements were not unconditionally complied with.

Maria, who dreaded the publication of her disgrace, lest the total loss of character, which must unavoidably follow it, should prove an insuperable barrier to her future union with the father of her child, was again forced to submit to the hard law of necessity, and trust to what chance or a change of measures might hereafter produce.

Meanwhile an alteration in the motions of the military took place, which proved by no means agreeable to the female part of their acquaintance in this quarter of Galloway. The greater part of the regiment was ordered to Kirkcudbright, Dumfries, and the vicinity. Amongst those destined for the latter place happened to be Captain Montague. Major St. Vincent, Mr. Jones, and one other gentleman alone were to continue for some time longer in their present station.

On the day prior to their march, Stella received a few hurried lines from Montague, containing this intelligence: he likewise mentioned his intention of calling upon her in the course of the evening.

The family at Woodside were engaged to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Harris; and as Miss Adair could not yet accompany them, Stella was suffered to stay behind with the invalid. The latter usually lay down for an hour or two in the evening; and her attendant had hardly left the chamber before Captain Montague made his appearance.

This was not the most cheerful of all possible interviews: their spirits seemed equally low, and the nature of those subjects which formed a chief part of their conversation, appeared but ill calculated to exhilarate them. Stella leaned pensively on the side of the open window, while he poured forth the grateful and friendly effusions of his heart, and dwelt on the regret that filled it on the near prospect of a separation from his beloved Louisa St. Vincent, and his much esteemed Stella: Maria, too—the undone Maria! might soon be no more!—might be sent to her final account by his means, and, like the accusing angel, carry his future condemnation along with her to the throne of immutable Justice! The softened mind of Montague shuddered at this picture of its own creation; and snatching the hand of the weeping Stella, he grasped it to his heart, imploring her by all her hopes of a hereafter, never to desert the wretched girl, or her unfortunate offspring.

Stella, in much emotion, raised her eyes to give him the solemn assurance so movingly requested, when a sudden exclamation of surprise that burst from her lips, called his attention to another object. It proved to be one very little expected at the time.

Placed amongst some trees growing near a window from whence every look and motion of Stella and her companion could be easily distinguished, appeared Mrs. St. Vincent on horseback. Mr. Jones, on his charger, was at her side, and leaned familiarly on the crutch of her saddle: while the malignant glance and sarcastic whisper alternately succeeded each other during the momentary observation a very short survey afforded of our heroine and her visitor.

Montague started from his seat, and regarded the companion of the lady with a stern, indignant eye. His meaning seemed to be pretty legibly written on his countenance; for the subject of it immediately resumed a less familiar posture, and apparently shrunk into his natural insignificance. Not so with Mrs. St. Vincent:—she cast another look of sneering contempt at the two friends—honoured her redoubtable beau with something of the same description, and then bursting into a loud laugh, put her horse to a canter, and vanished, with her escort, in a few minutes from sight.

“That cruel woman,” said Stella, recoiling intuitively as Margaret passed the window, “that cruel woman seems to take a most unaccountable pleasure in mortifying me on every possible opportunity: one would suppose she was too happily situated to trouble herself about a poor, unassuming foundling, so much in every respect her inferior!”

At the words “too happily situated” an involuntary sigh marked her meaning, and Montague could not refrain from raising his eyes to her face. The flush of insulted, but conscious worth that burned on her lovely cheeks was accompanied by the intrusive tear of bitter recollection. He silently gazed upon her for a moment, and suddenly dropping her hand, paced the room in visible, though mute emotion.

“I have frequently,” resumed Stella, without noticing his agitation, “envied those fortunate mortals who have brothers or near connexions to protect them from unmerited insult: had I been in possession of such, Mr. Jones, perhaps—but it does not much signify; I must bear inevitable evils as well as I can.”

“Damn the stupid dog!” cried Montague, with a vehemence of manner that startled her: “surely you cannot apprehend any thing from such an insignificant puppy!—If he presume only to mention your name with the slightest degree of disrespect, I will cane him through the

regiment.”

Stella soon perceived the error she had committed by letting complaints of such a description escape her lips; but a full heart is not always a prudent one:—she endeavoured, however, to repair the mischief by turning the discourse on more general topics; and had nearly succeeded, when Mr. Adair’s carriage drove to the door. Montague remained a few minutes after the return of the Adair family, and then, with evident regret, bade them adieu.

The next direction of his steps was to the grotto of the Hermitage, where the few interviews which had taken place between him and Mrs. Bertram, since the residence of Maria with that lady, were generally held. His intended visit was announced by a note similar to the one received by Stella; and the good lady, having apologized for her absence to her fair guest, whom she requested to remain within doors till her return, had already been some time in expectation of his appearance, before he presented himself to her view.

The grateful heart of Captain Montague shewed itself on this occasion in the genuine colours of unadulterated nature; and Mrs. Bertram became more than ever interested in the welfare and happiness of a young man whose feelings revolted so strongly from the idea of even unintentional error, and whose principles had escaped the infection of example, though his manners and address bespoke the first polish of fashionable life.

CHAP. XIV.

“Friends should part kind, who are to meet no more.”

HILL.

THE key of the private garden-door usually kept by Stella, had been in the possession of Captain Montague from the time that Maria became an inmate of the Hermitage; and on quitting the grotto, Mrs. Bertram accompanied him along the covered walk that led to it.

Their progress was slow, and their conversation carried on in low whispers: they moved with caution, and were within a few yards of the spot that was to separate them, when a rustling sound amongst some of the neighbouring bushes, followed by an abrupt and wild exclamation, suddenly interrupted a discourse that seemed altogether calculated to absorb their whole attention.

Mrs. Bertram stopped short in the midst of a sentence she was uttering with uncommon earnestness of manner, and turning round to discover from whence this unaccountable circumstance proceeded, a female figure was seen to rush from the opposite hedge, who, darting across the road, threw her arms round Captain Montague, and instantly sunk in a fainting fit at his feet.

The whole of this strange transaction was so rapid and unexpected, that the astonished spectators scarcely knew whether to believe it real or imaginary.

Mrs. Bertram was the first who appeared to recollect herself and comprehend the mystery: the truth flashed upon her at the second glance cast upon the apparently expiring object before them, who was quickly recognised for the unhappy Maria Campbell. Montague, softened by the previous discourse that had taken place relative to her unfortunate condition, could not behold this victim to a momentary error without the keenest sensations of remorse and

compassion. He raised her from the ground, and conveyed her in his arms to a small covered seat there at hand; where, still acting as her supporter, he mournfully surveyed the sad alteration a few months had produced in her features and whole appearance, as her head lay reclined on his bosom, without evincing the smallest degree of sense or motion.

“Are you mad?” cried Mrs. Bertram, softly endeavouring to unclasp his hands and remove her from his hold: “retire—depart instantly, before her recollection returns! otherwise the consequences may prove fatal.”

“I cannot leave you in this situation,” replied he, in a low tremulous voice, while a tear trickled down his cheek and fell upon her forehead, as his eyes remained fixed on her languid countenance.

“Not leave me!” repeated his companion: “you must indeed, however, Captain Montague! and that speedily too—indeed you must!”

“And how is she to be got back to the house, then?—you cannot possibly support her so far without additional assistance.”

“Commit the management of that matter to me, Sir,” replied Mrs. Bertram, in a firm, determined voice; “and do me the favour to believe I am competent to the task of arranging it properly: you evidently are not so at present. Respect her past sufferings, and increase not those to come by agonizing her already wounded mind with the presence of him in whom all her misery has originated.—I insist upon your absence.”

Every word pronounced by Mrs. Bertram, and her determined manner and commanding look, spoke strongly to the tortured soul of Montague. Silent and sad, he now prepared to obey her; and aided by her endeavours to free him from his burthen, had nearly accomplished the meditated retreat, when the movements and change of posture occasioned by this attempt, apparently operated to the restoration of the animal powers, and Maria once more regained her senses.

Their return, however, was productive of fresh difficulties:—she clung to him with strength almost supernatural, and wildly declared her intention of henceforth living or dying in his arms—of sharing his fate—of remaining with him for ever!

Mrs. Bertram tried the force of expostulation and reason; but expostulation and reason were unattended to amidst the frantic ravings of passion and the delirium of despair. At length exhausted nature gave way to corporeal weakness, and another fainting fit succeeded. Montague, mute and miserable, now saw the prudence of the sacrifice required by necessity; and Mrs. Bertram’s former request being again urged, no longer met with resistance: he dropped another liquid witness of heartfelt penitence on the pale cheek of the unconscious Maria—pressed his trembling lips on her cold forehead—imprinted a kiss on the hastily snatched hand of his inestimable friend, and sighing profoundly as he burst from the half-relaxed hold of the former, and casting a farewell, melancholy look on them both, rushed forward to the door, from whence his receding form soon ceased to be visible.

At the entrance of the first plantation he met Mrs. Wallace in her way to the Hermitage. She would have passed him unnoticed, however, had not his appearance alarmed her, and produced an enquiry after his health. The unhappy young man started at the sound of her voice, and suddenly stopping, raised his eyes to her face. She was speedily recognised; and on her asking for Mrs. Bertram, he directed her where to find her, accompanied by a request to hasten forwards without loss of time.

Mrs. Wallace, apprehensive from his perturbed and agitated appearance, that some untoward accident had befallen her friend, instantly obeyed his injunctions. She found Mrs.

Bertram supporting Maria, whose senses were again on the recovery: but mental anguish was now absorbed in corporeal sufferings:—the pangs of a premature labour had seized her, brought on by the conflict she had this evening undergone. She was, with difficulty, conveyed to her apartment; where a restless, agonizing night preceded the apprehended event, which took place on the following morning, and gave birth to the secondary cause of all her misery in the form of a female infant; which, though small and apparently delicate, appeared, notwithstanding, likely to live.

Just as Mrs. Bertram was going to forward a note to Stella, in which was contained a request to see her at the Hermitage, a messenger arrived from Woodside, with intelligence that Miss Adair had had a relapse; and therefore as the presence of our heroine could not be dispensed with, her maternal friend was entreated once more to prolong her leave of absence, which was otherwise to have expired in the course of a few days. The mother of the invalid seemed so much interested in the success of this petition, that Mrs. Bertram could not find in her heart to refuse her acquiescence, and a favourable answer was accordingly returned. Stella, of course, remained ignorant of the recent event at the Hermitage; for her worthy benefactress feared to trust it to paper, and a verbal message was out of the question.

Soon after the servant was dispatched from Woodside on this commission, the sound of the trumpet was heard approaching from Wigton. Stella knew it announced the departure of the troops; she therefore stole softly from the chamber of her patient, and entering her own, threw up the sash to observe their motions. The martial strains, grand, solemn, and impressive, reverberated at intervals amidst the surrounding hills for some time previous to the appearance of the performers. At length the helmets of the soldiers were discovered, glittering in the sunbeams of the morning, as they emerged from a plantation of Scotch firs, that concealed a part of the road through which they had to pass.

A gentleman, of an elegant figure and commanding air, occasionally appeared amongst the multitude, as the movements of a high mettled, fiery charger made its way through the crowd of spectators that encompassed, and, at times, nearly retarded their march. The heart of Stella throbbed as she first glanced her eye over this elegant horseman; and she shrunk back from the window under an idea that it could only be St. Vincent who thus shone conspicuous above his companions. Her mind became soon, however, reassured, from the recollection that he was yet to remain in his present quarters for some time to come: she therefore returned to her former situation at the window, and, convinced the cause of her alarm could not possibly be the person she had supposed, again leaned forward, in expectation of discovering her friend Montague in the number.

This wish was not long ungratified. Montague, hitherto placed in the rear, suddenly galloped up to Colonel Arabin, who rode at the head of the men; and after conversing with him for a few minutes, he was returning to his former station, when, upon casting a hasty glance in that direction, he perceived Stella at the window.

Montague moved his helmet, and was advancing to bid her a second adieu, but the Colonel having some further directions to give, called him abruptly back.

The troops in the interim moved on, and before their discourse terminated, the officer who had attracted her notice joined the two former. The late apprehensions of Stella were now not merely renewed—they were confirmed: it was indeed St. Vincent, as her heart had already hinted. She sickened at the conviction, and in much agitation turned from the ardent and melancholy gaze with which he evidently regarded her. Montague speedily remarked the air of pensive dejection that immediately spread over the countenance of his friend. He said something

to him in a low voice, but with much seeming earnestness: the Major suddenly started from his reverie, and each profoundly bowing to our heroine, passed the house without taking any farther notice of her.

The road lay within a short distance of this side of the mansion, and the trampling of horses again attracted her attention. Another division of the troops appeared in view, under the command of Lieutenant Jones. The scene of the preceding evening recurred to his memory, and on looking toward the open window, Stella was perceived leaning against the side of the sash, from whence she imagined herself least likely to be observed.

In the hope of remaining unheeded, she was not, however, long permitted to indulge. Mr. Jones had no sooner reached the vicinity of the window than he instantly rode up, and accosted her in a manner that determined her to retain her position as the most explicit proof she could give of the unimportant light in which she regarded him, and a distant and slight movement of the head was the sole return his first address was honoured with.

“Nay, my fair maid of the Hermitage,” said the incorrigible, familiar puppy, “for Heaven’s sake, do not let your grief thus absorb every sentiment of politeness! though that happy dog Montague is upon the move, those who remain will do their best to supply his place: believe me, you will find Harcourt and myself tolerable substitutes. I wish, *pro bono publico*, I could say as much for the Major; but a married military man is no better than any other unfortunate devil in the same predicament, when his wife is at his elbow.”

“The Major!” involuntarily exclaimed Stella, inattentive to every other part of this witty harangue, and wholly thrown off her guard by the sound of a name so interesting to her feelings— “what of the Major?” repeated she, bending forward as she spoke with a look of earnest enquiry.

Jones burst into a loud and sarcastic laugh; but seeing her about to retire from his view, with a countenance expressive of the profoundest contempt for a conduct so unpardonable, he endeavoured to restrain his mirth, and ludicrously bowing as he advanced nearer the window, begged leave to illustrate the nature of what he had said, by adding that though the Major, Harcourt, and himself were now upon their march with the rest of the light horse, their intention was merely to accompany them a few miles on their way, after which it would prove equally the endeavour and inclination of the two latter to supply the loss of those who had hitherto, in some people’s opinion at least, (again bowing) obtained a preference over them. As for Captain Montague—

Stella had already heard all she desired, and feeling perfectly indifferent to the conclusion of his information, closed the sash with a dignified air of cool disdain, without permitting him sufficient time to finish the sentence.

Jones seemed at first disposed to be offended; but on perceiving the object of his intended displeasure no longer in view to witness its formidable appearance, the design was quickly converted into another loud peal of unmeaning laughter, in the midst of which the disconcerted warrior clapped spurs to his charger, and galloped after his leaders.

CHAP. XV.

“We are creatures of sensation: our worst calamities derive as much of their pungency from the accessories by which they are accompanied, as they do from their intrinsic

value.”

GODWIN.

TWO of the younger Miss Adair's, who, unperceived by Stella, had been observing all that passed from an upper window, now joined her. Convinced that their former suspicions relative to Captain Montague were by no means so unfounded as she seemed willing to persuade them, our heroine at length silently acquiesced in an opinion, for the farther combating of which her spirits were at present by no means adequate: her teasing companions of course seemed to think a reciprocal attachment between her and the Captain henceforth established.

In the evening Mrs. Wallace called at Mr. Adair's, and taking Stella side, related to her the event that had happened at the Hermitage. She heard the recital in much agitation of mind, and at its conclusion insisted upon accompanying the good woman back to their mutual benefactress. This design was, however, presently negatived by the former, who declared Mrs. Bertram had expressly prohibited her return till the time already determined on for that purpose should arrive. As she knew her visitor was far better calculated than herself to be an useful assistant in such an emergency, Stella at length acquiesced, and consented to remain at Woodside for the specified time, provided nothing material occurred in the interim to require her presence at home.

A fortnight from the morning on which the troops had passed Mr. Adair's was already elapsed without producing any occurrence of consequence, except the restoration of his daughter to her former state of convalescence. The term of our heroine's visit was now arrived, and, accompanied by two of the young ladies, after taking an affectionate farewell of the family, she set off for the Hermitage.

The stile which led to the private path through the park, by some accident had been broken down, and its place was now filled up with stones and furze until it could be properly repaired. This occasioned a trifling disappointment to the young ladies, who saw themselves under the necessity of proceeding by the public road, although extremely dusty, and considerably about: no probable alternative, however, appeared; and while the Miss Adair's stood regretting the circumstance without attempting to remedy it by advancing forward, Stella, sunk into mental abstraction, was retracing in idea the various incidents of the formidable bull adventure which had occurred in the vicinity of their present station. Absorbed in the train of painful reflections that naturally followed, she perceived not that her companions had removed to the opposite side of the road, and were speaking to a gentleman in a shooting dress, who was pointing to the principal gate of the park, that lay at some distance before them. At length she heard the voice of Sally Adair repeating her name, and recollecting herself, immediately issued from behind a hawthorn bush, the full form of which had accidentally concealed her from their view. The stranger turned round upon her approach, and a sudden flush of crimson spread over every feature.

“Come, Stella,” cried one of the Adair's, in a gay accent, “our difficulties are ended: Major St. Vincent is in possession of a key to the park, and kindly offers the wanderers admittance to its apparently prohibited regions.”

Stella started at this intimation, and raising her eyes from the ground, on which they had been hitherto rivetted, met those of St. Vincent fixed upon her face with an expression of the deepest interest: her looks were again bent downwards; and the whole party now moved on to the gate.

During this period the Major compelled himself to converse on a variety of topics: but

forced exertions of this description are not always successful: frequent pauses broke in upon the detail of those events on which he discoursed; and the anxiety with which he endeavoured to repair his error, evinced a mind struggling under some powerful and, occasionally, ill-suppressed anguish.

At length they came to that part of the road where he had placed Stella on the exterior side of the park-wall, and supported her in his arms while fainting under the terror and apprehension to which the dread of her expected sufferings from the bull had given birth.

St. Vincent's temporary abstractions increased as they drew nearer this memorable spot. Arrived at it, his eyes and thoughts appeared solely occupied by Stella. The whole of his conduct now became too pointed to pass longer unnoticed. The Adairs remarked this circumstance; but mistaking the cause from whence it originated, thoughtlessly added to the distress of the parties most interested by the ill-timed raillery that succeeded their observation.

"Ah Stella! you are a sly girl," cried Elizabeth, with a provoking archness of manner, "and under that downcast look think to conceal the sensations produced by a first review of this never-to-be-forgotten spot after the departure of your truant swain, your gallant protector!—Trust not appearances, however, Major; nor fear that your absent friend runs any risk of being expunged from remembrance; for I aver, and Sally there can corroborate what I say, that we never pass that identical portion of the wall, either on this or the other side, without a look, a sigh, or some incontestible proof of particular attention escaping that demure little gipsy."

"Good God, Elizabeth!" exclaimed Stella, in a voice of the deepest distress.

"Nay, nay, child," cried Sally, laughing as she spoke, "two against one will gain credit in any court in Christendom."

"This is too much!" said Stella, in a low, tremulous accent— "it is cruel—very cruel indeed!—I entreat the subject may be changed—if you value me, I entreat it!"

The Major, after a perturbed look at Stella, had previously advanced a few steps without being conscious of the circumstance.

A servant, breathless with haste, now appeared, and accosting the Miss Adair's, informed them their presence was instantly required at home, where some visitors had arrived soon after their departure, who impatiently awaited their return, which he had been dispatched to accelerate without loss of time.

"Major," cried the gay Elizabeth, beckoning him back, "to your protection we commit this forsaken damsel; pray see her safely across the park, lest some furious animal should again start up to impede her progress, and Captain Montague summon you to a court-martial for negligence in the execution of your duty."

"Adieu, my silent friend!" rejoined her laughing sister. "We shall meet again in the course of a few days: meanwhile I trust Major St. Vincent will be enabled to give the absent red coat a good account of you."

"Is this treatment generous?—is it delicate?" asked Stella, in a reproachful whisper.

"We will discuss the merits of this question at a more favourable opportunity," replied the giddy Adair's, and curtsying to the Major, hurried instantly away.

The situation of those who remained, was at this juncture by no means enviable. They walked on in silence: but the deep and half-suppressed sighs which repeatedly burst from the bosom of her companion reverberated on the trembling heart of poor Stella, who, at length, sick and overcome by the conflicting emotions of her soul, would have sunk to the ground in a fainting fit, had not the feeble groan that announced her situation roused the unfortunate St. Vincent to a sense of it. She was now reduced to the dilemma of either resting herself upon the

side of the ground, or accepting the offered arm of her conductor: she preferred the latter, as least liable to objection; and they slowly continued their progress.

The approaching sound of horses' feet now gradually reached them, and Mrs. St. Vincent, with her constant companion Lieutenant Jones, abruptly appeared at a sudden turning of the road.

Stella started, and involuntarily attempted to withdraw her hand; but conscious of her inability to support her trembling frame, St. Vincent resisted the effort, and grasped it more firmly in his.

CHAP. XVI.

“Are these the proofs of tenderness and love:—
“These endless quarrels, discontents, and jealousies:—
“These never-ceasing wailings and complaining—
“These furious starts—these whirlwinds of the soul,
“Which every other moment rise to madness?”

ROWE.

MRS. St. Vincent regarded them with an uncommon degree of malevolence; and checking her horse, which was so placed as to prevent them passing her, sarcastically accosted her husband with—

“Your servant, Major St. Vincent!—Is not this a charming evening?”

“Such I presume you think it, Madam, otherwise I had scarcely had the pleasure of seeing you on horseback.”

“Humph!—the pleasure!—witty too!—Well, but, Sir, pray where is the wonder of my being on horseback when your pedestrian companion has already acquired sufficient strength to quit her apartment?”

Stella raised her eyes to the speaker; but not comprehending the meaning of what she heard, nor supposing herself implicated in its explanation, instantly withdrew them again.

St. Vincent did not seem more enlightened on the subject; but his look of enquiry passed unheeded in the laudable eagerness manifested by his lady to mortify our unfortunate heroine.

“Upon my word, Miss Bertram,” the Miss was pronounced with peculiar emphasis, “you really evince an immense portion of courage thus to encounter the night air at so early a period of emancipation from the confinement of a sick chamber!”

Stella once more looked up with an air of the utmost astonishment; but immediately recollecting that she probably alluded to her late attendance on Miss Adair, and being besides uncertain whether she spoke in earnest or jest, though from the general tenor of her former conduct the latter appeared most likely, the eyes of our heroine were a second time dropped in mute forbearance.

“Pretty, ignorant, modest innocent!” cried the scoffing Mrs. St. Vincent, turning with an expressive sneer of supercilious contempt to the obsequious Mr. Jones, whose white teeth were just beginning to show themselves at the commencement of a ready approving smile, when the stern contracted brow and indignant eye of the Major speedily closed his lips, and spread a degree of ludicrous solemnity over every working feature.

“A *convenient double*,” resumed Mrs. St. Vincent, “is one of the most useful items in a modern man of fashion’s inventory of indispensable necessaries. I think, Major, you and your friend Montague are of this opinion: no doubt he would have been equally ready to serve his counterpart under similar circumstances; but, perhaps, in the present instance, your partnership may be formed on one and the same system of reciprocity; and then in that case—why the article of commerce becomes a mutual concern, you know!”

Another expressive glance was directed to the Lieutenant, who nevertheless began to feel by no means at home in his saddle, which, with the particular construction of a bridle he had seen twenty times before, was examined and re-examined with the most persevering assiduity, every instant.

“You have been invisible for some time at the Hermitage, I think, Miss Bertram?” continued Mrs. St. Vincent, bowing with an air of ceremonious, but affected respect to Stella.

“I was from home, Madam,” faintly replied the agitated girl.

“Or denied when there!” retorted Mrs. St. Vincent, with malignant quickness.

“Madam!” said our heroine, with increased surprise.

“Sweet, unconscious innocent!” again cried her tormentor, with an hysterical kind of laugh.

Stella made another and more successful effort to free herself from the arm of the Major, and gliding past the horses, walked on as well as her trembling limbs and mental perturbation would permit.

“And now, Mr. St. Vincent, when you have no burthen but that of your own reflections to support, may I presume to enquire how you met with that well principled and modest-looking lady who had just discovered she can move off with out your officious assistance?”

“Suppose I plead privilege, Madam, and refuse to gratify impertinent curiosity?—Your are my wife, not my Father Confessor.”

“And treated accordingly!” retorted the enraged Mrs. St. Vincent, bursting into a flood of tears.

“Ride on, Mr. Jones,” said the Major, in a tone of evident displeasure: “however your presence may be necessary to Mrs. St. Vincent, her husband can at present dispense with it.”

“No, stay, Mr. Jones,” sobbed the lady, “and bear witness to the treatment I am going to experience!—going!” she reiterated— “when has it ever been otherwise?”

Mr. Jones seemed unwilling to disoblige either party, and, though, like the Yorkshireman, he preferred “eating to fighting,” scarcely knew how to act in so critical an emergency.

“Ride on, Sir!” vociferated St. Vincent, in a voice that speedily determined the matter, and admitted not of further hesitation: “*your evidence shall be called for when wanted!*”

Mr. Jones bowed, and shewed his wisdom by a prompt and ready compliance with the will of his commander.

St. Vincent now endeavoured to expostulate with this perverse woman on the folly and absurdity of her conduct; and, for the sake of poor Stella, to whom he well knew she ever bore the most inveterate malice, finally condescended to explain the accidental nature of his recent appearance in her company.

Where reason is not a native of the soil, like other exotics, it frequently proves difficult to rear. Mrs. St. Vincent heard him at first with every indication of impatience and incredulity: the result of some former altercations of the same nature had, however, made her rather fearful of exceeding certain bounds, at the climax of which she began to feel herself nearly arrived: his influence was, besides, still predominant over her mind; therefore, when she saw him almost wearied out, and visibly disgusted with the violence of her temper, the dread of a lasting rupture being the consequence of such repeated provocations at length operated as usual, and her passions gradually subsided into a state of more apparent calmness.

“You will now, however, accompany me home, Sir, and I will walk across the park with you?” said she, in a half-sullen, half-humble voice.

“No; Jones must supply my present deficiencies in point of attendance: I have tacitly promised to see Miss Bertram through the plantations, and cannot possibly do otherwise.”

“The claims of a wife must then, it seems, yield to those of—”

“Honour!” interrupted the Major, perceiving her eyes sparkle, and her deepening colour

indicate an approaching relapse.

“Yes, the honour of a modern husband!” she replied, with a disdainful toss of the head.

“Margaret!” said St. Vincent, fixing a stern and significant eye on her face.

The word was too emphatically pronounced to fail of making the intended impression: she knew from experience how little was to be gained with the Major by ill-humour or violence; and apprehending a return of both, resisted the recall of Jones no longer, but silently permitted herself to be escorted home by her now crest-fallen conductor.

In spite of her wish to proceed alone, the weeping Stella was soon overtaken by St. Vincent, who, on reaching her, attempted to apologize for the foregoing scene; but the words died away, and his voice became nearly inarticulate before the first sentence was concluded.

“Leave me, Sir—I entreat you, leave me!” said Stella, after a temporary, and affecting pause. “Alas! why am I thus perpetually destined to be the victim of fallacious appearances!—why for ever doomed to encounter the punishment of guilt, without the most distant inclination to wander from the narrow path of moral rectitude!—hard—hard fate!”

Her tears streamed afresh at the melancholy picture of the past and the future, which a sanguine imagination now presented to her view; and in the mute contemplation of anguish so unmerited, St. Vincent seemed to have forgotten the heavy portion of individual misery which had fallen to his own share, while hers possessed sufficient influence to throb with accumulating force through his every vein.

Persevering to refuse his offered arm, and equally cautious in avoiding every possible degree of conversation—sick at heart, weak, and weary, she at length reached the garden gate of the Hermitage; where, afraid to trust her voice with a last farewell, she raised her humid eyes, and fixed them for a moment on the agitated St. Vincent with a look of unutterable woe, who, torn already by a thousand conflicting passions, was totally inadequate to the task of sustaining this unexpected proof of tenderness. He struck his forehead with violence, and suddenly snatching her hand, pressed it first to his heart, and afterwards to his lips, in all the agony of incurable despair; then abruptly rushed from her presence, and darted into the thickest part of the plantations.

CHAP. XVII.

“Blustering when courted, crouching when oppress’d;
“Wise to themselves, and fools to all the world;
“Restless in change, and perjur’d to a proverb.”

DRYDEN.

TO account for the dark, mysterious hints thrown out by Mrs. St. Vincent, in which our heroine seemed evidently implicated, it is here necessary to observe that an old woman in the neighbourhood of the Hermitage, remarkable for her gossiping disposition, had somehow discovered that a child was supposed to be born in that house, whose mother was carefully screened from public notice. This person had not heard of the unfortunate Maria’s residence there, for it had hitherto remained a profound secret in the vicinity: of course, the little stranger, if such really existed, was immediately saddled upon poor Stella, whose reported absence received no manner of credit from an idea that it was merely fabricated for the purpose of deception and temporary concealment. This story, circulated at first in whispers amongst the country people, at length reached the ears of Mrs. St. Vincent’s maid Jenny, from whom it was speedily communicated to ascertain the truth.

An imputation so inimical to the character of our innocent heroine was greedily listened to by this unfeeling woman, and every means of investigation instantly, though secretly adopted, to ascertain the truth.

Where the stigma of error is ardently wished to be fixed on the conduct of an enemy, the slightest appearance may suffice for the designs of calumny, and every trifle judged sufficient to build a foundation upon: the foregoing attempt was therefore, in due time, imagined to be successfully accomplished, as far as related to the birth of the child; but the partner in her guilt still remained to be ascertained.

After every possible scrutiny was practised for this purpose, little or nothing appeared to criminate Major St. Vincent, who, upon the whole, stood tolerably acquitted of the charge, though his affectionate wife still harboured some private suspicions on the occasion.

Not so with Captain Montague, however:—his frequent visits to the Hermitage were no secret in the neighbourhood; neither was his partiality for our heroine unknown. The interesting situation in which Mrs. St. Vincent had herself discovered them at Mr. Adair’s seemed to corroborate the general notion of a particular attachment between them. The prominent features of this interview instantly recurred to her memory: the lady in tears—the gentleman pressing her hand to his bosom—the visible consternation of the parties on perceiving they were observed—all, all seemed conviction “strong as proofs of holy writ,” and, in the jaundiced eye of a predetermined accuser, of the most decisive description, though not exclusively calculated to exculpate her husband from a co-partnership in the affair; for, in spite of every effort to bring him in as a fellow-offender having failed, her unjustifiable hatred to poor Stella still induced her to retain the supposition that opportunity was alone wanting to pursue a similar line of conduct with one whom she more than suspected had formerly viewed the detested girl with no small degree of secret partiality.

Under this view of the business, Mrs. St. Vincent felt comparatively happy, if a disposition like hers can be supposed capable of such a sensation; for she concluded her husband would soon cease to indulge a prepossession in favour of a woman already the mistress of his

dearest friend; or should the fascinating delusion continue a little longer, it would still prove but temporary, and would not be followed by any consequences that ought seriously to alarm her for producing a permanent estrangement of his affections.

Had Mrs. St. Vincent been reasonable enough to think thus rationally for any length of time, it had been fortunate for herself; but uniformity of conduct on such occasions formed no part of her character; and this unlucky encounter with the reprobated Stella, in such company, speedily overthrew all the small stock of wisdom on which she had previously laid so instable a foundation for domestic tranquillity. The case might nevertheless be exactly as he had represented it, respecting the accidental nature of their interview; and this idea furnished some small degree of consolation, although inadequate to the task of totally removing every intrusive suspicion which occasionally obtruded itself on her versatile and irascible mind.

Mrs. St. Vincent proved of that order of being who are “every thing by starts, and nothing long:” her attachment to the Major reigned, notwithstanding, paramount over every other passion; and the partial interruptions it at times received from the ungovernable violence of her temper, were usually succeeded by an increase of affection, which frequently rendered the effects of some subsequent and capricious cause of offence more than ever intolerent and provoking. Strict in principle, and steady in all his actions, St. Vincent nevertheless endeavoured to overlook consequences in causes: he knew he was greatly in arrears on the score of what is generally understood by the word love; he knew that to her preference of him was owing the peace of his family, and the chief part of all he could now call his own in the world; and he likewise knew that his heart was entirely in the possession of another woman, in spite of the foregoing obligations to Margaret Ross. These considerations operated as they ever will do in a good and generous mind: they rendered him indulgent to foibles, and patient under the provocations which would have driven men of an inferior character to extremities; and it was only when a sense of what he owed himself rendered coercion necessary, when he conceived his honour or his respectability implicated by a different mode of proceeding, that he adopted strong measures, or judiciously exerted the legal and decisive authority of a husband for the purpose of recalling her to considerations of duty and propriety. In this predicament he found himself placed on the recent occasion; and the remedy, though repugnant to his nature, was necessarily practised with its usual success.

After separating from Major St. Vincent, Stella entered her home in a state of extreme perturbation, which was not lessened by the anxiety her appearance created in Mrs. Bertram, and her kind enquiries on the subject.

“Stella, my love, you are not well!” said her worthy benefactress, regarding her with a look of the utmost solicitude: “has any thing happened to distress you?”

“Nothing new, my dear mother,” (so she usually styled her truly maternal friend) was the reply, as she threw herself languidly on the sofa.

“Perhaps your walk has fatigued you, then?—the evening has proved uncommonly close and sultry.”

Stella sighed, but spoke out.

Mrs. Bertram threw open the sash in order to procure her a little fresh air; and having made her swallow some hartshorn and water, enquired for Mrs. Wallace, who, she said, had left her a few hours ago, on a short visit to her niece, and proposed afterwards walking on to meet Stella in her way back from Woodside.

“I saw her not, however,” replied our heroine.

“You surprise me,” cried the old lady: “I certainly perceived some one with you:—the

evening, indeed, is far advanced, and with the distance might have deceived me as to the person; but surely in crossing the Grove you were not alone?—in that circumstance I could scarcely be mistaken.”

Stella repeated her former answer, in a voice expressive of chagrin and vexation.

“Then, my love,” resumed Mrs. Bertram, without noticing the increased emotion of her auditor, “you are still ignorant, I presume, of the last new arrangements at the Grove. Mrs. Ross is ordered by her physicians to the milder climate of the south, and sets off accordingly in a very short time, to try what effect change of air will produce on her enfeebled frame. But this is not all:—Mr. Benson called with a message from her this morning, requesting to see me in the course of the day. I obeyed the summons immediately, and being conducted to her apartment, soon learned the cause of the invitation. She wishes, my dear child, to obtain your company and attendance during the term of her absence. Independent of her former obligations, I conceived the advantages to be derived from a situation so eligible far too important to be declined without your previous approbation and knowledge. After some further discourse on the subject, it was agreed to await your return before any final determination should take place.—What say you, Stella—are you willing to comply with this request, and oblige your kind benefactress at the Grove?”

A short pause ensued, during which our heroine appeared much agitated. At length, perceiving an answer unavoidable, she replied, in a tremulous accent—

“I have insuperable objections to the scheme you mention, my dear Madam.”

“Insuperable objections, Stella!” repeated Mrs. Bertram, with a look of astonishment: “I do not comprehend you meaning child.”

Stella threw her arms round the goody lady’s neck, and wept upon her bosom.

Mrs. Bertram’s surprise augmented: she requested an immediate explanation of words so mysterious and incomprehensible.

Stella, shocked and hurt by reflecting on the suspicion and weak conduct she had displayed, gradually acquired more self-command and mental exertion: she spoke of a violent head-ache, to which the depression of her spirits was ascribed; of her inability for a situation so superior to her expectations, and the repugnance she must assuredly feel to be placed at so considerable a distance from her best and dearest friend at the Hermitage; in short, every topic was introduced most likely to disguise the truth, and prevent any further arguments in behalf of Mrs. Ross’s proposal: and, at length, when all her attempts for that purpose proved ineffectual, she declared, in a faltering voice, her unconquerable dislike to any station in life, however beneficial in other respects, that must subject her to the daily insults of such a woman as Mrs. St. Vincent, who, as her kind friend well knew, had long harboured the most decided, though inexplicable aversion for her, which, she was so far from wishing to conceal, that no possible opportunity for displaying her unmerited hatred was permitted to escape without exhibiting some fresh instance of its virulence.

Stella spoke with a bitterness of expression till now unpractised; but the late scene pressed heavy on her remembrance, and her heart swelled at the idea of tamely acquiescing in her own humiliation by accepting an offer so well calculated to gratify the unceasing malice of a capricious, ill-tempered enemy.

“Mrs. St. Vincent, my dear, does not accompany her mother,” said Mrs. Bertram, after regarding her *protégée* with a look of fresh astonishment; “she remains at the Grove till the regiment removes to its next destination. It is in consequence of her declining the performance of her filial duties that you are requested to supply her place. Poor Mrs. Ross! how I pity her!—My

Stella would not desert a parent under such circumstances: but wealth and happiness are by no means synonymous terms.”

Stella thought of St. Vincent, and sighed as she pensively answered— “Too surely they are not!”

CHAP. XVIII.

“I feel my genial spirits droop,
“My hopes all flat—Nature within me seems
“In all her functions weary of herself,
“And I shall shortly be with them that rest.”

MILTON.

RELIEVED by the foregoing intelligence from an apprehension yet more formidable to her mind than all the ostensible terror Mrs. St. Vincent’s malevolent disposition was supposed to inspire, an apprehension that a residence under the same roof with Major St. Vincent would neither prove conducive to the re-establishment of his peace or her own, but, on the contrary, be attended with the most probable evil to both, Stella began to see the business in a different point of view, and flattered herself that change of place, and a succession of new objects, might be of material service in producing an alteration in those sentiments which at present blasted every enjoyment, and obscured every prospect in disappointment and secret anguish.

After much conversation on the subject, it was determined to delay its final discussion till the following day: that discussion, however, was to be made as subservient as possible to the wishes of Mrs. Ross, to whose early indulgence our heroine was so infinitely indebted for the many great and incalculable advantages derived from the sources of extensive knowledge and superior education.

The two chief considerations which could occasion a moment’s hesitation, were now totally out of the question: the Major would be far removed from all future chance of interfering with her meritorious struggles for the restoration of her lost tranquillity, and Mrs. Bertram would not be left without a companion while Maria Campbell remained under her roof; a circumstance which was likely to prove of some duration, as her guardian and his fashionable helpmate were now in Yorkshire, attending a widowed sister of the latter, from whom they expected a considerable increase of fortune on the event of her demise, which, from an incurable state of bad health, seemed gradually approaching: at any rate, Mrs. Bertram had been long engaged to spend some time with her friends in Ireland; and consequently was equally prepared in either case against the likelihood of passing the term of her *protégée*’s absence in total solitude.

These considerations partly reconciled the mind of Stella to a temporary separation from her maternal friend: nevertheless, she determined to stipulate for permission to revisit the Hermitage, should any unforeseen occurrence require her return before the expiration of their intended residence in the south. This arrangement afforded her affectionate heart no small pleasure, as its adoption appeared to unite the reciprocal duties of gratitude to Mrs. Ross, and filial attention to her chief benefactress, the friendly Mrs. Bertram.

Maria Campbell, whose recovery had latterly appeared somewhat dubious, happened to be rather more indisposed than usual this evening; which was probably owing to the agitation she experienced at the idea of a first interview with our heroine, whom she had not yet seen, but to whose humane interference in her affairs she knew herself infinitely indebted: Stella, therefore, was not allowed to satisfy her curiosity by an immediate introduction into the chamber of a woman of whom she had heard so much, and who, in a great measure, owed her present comparative state of safety from public exposure to the exertions she had used for that purpose.

Breakfast was no sooner concluded next day, than the suspense by which they were both

agitated, was speedily brought to a termination.

Solitude, sickness, and misfortune are great promoters of sober reflection; and Maria had benefited very considerably by the two latter; whilst the former was only occasionally broke upon, to admit the instructive and sensible conversation of her kind hostess, whose salutary precepts seemed to have made their proper impression on her young and naturally uncorrupted heart. The gay, the giddy, the fashionable pupil of the dissipated Mrs. Harris no longer appeared to view; melancholy personified seemed to have taken her place, accompanied by that look of pensive dejection and broken-hearted submission to irremediable evils, which is frequently exhibited in a countenance expressive, like Maria's, of all that passes in the secret recesses of the soul—a soul deeply wounded by the fatal conviction of voluntary error and self-created wretchedness. Her pallid face and emaciated form seemed to announce the journey of dissolution commenced, which was to raise her

“Above
“The reach of human pain—above the flight
“Of human joy.”*

When Mrs. Bertram, on entering the room, mentioned the name of her *protégée*, Maria, supporting herself on the arm of the easy chair in which she was seated, attempted to receive her standing: her corporeal and mental frame, however, were at this moment equally inadequate to the task imposed upon them; and the trembling, enfeebled girl was under the necessity of replacing herself almost instantly. She leaned her throbbing forehead against the back of the chair, and whilst her hand was extended to Stella, a violent burst of anguish took place, which, though it deeply affected her new acquaintance, proved of material service to herself, as it probably prevented a return of those fainting fits to which she had latterly been subject. But though the bloom of her cheeks had vanished, and the once sparkling lustre of her dark eyes was no longer visible—though the playful smile of light hearted innocence sported not, as formerly, on the coral lip of beauty, or dwelt in the fascinating dimple that added an additional grace to the *tout-ensemble* of the late glowing picture, Stella, as she mournfully gazed on the now humbled victim of error, fancied she could easily trace the sad change that grief had produced, and judge, by what remained of the almost ruined fabric, how eminently lovely it must have appeared in the pristine days of its glory; she saw, she felt the fatal contrast, and her eyes were instantly suffused in tears of the deepest regret and commiseration. Maria's conduct corresponded with the nature of her feelings; and softly raising the hand she still grasped in hers, with a look of ineffable sweetness, pressed it to her bosom in all the ardour of warm and grateful acknowledgment.

Mrs. Bertram, who thought it best to let the first effusions of acute sensibility subside of themselves, unchecked by the interference of cool and dispassionate reason, was for some minutes a silent spectator of this scene; but apprehensive, if too much prolonged, of the effect it might produce on the weak and shattered nerves of poor Maria, she at length interposed; and the interrupted, desultory sentences hitherto uttered, were succeeded by others of a more connected description; during which the young people appeared mutually pleased and interested in behalf of each other, and alike happy in the idea that this hitherto formidable interview was finally accomplished.

On retiring from the chamber of the invalid, Stella could not help expressing her anxiety for the recovery of their guest, who apparently looked forward to the hour of expected

* Thomson.

dissolution with a degree of calmness and composure extremely affecting to her young visitor. The subject was then changed for that of the preceding evening; after which they prepared to call at the Grove, and acquaint Mrs. Ross with the result of their determination, which they had previously agreed should be favourable to her wishes.

From the bearer of that lady's message to the Hermitage, Mrs. Bertram understood the other members of the family were engaged to spend the whole of the day from home. This circumstance was casually repeated to our heroine during the first intimation she received of the business, and proved a seasonable relief from the apprehension of any accidental *rencontre* with the Major. After their arrival they reached the apartment of Mrs. Ross without seeing a single individual, the servant who announced them excepted.

Stella had not visited her early patroness for some time; and the death-like expression marked in legible characters on every placid feature almost overcame her fortitude, as she paused to contemplate the sad alteration but too apparent since their last meeting.

"I thought you had forgotten your poor sick friend, Stella," said the faintly smiling invalid, as she presented a hand still more emaciated than Maria Campbell's; "but I ought not to expect young people would quit the cheerful scenes of health and happiness for the dreary seclusion of such a room as this: at least," continued she, sighing, "I have not been much accustomed to sacrifices of this description; and from you, my good girl, it would be cruel to exact what the nearest relative thinks too much to bestow on a dying parent."

"Good God!" exclaimed Stella, with energy, and raising the hand she still retained to her lips: "I was ready at all times to obey your summons, my dear, my revered benefactress; why then have I not been called upon to gratify my own feelings by being permitted to administer to your wants and wishes?"

"Permitted, my dear!" repeated Mrs. Ross, in a voice of surprise; "why you excused yourself from accepting my invitation so frequently of late, that at length I determined to try my influence with good Mrs. Bertram here, since what I once possessed over your inclinations seemed apparently too much upon the wane to leave any flattering prospect of success from a direct application to yourself."

"Indeed, indeed," exclaimed Stella, emphatically, "you wrong me, Madam!—nothing should have detained me from attending your commands, except the positive prohibition I received."

"Prohibition!"

"Yes, my dear Madam: Mrs. St. Vincent ordered me to be informed that you were too much indisposed to admit visitors, but that I should be sent for when my services were wanted; till then, I was given to understand, they could be dispensed with."

"Enough, my good girl," said Mrs. Ross, while a profound sigh accompanied the tear that glistened in her downcast, languid eye: "my suspicions, I find, were just! Alas! when—but," added she, suddenly checking herself, "where the evil is irremediable, complaint proves equally childish and ineffectual."

Mrs. Ross, after a momentary pause, now entered on the topic of their projected journey to the south, and expressed the highest satisfaction at the visible alacrity with which Stella agreed to accompany her. To Mrs. Bertram she poured forth the warmest acknowledgments for her ready acquiescence in a plan the successful accomplishment of which seemed to afford her no small satisfaction, and repeatedly assured her guests that her gratitude and remembrance of their goodness could only terminate with her existence.

"Alas!" thought Stella, "is the great, the opulent Mrs. Ross, she who ought to command

and be obeyed by her numerous train of domestics—is this woman, at whose nod the good things of this world are ready to descend in torrents, necessitated to look for consolation and attendance from the humble and lowly inhabitants of such an abode as ours—from the friendless widow and unacknowledged foundling?—Oh Providence! thy levelling hand is here visible indeed!—that hand which places the poor and needy, but virtuous and contented offspring of the cottage on an enviable equality with the proud and prosperous possessor of thousands, and forces the latter to look down from the summit of earthly grandeur, from the dazzling pomp of adventitious success, on a fellow-creature whose sole wealth possibly consists in an upright heart and a virtuous conduct!”

Such were the secret reflections of our heroine while the sick and dejected Mrs. Ross was conversing with the mistress of the Hermitage; and as they passed in quick succession through her mind, she felt alike the inefficacy of wealth to procure happiness, or the pride of grandeur to banish corroding anguish from the bosom that sighed for the less glaring, but more rational enjoyments of life.

CHAP. XIX.

“Gently scan your brother man,
“Still gentler sister woman;
“Tho’ they may gang a kennin wrang,
“To step aside is human:
“One point must still be greatly dark—
“The moving why they do it;
“And just as lamely can you mark
“How far perhaps they rue it.”

BURNS.

MRS. BERTRAM returned home before dinner; but, at the request of Mrs. Ross, permitted Stella to become her guest for the remainder of the day. It had of late been customary with the lady of the mansion to lie down in the afternoon, in order to recruit her debilitated frame, which the smallest exertion was apt to fatigue: she retired therefore about the usual period allotted for this purpose, and requested our heroine might amuse herself in the interim with a new publication, that would be found on the window-seat in the drawing-room.

The work was well written; but the subject appeared dry and uninteresting: the perusal of very few pages sufficed to satisfy her curiosity, and she threw the volume aside in disgust. The sun shone mildly refulgent through the shrubbery, and exhibited the variegated tints of the flowering plants in the most pleasing point of view. At length some of his glittering beams rested on the little glass casement of a small cottage, picturesquely situated in a well wooded corner of the pleasure-grounds. Stella recollected having formerly visited this romantic spot in company with her young friends, Maria and Emma. It was then inhabited by Mr. Ross’s huntsman and his family. The wife of this man happened to be a particular favourite with all the three, and she now determined to call upon her.

The good woman was alone, and appeared to be highly delighted with this mark of our heroine’s attention. She ushered her into the best apartment—wiped the dust from an old fashioned high backed chair that stood near the chimney, and moving it to the window, entreated her guest to be seated. A small table, covered with a coarse, but clean napkin, was then placed before her, and oaten bread, with the produce of her little dairy, ostentatiously displayed for her acceptance.

It was not in the nature of Stella intentionally to offend any human being; and she forced herself to partake of the articles so hospitably offered, and so profusely recommended by her kind hostess, in spite of the dinner she had so recently partaken of at the Grove.

“Ah, welladay!” said the worthy creature, as she pensively leaned on a corner of the table, and addressed herself in a low restrained voice to her visitor, “times are sadly changed, Miss Stella, since the illness of our good lady! For my part, I wish I were any where but here, and so I continually tell my husband. Poor folks, however, must do as they can: he says we may not be bettered by flitting*; and to be sure the house is beyond what we expect, and the wages far greater than ever we had before. I should not be sorry, however, to see some people who call themselves my superiors a little more attentive to appearances, for ‘handsome is that handsome

* The Scotch term for removing to another place.

does,' says the old proverb."

From the position in which Stella happened to be placed at the window, a distant prospect of the very spot where she had been consigned to the care of St. Vincent by the mischief-loving Adairs, struck her view. Like the attractive nature of the loadstone, this discovery fixed her thoughts instantly on one object, and rendered them inattentive to every other; she therefore heedlessly replied, that it might be so, and that she believed Mrs. Blair was perfectly in the right, without comprehending a single syllable of what the poor woman alluded to.

"Nay, Miss Stella," exclaimed the latter, a little piqued at the evident inattention of her auditor, "I am sure you do more than believe so, otherwise you had never proved so great a favourite with our good lady at the mansion-house.—Alas! alas! how badly have things gone on since her place in the family has been supplied by another! Perhaps they may mend, however, when the remainder of the soldiers leave us. I wonder what kept that Jones behind! if I were the Major—"

"The Major!" interrupted Stella, with a sudden start—"what did you say of the Major?—he is not approaching, I hope?"

"No, no," answered Mrs. Blair, with a significant shake of her head; "there are others who take solitary walks as well as the Major. As for him, he is not only the handsomest, but the best gentleman in the world: I wish I could say half as much of some folks but too nearly connected with him."

The emphatical manner in which these words were pronounced struck Stella: her mental abstraction was now no longer visible; she became all ear, and eagerly requested her entertainer to explain herself.

Mrs. Blair drew her seat closer to our heroine, and after a few preliminary cautions, proceeded to inform her that Mrs. St. Vincent's conduct with Mr. Jones had latterly been much remarked and animadverted upon by the lower class of people; that she was frequently seen at all hours walking with him in the plantations and shrubbery; and what particularly provoked their censure was, the open and daring manner in which she often ventured to notice him under the very eye of her husband, who was universally adored by every human being on the Nabob's estate; while she, on the contrary, seemed an object of general dislike and secret reprobation.—"The covered walk, yonder by the side of the river, is a favourite haunt of the Major's; he is frequently seen there for an hour at a time: and, would you believe it, Miss?" continued the narrator, with an additional portion of energy, "his strange, unaccountable lady thinks nothing of meeting him in that out-of-the-way place with only the vile, conceited fellow Jones in her company; who, however, shews one sign of grace at least, for he appears always much graver than Miss Ross, and never joins in the loud laughs she sets up in her husband's hearing: but we need not be surprised at any thing after the treatment she is known to give her good mother."

"But how does Major St. Vincent bear this behaviour of his lady?—does he take no notice of Mr. Jones's share in it?"

"Why, Miss Stella, to tell you a secret, it is thought the Major cares very little about her; and, in regard to Jones, he is said to consider him in too contemptible a light to apprehend any serious liking on the part of his wife for such a puppy: at least, so the Major's gentleman told my husband. But, dear Miss, for the love of God, do not repeat a single syllable of what I have said, otherwise we may perhaps be brought into some quandary about them! young Madam would stop at nothing to be revenged on us in that case; and poor folks, you know, cannot always command a house to put their head in, if turned into the open air at a moment's warning."

Stella assured her talkative companion that she had nothing to apprehend on that account;

and promising to repeat her visit at some future opportunity, soon after quitted the cottage. Her steps, however, instead of carrying her to the mansion-house, insensibly conveyed her to the “favourite haunt of the Major,” where, uninterrupted and alone, she pursued the train of reflections produced by Mrs. Blair’s recent intelligence.

In regard to the imputed guilt of which Mrs. St. Vincent seemed pretty clearly suspected, the upright heart of our heroine entertained a very different opinion from that adopted by the public: that she appeared imprudent was undeniable; but, badly as Stella thought of her in general, she could not admit the possibility of real error, when the husband she possessed was put in competition with the despicable insignificant substitute assigned him; nor did she imagine Mrs. St. Vincent’s principles so corrupt, or her haughty disposition yet so humbled, as to carry her to so criminal an excess of unjustifiable passion. The adduced instances of supposed boldness and depravity brought in accusation against her by Mrs. Blair, seemed, in the more candid judgment of our gentle heroine, to imply nothing farther than a wish to rekindle his dormant tenderness, (if for her he had ever experienced a sensation of that description) by calling those particles of jealousy which are inherent in our nature from their present state of apathy into action, and thereby ascertaining the positive extent of her actual influence over his mind, in the degree of resentment her apparent preference of another might produce: indeed, her mode of proceeding before the Major could scarcely admit of a different construction; unless she had irretrievably reached the last stage of infamy, and become hardened, in the most unexampled manner, at the very commencement of vice; a circumstance not commonly usual even in characters where the bias to profligacy had long reigned predominant before practice took place of theory, and gave a loose to the secret inclinations of the unfortunate and erring mortal over whom its degrading sway had unhappily proved too fatally successful. That Mrs. St. Vincent, however, could not yet have attained this climax of female misconduct seemed fully ascertained by the behaviour of her husband, who, though the nature of his feelings on her account rendered him perfectly indifferent to her proceedings in the common and trifling occurrences of a modern woman of fashion’s transactions, would by no means have remained a passive or inactive spectator of those in which his own honour and the respect due to himself were seriously implicated.

But though Stella called to her aid all these auxiliary reflections in favour of Mrs. St. Vincent’s innocence, and was willing to imagine the foregoing motives might have influenced her secret inclinations in the adoption of such measures, she could not help condemning the means by which they were to be effected. “To do evil that good may arise from it,” was rather a dangerous experiment, and it was to be feared the mind that could stoop to make it, might afterwards be led by imperceptible gradations to the commission of the very deed, from the contemplation of which, at an earlier period, she would have turned with every sensation of abhorrence and disgust.

At any rate, however, the peace of Mrs. Ross and the happiness of her son-in-law seemed for ever fled: of this melancholy truth the former had given many indications in the course of the day; and, in regard to the latter, suspicion had long taken the form of certainty in the opinion of the public. The fetters that necessity sometimes binds us with in the ordinary and unavoidable situations which commonly connect us with each other through life, are at best of a temporary construction, and usually cease with the casual circumstance that created them; but from those forged on the altar of matrimony, divorce or death can alone set us free: the first of which was remedy only to be resorted to in the last emergency, and always stamped its objects with notoriety; the second—Stella shuddered at the thought of uniting the image of St. Vincent in the

same idea that introduced an allusion to our final dissolution, and hastened to banish the tormenting reflections that spontaneously succeeded it, by endeavouring to turn them from their present course to subject of a less interesting description.

CHAP. XX.

“Pleasure never comes sincere to man,
“But lent by Heaven upon hard usury:
“And while Jove holds us out the bowl of joy,
“Ere it can reach our lips, its dash’d with gall
“By some left-handed God.”

DRYDEN and LEE.

AT an angle of the walk stood a small pavilion, romantically situated on a rock that projected over the river. It consisted of two rooms, one above the other, with light closets attached to each. The lower apartment served the double purpose of a bathing-room (for the water was conveyed thither by pipes, and then received into a marble reservoir, sufficiently large for the accommodation of any person who wished to benefit by such an indulgence,) and a green-house in miniature; a profusion of tall and very fine exotics being scientifically arranged round its walls, and in many places bending their variegated forms over the sides of the bathing place, so as to give it more the appearance of a shady arbour than the interior of a stone building. The upper room was finished with much taste: it contained a book-case and several musical instruments, and commanded one or two confined views through the surrounding plantations. Stella recollected that in the absence of the heads of the family, her beloved governess had frequently dispensed her instructive precepts in this favourite retirement to her young and attentive pupils. She felt a propelling inclination once more to revisit it, and ascending the steps, soon entered the apartment.

The view from a small Gothic window opposite the door, was nearly the same with that which had fascinated her eye at the cottage: it rested on the well-known side of the park where she had more than once encountered the man whose image was but too seldom absent from her thoughts; and had this additional advantage from its lofty situation, that the prospect reached even to the grotto at the Hermitage, which formed a picturesque and beautiful termination to the lengthened scene thus judiciously carried though every intervening impediment.

On the window-seat lay a book, which on examination proved to be Hammond’s Love Elegies. Stella casually opened it at the lines beginning—

“Oh say, thou dear possessor of my breast!”

and a piece of paper, bearing the name of Major St. Vincent, dropped upon the floor. This incident ascertained the last peruser of the volume; and Stella, in trembling emotion, continued to regard it with an additional degree of interest, unconscious of the fatal indulgence to which she was thus weakly giving way.

The poetical merit of the beautiful verses which had evidently occupied his recent attention, seemed to increase every time she threw her eyes upon them, and reflected in whose possession they had been.—“Perhaps,” thought Stella, “my image was before his mental vision when he read this charming poem!—Ah, yes!” continued she, raising her eyes to the park and more distant grotto as she spoke, “the objects that present themselves from this window convince me I am not mistaken in such a supposition: the well-known scene could not have been contemplated without that combination of ideas which I ever experience on all similar

occasions!—But what have we here?” she added, perceiving a second piece of half-folded paper lying near her: “Oh, it is another marker that has fallen from this precious book, I dare say! it shall again be replaced in some of the pages, however—Heavens! what do I see?—my own name!—How in the world came it here?”

Astonishment took possession of every faculty at a circumstance so totally unexpected. Curiosity, however, speedily whispered that so strange a discovery authorized a farther and more minute investigation of the matter: Stella instantly obeyed the impulsive sensation of the moment, and, without permitting herself time for longer reflection, proceeded to examine the mysterious paper.

It appeared to be the remnant of a letter from Captain Montague, whose half-torn, mutilated signature was with difficulty made out: the superscription, however, happened to be totally wanting; but the contents plainly shewed it could only have been addressed to Major St. Vincent; and the justice of this supposition soon became apparent on a farther perusal.

It is here necessary to observe that Louisa St. Vincent had been summoned from Rossgrove almost immediately after the departure of that division of the troops which was ordered to Dumfries. The cause of her sudden and unexpected return to England originated in the declining health of Mr. St. Vincent, whose former complaints had again resumed their late threatening aspect; chiefly brought on, it was imagined, by the persevering misconduct of his eldest son, and an accidental discovery of the domestic unhappiness he himself had proved the principal instrument of entailing on the Major. He was not, however, apprehended to be in any immediate danger; but Louisa had always been his favourite attendant on such occasions: and the marriage of one of her sisters, which took place about this time, rendered her presence doubly necessary to their mother.

In the abovementioned fragment frequent allusions were made to some previous subject of conversation, which, it appeared, had been recently discussed between her and Montague, as she passed through Dumfries in her way to the south. What the precise description of the *tête-à-tête* was, Stella could not possibly divine, for the paper happened to be much torn in that particular quarter; but from the paragraph that followed, it seemed to intimate at something about the unhappy situation and prospects of her brother, which (ignorant of Mrs. St. Vincent’s jealous suspicions of our heroine) Louisa ascribed to the natural bad temper of his wife; and she had expressed great anxiety to learn his real sentiments respecting her conduct; a circumstance which, this affectionate sister complained, was nevertheless studiously concealed from her knowledge, though she had reason to believe some secret sorrow preyed upon his mind, in spite of the evasive and even ludicrous style in which he treated her often repeated apprehensions when topics of this kind were casually introduced between them.

The subsequent observations made by Captain Montague on the source of Louisa’s solicitude for the abovementioned explanation, with the dark hints and reiterated, but wholesome advice which followed them, seemed to glance at the probable consequences of an unfortunate attachment to some other woman than his wife, in no very equivocal terms. The cheeks of our heroine glowed at the internal conviction that this woman could only be herself; and she felt deeply mortified on reflecting what the private sentiments of the writer must necessarily prove of her principles, under the degrading supposition that she was accessory to, or acquainted with, the Major’s imprudent predilection in her favour. A thousand instances immediately occurred to her mind in which Captain Montague appeared to have observed her motions with no common degree of interest whenever his friend became occasionally the subject of discourse, or was even named before her. The pang that shot through her heart on the intrusion of all such recollections

was acute and painful in the extreme; and bitter self-reproach silently whispered the additional mortification, that what she now suffered was justly merited for the blamable gratification secretly experienced on a fresh conviction of his attachment not many minutes prior to the humiliating sensations which at present oppressed her wounded spirit.

One discovery, nevertheless, afforded some prospect of indemnification for the past, and proved the source of considerable satisfaction in the midst of many sorrows. To the great disappointment of our heroine, the first visit of Miss St. Vincent at the Hermitage had never been repeated. For this singular circumstance no explanatory or adequate reason had hitherto transpired, though the whole tenor of that young lady's conduct at the time gave cause to expect a very different mode of proceeding. One short sentence in this letter now dispelled the late existing mystery: but, similar to the paragraph already quoted, all connexion with what preceded it was broken off by another unfortunate chasm in the disjointed intelligence. What remained, however, proved sufficient for the purpose of removing the veil of obscurity which had long hung over her conjectures on the subject; for it hinted that Mrs. St. Vincent was, in fact, the groundwork of the whole, by prohibiting all farther intercourse with the inhabitants of the Hermitage, as people to whose society she entertained secret, but insuperable objections: and it appeared that Louisa, solicitous to keep her capricious sister in good-humour, if such an herculean undertaking could possibly be effected, had, in consequence of this intimation, instantly sacrificed her own inclinations as a peace offering to fraternal tranquillity.

The discovery of this circumstance was extremely grateful to the feelings of poor Stella, who had frequently deplored the short-lived nature of Louisa's friendly professions, and apprehended the total neglect she experienced from that quarter might have proceeded from a knowledge of the Major's ill-judged sentiments in her favour. Instead of blaming Louisa for instability and forgetfulness, she now fully exculpated her from every charge of the kind, and felt her returning admiration of her conduct augment in proportion to the supposed injury she had formerly sustained by the bad opinion appearances had given rise to. The meditations of our young moralist, however, were soon interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps; and fearful (should the paper be hereafter perceived) that her knowledge of its contents would end in something more than suspicion, Stella in great perturbation thrust the tell-tale page into her bosom, and waited for what was to follow in anxious expectation.

The agitation of her mind quickly subsided on the appearance of a servant, who informed her that his mistress had left her chamber, and requested to see her again.

Stella cast a longing, lingering look on the volume of poems, which, at this moment, seemed the most desirable of human possessions.—“I wish to give it a farther perusal,” said she, mentally, “and can return it in a day or two.”

The latter part of the sentence removed every remaining degree of hesitation, and the Love Elegies were speedily deposited in her pocket.

CHAP. XXI.

“Fool, do not boast!
“Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind
“With all thy pow’r, altho’ this corp’real rind
“Thou hast immanacled, while Heav’n sees good.”
MILTON.

LET not the starched prude, or the furious censurer, too severely anathematize our poor little heroine for thus yielding to the bias of the moment, and the temptation of opportunity; happy might all of the above description be considered, if the frailties of human nature, so circumstanced, proved with them equally venial and trifling. It has often been observed that those most violently bent on the condemnation of others, are generally the first to err themselves—I say generally, for far be it from me to affirm there are no particular exceptions in the case, and that interest, a sensation of fellow-feeling, or some other secret cause of equal potency, does not now and then supply the place of principle, and restrain us from being too severe in a self-conceited virtue: no, I am experimentally convinced to the contrary; for it has more than once been my lot to see the innocent condemned on the most fallacious appearances, and the guilty supported, when living proofs of their criminality were actually present. There was this material difference in the business, however—poverty damned the one, riches purified the other: so true is the old adage, that “some people may sooner steal a horse, than others look over the wall.”

The fashionable modes of noticing vice, and the various criterion by which it is established, are numerous; not indeed according to the gradations of its magnitude, but the weight of the erring mortal’s golden capabilities in the art of what is vulgarly styled *hush-money*. In this necessary article Stella was rather deficient; and the pains and penalties incident to a defalcation in the *one thing needful* would certainly have produced an immediate effect, had not chance stood her friend, by concealing the extent of her imprudence from the observation of the servant.

“The contents of that strange letter have disturbed and agitated me,” whispered Stella to herself, as she proceeded to the mansion-house; “but Hammond’s beautiful verses will restore my mind to its usual state of tranquillity.—‘Misjudging girl!’ answered sober-thinking Prudence; ‘will not the very circumstances connected with their perusal, produce a contrary effect?’

Stella dreamed not of that; her heart was free from the most distant idea of intentional error, and she suspected not that censure could attach to a conduct equally innocent in fact as, she rashly concluded, it was in appearance: but “*l’innocence n’est pas toujours une sûreté, parce que la malice va à son but par des artifices qu’un coeur droit ne peut imaginer, contre lesquels, par conséquent, il lui est impossible de se garder.*”

As the evening advanced, Stella became proportionably solicitous to depart, lest procrastination should again render her the victim of accident, and the return of the visiting party interfere with her motions. But something was still to settle relative to the projected journey; new arrangements perpetually occurred as to the mode of their route: and it was not till a late hour that she found herself able to accomplish her retreat. On quitting the room, Mrs. Ross made her a handsome pecuniary present, for the purpose of procuring those fashionable articles of dress which the occasion might render necessary. This Stella would gladly have declined; for her

maternal friend at the Hermitage generously supplied every want of the kind in a suitable and genteel manner: Mrs. Ross would accept of no refusal, however; and she was therefore obliged at last to acquiesce.

The evening, though fast drawing to a close, was not yet dark, and Stella could not resist the inclination she felt to take another peep into the volume purloined from the window-seat of the pavilion. The private and solitary path through the shrubbery seemed to afford a favourable opportunity for this coveted indulgence, whither withdrawing, she drew it from her pocket accordingly.

Entirely engrossed by the interesting nature of her subject, our heroine insensibly wandered from the right path; and entering another, without paying the least attention to her steps, or even conceiving the possibility of a mistake, slowly moved on in a direction very different from that she imagined herself pursuing.

The chief anxiety experienced by Stella during the latter part of her visit at the Grove, was concentrated in her wish to get clear of the house unnoticed by those she most dreaded to encounter: this object had been successfully effected, and her mind, of course, became more tranquillized; for she flattered herself there could be little remaining chance of any untoward accident taking place in a quarter of the pleasure-grounds almost exclusively appropriated to the convenience of the domestics, and scarcely ever resorted to by any of their superiors. All this was very true; and nothing but a small degree of observation on her own side was wanting to realize the idea she entertained of her probable security on the occasion.

Hammond's beautiful verses, and he to whom Hammond's beautiful verses most probably belonged, were each of them, however, too predominant in her mind to admit of any attention to the trifling circumstances of right or wrong: the *dulce* more than the *utile* occupied every thought; and time and space appeared considerations entirely estranged from the mind of our heroine, though once in her estimation of great importance.

From this state of unconscious wandering and mental delirium, the rattling sound of carriage wheels suddenly roused her. Stella raised her eyes from the favourite volume, and, with inconceivable astonishment, perceived the dreaded absentees turning an angle of the public road, and almost at her elbow. With increased surprise, and in extreme perturbation, she cast a hasty glance round, in order to discover the cause of an encounter so perfectly incomprehensible and unexpected, and could scarcely credit the evidence of her senses when she found herself on the verge of the north-west side of the plantations, and close to the high road that led through the park.

Confounded and thunderstruck by the obvious mistake thus committed, and the disagreeable predicament in which it placed her, the mischief-making volume dropped from her fingers; and unable to proceed or retreat, she stood immoveably fixed to the spot.

The phaeton in which Mr. Jones was driving Mrs. St. Vincent, abruptly stopped when it reached Stella, and both seemed apparently much entertained by her visible embarrassment and distress.

"Your servant, Miss Bertram," cried the Lieutenant, bowing with a ludicrous air of affected respect, as he checked the horses: "you seem immersed in the deepest abyss of philosophical contemplation; we shall shortly have a learned publication on the beauties of Nature, I presume."

"Or, perhaps, Miss Bertram may favour us with a dissertation on highway exhibitions, and entitle it 'The critical Minute, or a new Mode to attract Notice, *en passant*,'" said his companion, with her usual sarcastic sneer.

“Or suppose the lady tried her hand on the ‘human face divine’ under a light-horseman’s helmet?” asked the Lieutenant, with a significant wink at his unfeeling fellow-traveller.

“And the light-horseman, in return, places her on the pedestal of Niobe’s statue, as the most picturesque figure of the two,” retorted Mrs. St. Vincent, while the military wit laughed immoderately at what he styled the *à-propos* conceit of this bright idea. “But alas! alas! man delights not her, nor woman neither?” resumed this female tormentor, mimicking the vacant look and still motionless attitude of our poor disconcerted heroine.

“Oh, trust me for that!” exclaimed the other, with quickness; “our modern Pylades and Orestes understand the Promethean art, and will soon bring her to sing

‘How happy could I be with either! &c.’

Yes, faith! they are practitioners of some standing, and allowed by the corps to be tolerable adapts in these matters—egad, I know them!”

A conscious smile, that indicated more than met the eye, and a look, intended to be particularly sagacious, accompanied these very clever remarks.

“Wretch!” cried Mrs. St. Vincent, gaily tapping him on the shoulder with her parasol as she spoke, “you will really put the modest Miss Bertram to the blush, and spoil my projected representative of Niobe, if you proceed at this rate any longer!”

The Lieutenant, in reply, whispered something slyly in her ear; to which no answer was given; but the heightened colour of his amiable coadjutor deepened at the communication, and her eyes sparkled with an additional degree of malevolence as they fiercely darted over the trembling form of her still motionless victim. Any further vent to her feelings was at this period, however, denied; for another carriage rapidly approached, from whence (apprehensive no doubt that something was the matter with the phaeton, on perceiving it stationary,) a voice hastily demanded to know what had happened. Of this enquiry no notice whatever was taken; all that marked its being heard was a sudden motion of the head, and a glance cast towards the speaker. The Lieutenant then smacked his whip, and the impatient horses abruptly set off at a gallop.

The post-coach followed the phaeton, and speedily passed Stella. In it was the Nabob, Mrs. Arabin (who still remained behind her husband at Ross Grove), another lady, and Captain Harcourt.

Mr. Ross regarded our heroine with a stern and inquisitive air; Mrs. Arabin’s countenance implied a strong degree of surprise, but she bowed with apparent affability; and the remainder of the party stared with the most visible symptoms of curiosity and astonishment.

The expression of displeasure that marked the features of the first, and the conciliatory smile of the second, affected her infinitely more than all the (to her) incomprehensible jargon of her late tormentors, whose mean and unmerited insults were not half so wounding to her gentle spirit, as the galling conviction that she had drawn them upon herself by her own imprudence and inattention. She gazed after the carriage for a moment, and then pulling her bonnet further over her face, burst into a flood of tears.

CHAP. XXII.

“Be not over exquisite
“To cast the fashion of uncertain evils:
“For grant they be so, while they rest unknown,
“What need a man forestal his date of grief,
“And run to meet what he would most avoid?”

MILTON.

BEFORE the first violence of bitter self-reproach had subsided, two horsemen rode up, and stopped within a few yards of the weeping, unhappy girl, whose mind was then too much absorbed in the melancholy nature of her own reflections to observe what was passing around her.

The travellers seemed alternately occupied in speaking to each other and watching her motions. At last one of them suddenly dismounted, and springing forward, caught hold of her hands, which he grasped in his.

Stella, her eyes drowned in tears, and unable to speak, started involuntarily aside, and, with her face still concealed in her bonnet, endeavoured, though ineffectually, to disengage herself from his hold; till the welcome, but unexpected voice of Captain Montague reached her ear, and banished every remaining apprehension.

A fresh flood of tears now burst again from her overcharged heart, in which shame, surprise, and pleasure were mingled in equal proportions, while a thousand enquires rapidly succeeded each other respecting the cause of his speedy reappearance in this part of the country.

This was easily accounted for:—regimental business with the Major had called him back to Galloway; were his visit, he said, might probably be repeated before the final departure of the troops from Scotland.

The eye of Montague at this moment was cast upon her handkerchief, which, wet with tears, had dropped from her hand on his first accosting her. Near it lay the ill-starred volume of poems. He lifted them up together, and presented both to our heroine just as the Major rode up to whisper a few words, *en passant*, to his friend. St. Vincent appeared spell-bound for a moment; then bowing low to Stella, clapped spurs to his charger, and instantly followed the carriages.

“Oh God! Oh God!” exclaimed Stella, emphatically, “for what further humiliations am I reserved?”

The supporting arm of Montague was never more seasonably offered: but she closed her eyes on a second tender of the book, and repulsing it with her half-extended hand, protested she would never touch it more.

Ignorant of her motives for this rejection, Montague conceived there must certainly be something of importance concealed in the mysterious leaves of the little volume, the outer covering of which was remarkably elegant: he began, therefore, to open it, for the purpose of elucidating this matter, when our heroine recollecting the name on the title page, and the certain conviction of Montague’s former suspicions, which would unavoidably follow such a discovery, abruptly snatched it from his hand, and hurried it into her pocket.

Montague recoiled a few paces, and gazed at her averted, glowing cheek in the utmost astonishment. A momentary silence ensued, during which either a sudden recollection of the book, or a suspicion of the truth, darted through his mind; whichever proved the case, no further

questions on the subject were asked; and the subsequent conversation turned immediately on the situation of Maria and his little infant.

Stella was yet too much agitated and disconcerted to carry on a connected conversation: exertion in the present state of affairs was, nevertheless, too requisite not to be attempted; she therefore endeavoured to do her best, and succeeded tolerably in the task thus self-imposed on her fortitude.

Montague was not to return to Dumfries before Thursday morning; this was Tuesday night: and after many solicitations and much entreaty, she was at length prevailed upon to promise him a sight of his poor little daughter on the succeeding evening. At a convenient distance from the Hermitage he retired, and Stella finished her eventful walk alone.

“What ails you, Stella?” cried Mrs. Bertram, on her entrance: “upon my word these solitary walks shall no longer be permitted; you constantly return from them indisposed of late.”

Stella could have fully accounted for her present agitated appearance, had she chose to have made known her recent adventures: a strong sensation of repugnance, which she found utterly impossible to conquer, however, retrained her from making the communication, and she merely answered—

“I have seen Captain Montague, Madam.”

“Captain Montague, child!—how—where is he?—not here, I hope?”

Stella replied in the negative, and related some circumstances of the foregoing scene.

“You did wrong, my love, to promise him a sight of the infant,” said Mrs. Bertram, mildly; “disagreeable consequences may possibly ensue from the ill-judged indulgence.”

“I am sorry, my dear mother, you disapprove of it: but pardon me for saying I do not perceive what evil consequences can be produced by such an event.”

“Young people, Stella, seldom think about consequences till too late to prevent the mischief they occasion.”

“I can only repeat, Madam, that I am sorry for my error, and shall endeavour to repair it by prevailing on the Captain to refrain from exacting the accomplishment of my promise.”

“By no means, my dear girl; your present promise shall be held sacred: only in future be more cautious, and enter into no engagement whatever without bestowing a little previous reflection on the propriety of the measure you are requested to adopt.”

Stella avowed her determination to abide by this salutary advice, and protested it should henceforth be held in remembrance as a guide and preserver from similar errors.

The subjects which succeeded Mrs. Bertram’s departure from the Grove, those at least that passed between Mrs. Ross and her young visitor, were next discussed; and Stella was gratified to find that every part of her conduct, in this instance, met with the entire approbation of her maternal monitor.

Maria, it seems, had frequently enquired after her during the long period of her absence; Mrs. Bertram therefore desired her *protégée* to see the fair invalid before they retired for the night. With this request, under resent circumstances, she would gladly have dispensed; but the will of her benefactress was omnipotent; and she instantly complied with it, in spite of the secret reluctance experienced thereto.

The spirits of poor Maria appeared unusually low and depressed; those of our heroine were not in a much better state. The former ventured to mention her child, which was the first time it had been named before Stella, and melting into tears, deplored her hard fate in being so seldom permitted to water its little face with the repentant drops of maternal anguish.

“Oh Stella!” cried she, with clasped hands and a look of unutterable woe, “pity me,

Stella, and cast me not from you with indignant contempt, when I acknowledge that the author of all her misery is still dear to the devoted Maria!—dear as the ruddy drops that visit this sad heart—a heart bursting with concealment, but which dare not attempt to disburden its sorrows before the good and venerable friend who deigns to shelter the head of the penitent from the load of public infamy one fatal, one incautious moment has suspended over it! Oh Stella! to be virtuous and to be happy are too surely synonymous terms!—Remember, she who speaks from sad experience tells you so; and may her sufferings prove a beacon to preserve you from a similar destiny!”

Miss Campbell’s voice here became nearly inarticulate; and covering her face, she wept aloud.

Stella was deeply affected; she felt this scene more acutely from the recollection of her previous interview with Montague: but while she sympathized sincerely with the unhappy mourner, a secret pang for herself sometimes shot across her bosom, and added considerably to the interest taken in the sorrows of another.

“Alas!” thought our heroine, “if virtue and happiness are, as Maria says, synonymous terms, why then is innocence so frequently oppressed, and vice, on the contrary, triumphant? I am happily a stranger to the feelings of this poor unfortunate girl, and even free in idea from guilt of any description: ought I not, then, to be happy according to her doctrine?—and am I so?—Ah, no, no, no! Comparatively so, she should have said—and in that case I might have ventured to agree with her; for certainly, though felicity belongs to neither of us, my sensations must be far more enviable than hers, who has to sustain the sting of self-reproach for actual error, along with the disappointment of her dearest hopes, and the apprehended horrors of public and, what is yet worse, merited contempt.”

The short silence that each seemed disposed to observe in the present disposition of their mind, was first broken by Maria.

“Oh Miss Bertram!” said she, in a low, mournful accent, “you are good; virtuous, and gentle: I see you enter into my sufferings, and commiserate an unhappy fellow-creature, though fallen—even so fallen as I am! Pardon the distress I occasion you, and kindly make allowances for the double portion of it which wrings this nearly exhausted heart—yes, a double portion of misery is too surely mine! I love, to distraction love, a man who cruelly disclaims all future knowledge of me, and, though my earthy prospects are for ever clouded through my fatal acquaintance with him, refuses to grant me the poor indulgence of hearing my last sentence from his own lips! My child, too—alas! wretched little being! destined to an ignominious lot in life, and torn from the maternal bosom, that bosom alone interested for thy welfare through the wide circle of this extensive globe—thee, too, my hapless child, I am scarcely permitted to see! Privileges enjoyed by the human race in general, even by the very brute creation, are prohibited to me: in vain I languish to clasp her unconscious form in my arms, or die to allay the agonizing solicitude of a mother’s fears, by once more beholding the innocent proof of an erroneous and ill-placed, but unconquerable tenderness! This blessing, hitherto bestowed with a scanty and reluctant hand, is henceforth to be totally withheld, from the supposition that it acts as a strengthener of that attachment I must ever retain for her dear, but unfeeling father. Miss Bertram, say, will you plead for me?—will you try to prevail with our worthy and benevolent friend to withdraw this harsh and overwhelming sentence? If any one possesses that power it is you: and surely, surely my future prospects are liable to sufficient privations in other respects, without this heart-rendering addition to the number! say, then, dear Stella, tell me I shall yet be permitted to see my ill-starred infant!”

“Alas!” replied Stella, with sensations of the utmost regret, “I dare not give hopes which may, in the end, prove illusive, and by that means finally increase the evil they were intended to remedy! my dear mother will not, I much fear, be influenced by me on this subject.”

“You previously knew then of her determination,” cried Miss Campbell, with quickness, “and have kindly endeavoured to soften her heart in my favour?—God in heaven for ever bless you, my good and generous Miss Bertram, and grant you may never stand in need of an intercessor on such an occasion!”

“No,” answered Stella, “I must not assume a merit to which I have no just claim—I was ignorant of the foregoing circumstance till you mentioned it. I pity, I regret, I sympathized in the anguish it causes; but indeed, by dear Miss Campbell, this is all I can do for you.”

Maria’s tears flowed afresh at this intimation, and a silence again ensued. Before it received any interruption, Mrs. Bertram joined them; and reminding Stella of the late hour and long visit she had paid the weeping Maria, they wished her a good night, and retired.

CHAP. XXIII.

“Oh, what a pain to think, when every thought,
“Perplexing thought, in intricacies runs,
“And Fancy knits th’ inextricable toil
“In which herself is taken!”

YOUNG.

MRS. BERTRAM perceived that Stella was apparently more affected than usual, and she now enquired the cause of it.

“I have no concealments from you, my dear mother,” Stella would have said, as the words rose spontaneously to her lips; but she remembered St. Vincent, and merely confined her communication to the affairs of others, by relating what had passed in the course of the foregoing conversation.

“I applaud your prudence, my love,” said Mrs. Bertram, when our heroine ceased speaking. “Few are those who deserve advice, because few are those who profit by it: you have shewn you belong not to this class of incurables; and I rejoice to find my opinion of you invariably well founded. You cannot imagine, my dear child, how much your conduct gratifies and pleases me on every trying emergency!”

The ingenuous nature of poor Stella revolted at the idea of applause, in her opinion, so unmerited, and she felt considerably distressed by it. The poet says—

“Praise undeserv’d, is flatt’ry in disguise.”

Such, however, she well knew was by no means the case in the present instance; and the accusing angel seemed to stand before her “mind’s eye,” arrayed in more than his usual terrors. With her protectress, Stella immediately determined to be explicit; but before the mode of communication could be mentally arranged, Mrs. Bertram resumed her discourse: and time being thus allowed for cooler reflection, our heroine’s former repugnance to entering upon the painful topic, recurred with its usual force; and the late intended confession was again withheld from the knowledge of her maternal friend.

Without remarking the palpitating heart or glowing cheek of her agitated *protégée*, the good lady proceeded to explain her motives for adopting a measure that, to appearance, was certainly, as Maria had styled it, a harsh one. Caustics, however, are sometimes necessary to be applied when milder remedies prove ineffectual; and such was the state of the matter at present.

Mrs. Bertram had early observed that Maria Campbell’s disposition was yielding as wax, and apt, not only to receive, but retain, every favourite impression, however inimical to her character or peace. The child happened to prove extremely like its father; and the ecstatic delight she took in tracing this cherished resemblance considerably augmented the force of that partiality, the secret indulgence of which was continually encouraged as the first and dearest object of her existence.

For her future, as well as present, tranquillity of mind, her worthy hostess entertained many just and alarming apprehensions; and perceiving the susceptibilities of her nature rather increased by gentle measures than otherwise, she reluctantly resorted to those of a more coercive nature, in order to try if it were practicable to rouse some little degree of magnanimity, or even

common fortitude, as an occasional support under the unavoidable evils generally attendant on the lot which had befallen her.

As the first and most necessary step for this purpose, the child was prohibited from appearing so frequently, as usual, at the Hermitage.

In the reasons assigned for the adoption of this new mode of proceeding, it was impossible not to acknowledge the justness, propriety, and wisdom of such a regulation. Stella saw and felt all this, but without being able to sanction the whole with her undivided approbation; for she likewise experienced the pangs of disappointed passion and hopeless despair, and though free from the actual commission of error, or the apprehended opprobrium that follows any dereliction from moral rectitude, her feelings secretly sympathized with the unfortunate Maria, and she could not help thinking that the evils under which she previously groaned, were indeed sufficiently overwhelming and severe to require every alleviation and indulgence in the power of those around her to bestow.

These sentiments, however, our heroine wisely chose to keep to herself: and at a very late hour she retired to her own little apartment, where, harassed, weary, and miserable, she sunk upon the first chair that offered. The soothing aid of balmy sleep seemed, nevertheless, to fly her heavy eye-lids; though the night wasted fast, and a solemn stillness reigned in every quarter, Stella felt not the smallest inclination for repose. Alone, and at liberty to indulge the conflicting emotions of her heart, she now gave a loose to the luxury of unrestrained anguish, which burst forth with additional violence in proportion to the time and difficulty with which it had been suppressed. Thought, that busy active principle which retraces the past, and anticipates the future, held its despotic sway over her mind, and continued to banish every idea of present rest, while the incidents of this eventful day perpetually recurred, and filled her bosom with a thousand painful reflections on their probable consequences.

Amongst the quick succession of these self-created tormentors, Hammond's Love Elegies were not forgotten, nor appeared the least conspicuous of the number. Slowly, and with a trembling hand, Stella drew them from her pocket, and after gazing upon the volume for some time with a melancholy mien, threw it aside with a new, but momentary sensation of anger, to which the sight of it apparently gave birth. It seemed to be regarded as the evil Genius of the day, and the source from whence all her subsequent vexations flowed to it she owed the reproaches of her own mind, which incessantly condemned the culpable weakness, the imbecile wish that had instigated her to purloin it from the pavilion. One wrong step frequently leads to another, and so on till the climax of error is gradually accomplished by imperceptible degree. This sad truth was fully ascertained by experience: for had the inclination to examine the contents of this book been properly checked on the first discovery of its owner, the possession of it would not have been afterwards coveted, nor would it in the end have been taken from its place; of course, no deviation from the road to the Hermitage would probably have happened, and the bitter humiliation that succeeded would have been spared her.

For the childish, yet malignant insults of Mrs. St. Vincent and her empty companion, no sensation, but that of contemptuous pity, remained; and she wondered how either of them could ever have produced a single moment's uneasiness, more especially as the purport of their meaning was totally incomprehensible and unknown, though its aim evidently appeared that of mortification. The stern glance of the Nabob rather made a deeper impression; because she had not accustomed herself to consider him in the same point of view with the two former. But, distressing as the whole occurrence certainly proved at the time, their power to wound her feelings seemed, at this period, trifling, when put in competition with the circumstances of the

succeeding interview; and her apprehensions lest the fatal volume should be equally recognised by the two friends, whose looks and manner, she sometimes fancied, implied this idea, was but too well founded.

“The smallest infringement on propriety is generally productive of the most unpleasant effects; so my kind mistress my dear mother, has frequently told me.” thought Stella: “and after what I now suffer, can the justice of the remark be doubted?—An, no, no! I feel it cannot! May my first error, however, prove the last! With the example of poor Maria Campbell before my eyes, I should be doubly inexcusable were I to fail in the respect due to my own character, by a repetition of the like weakness—a weakness that must even degrade me below the level of her I now commiserate, in as much as the education and morals of the one have been infinitely more attended to than the other. A married man, too! Oh good Heaven, preserve my senses!”

She shuddered at the succession of images this recollection embodied, and covering her face with both hands, sunk back in the chair, overwhelmed with anguish.

In this manner, sleepless and unhappy, passed the lingering hours away, till the early beams of the morning darting through her little casement, announced the rapid approach of day. She then fell into an interrupted kind of slumber, from which little or no benefit could be expected; for during its continuance every recent object of waking distress haunted her in dreams, and brought in its train a fresh accumulation of terror. Amidst these visionary starts of a perturbed imagination, Fancy, on forward wing, placed her in the grotto with Montague, and his infant daughter in her arms: she saw him fold it to his bosom, imprint a kiss on its little forehead, and, as he returned it to her care, felt one of her own hands suddenly raised to his lips with the warm pressure of silent, but heartfelt gratitude. At that interesting moment an enormous snake seemed to issue from the nearest plantation, and writhing itself round an obelisk in the pleasure-grounds of Rossgrove, fixed a fiery and threatening look on its terrified observers, who attended its motions in anxious expectation of what was to ensue. At length the monster seemed to be collecting all its force, and abruptly bounding through the air, directed its course to the grotto; where Stella, in imagination, already conceived herself its victim, when Montague springing forward, seized it by the throat and after a conflict of some minutes, threw it with violence from the landing place: in the following instance it reared a mortified, though still furious aspect, and hissing at our terrified heroine in a manner that made her blood almost curdle in her veins, speedily glided from view amidst the underwood bordering on the path that led to the Grove.

Stella, thus relieved from imagined destruction, immediately felt her late torpid senses return: she grasped the hand of her deliverer in token of acknowledgment, and attempted to express her feelings by words: the power of articulation, however, was apparently denied. A repetition of the tremendous hissing sound which had recently appalled her, again vibrated in her ears: she looked hastily up—the same terrific monster appeared, writhing itself as before round the obelisk: but it was not now alone; the helpless devoted daughter of her late protector lay entwined in its scaly folds, and seemed doomed to instant destruction.

What the apprehensions of Stella could not effect, this dreadful sight accomplished. As an excruciating shriek seemed to burst from the little wretch, her agony became extreme; it broke the fetters of sleep, and quickly relieved her from the influence of those illusive horrors, which, though generated amidst the baseless fabrics of a dream, almost shook the mental faculties to distraction. She started up in a state of utmost agitation, cast a timid, inquisitive glance round the room, as if fearful of finding the visionary cause of her alarm realized; when having fully ascertained the truth, she sunk upon her knees in fervent acknowledgement to Heaven for granting this termination to the ideal distress of the foregoing scene.

CHAP. XXIV.

“Ah me! that fear
“Comes thund’ring back with dreadful revolution
“On my defenceless head”

MILTON

TO think of obtaining any further repose at this time was totally out of the question; the experiment, of course, remained untried: and her anxiety entirely turned upon the most effectual means of repairing the mischief already committed, so as to prevent Mrs. Bertram from suspecting the cause of her haggard looks and languid appearance, both of which, she was conscious, might subject her to no common degree of observation. Having changed her dress, and endeavoured to assume an air of tranquillity, foreign to the present nature of her feelings, she left her apartment to encounter the unknown vicissitudes of the day.

As Mrs. Ross’s departure from the Grove was speedily to take place, some preparation on the part of our heroine became unavoidably necessary; and her intention, on the preceding evening, had been to walk over to Wigton this morning, in order to make a few purchases for the occasion: a violent headach, however, interfered to prevent the execution of her design; and she passed the greater portion of the day in Maria’s chamber, where subjects, suitable to their present turn of mind, engaged their attention.

As the evening approached, and the appointed period for her interview with Captain Montague drew near, the thoughts of our heroine became more abstracted, and wandered at intervals from the scene now before her, to that in which she was shortly so interestingly to engage. The dream, and its attendant horrors, recurred to her memory, accompanied by a thousand apprehensions of lurking evil, either to herself, or the poor little infant, who, almost prohibited the arms of one parent, was upon the point of being placed in those of the other, whom she had never yet seen.

A restless solicitude likewise seized our heroine respecting the extent of Montague’s knowledge of Hammond’s Love Elegies, and the probable discovery by St. Vincent of their being in her possession. If the gentlemen were both acquainted with this vexatious circumstance, their opinion of her conduct appeared to her of too humiliating a description to be reflected upon with patience; and the colour of Stella alternately varied its hue as she secretly moralized on female weakness and human possibilities. At length the clock struck six, and reminded her that one hour more only remained to prepare for the reception of Captain Montague.

The circumstances which had taken place on the first introduction of herself at the Hermitage, and the success that attended their arrangements on the occasion, suggested a similar mode of conduct in the management of Maria’s affair. Her child was consequently put to nurse with Mrs. Thompson (the *ci-devant* Sally Wallace, who happened about this period to be delivered of a female infant, which did not long survive its birth,) and a plausible story being propogated to answer the purpose of deception, every thing apparently succeeded to their wish; for the whispered slander of the gossiping neighbour already noticed, like the suspicions entertained by Mrs. St. Vincent, were as yet equally unknown to the inhabitants of the Hermitage, where Maria was represented as continuing to reside for the benefit of her health, on account of a consumptive habit, with which she had been threatened before her guardian and Mrs. Harris left the country.

From the house of its ostensible mother, Mrs. Wallace or her niece had sometimes been permitted to convey the little creature to the arms of her to whom it owed its miserable existence. Miss Campbell's apparent declining condition seemed to plead hard for the occasional and stolen indulgence its presence visibly afforded her: but the consequences which followed a repetition of this gratification proved very different from the original expectations entertained of their efficacy; and Mrs. Bertram, it may be remembered, found herself finally necessitated to prohibit a remedy so ill calculated for producing the desired effect.

Stella, her heart full of the approaching occurrence, stopped for a moment at the door of Maria's chamber, and regarding her with a look and most expressive and interesting, hastily wiped off a pitying tear, and then hurried to her own apartment.

"I shall soon see the two beings so coveted, so beloved by poor Maria!" thought our heroine, as she tied on her straw bonnet, "Those beings from whom she seems unavoidably and eternally separated!—Alas! with what transports would she not have flown to such an interview, if permitted to have taken my place! Ah! would to Heaven such had proved the case! for the unaccountable reluctance I experience to my part in the transaction momentarily increases with the lapse of every intervening instant of time: but it signifies not, I will perform my promise; and if contempt is really the result of Captain Montague's knowledge of my late proceeding in the pavilion, why conscious innocence in other respects must just support me under the trial as well as it is able."

Her mental soliloquy finished; and ready to sally forth, she descended the staircase, and enquired for Mrs. Bertram: the latter, however, was at her evening devotion, during which no one presumed to disturb her. Stella looked at the clock, and perceiving there was no time to lose, hastened to the habitation of farmer Thompson, from whose wife she received the little infant. Half an hour more brought her to the grotto; where Montague soon after joined her.

The usually gay, fashionable friend of our heroine seemed here to have renounced all the adventitious advantages he had hitherto possessed, and permitted Nature to operate in her most interesting form. Stella, previously acquainted with his situation in regard to Louisa St. Vincent, could not help admiring the delicate manner in which he conducted himself through the whole of this trying affair. The new, the delightful sensation of parental affection seemed to throb in every vein, and while he caressed the little infant, his attachment for his offspring appeared to banish every recollection of the mother's errors; without, however, lessening the indifference he experienced for her, or softening his resolution to see her no more.

Possessed of innate good principles and great sensibility of heart, any casual deviation from the former was deeply regretted, and whatever interested the latter acutely felt; but while he deplored the fatal effects of bad example, and the propelling impetuosity of youthful passions, which were apter to lead him astray than any evil propensities of his own, his determination to avoid the particular source in which his late misconduct originated, was invariably adhered to with the most scrupulous exactness; for a repetition of what his cooler judgment told him was materially wrong, appeared a double aggravation of the fault. Such were his sentiments on the present occasion, and by them he intended immoveably to abide. The child, however, was innocent; and every feeling of humanity called upon him to indemnify his unoffending offspring for the injury entailed upon it through life by the circumstances of its unfortunate birth. Naturally of a tender and affectionate disposition, he felt himself moved as he ardently gazed upon its little face, and thought less of the unhappy mother than his adored Louisa, whose image he vainly strove to trace in the features of the smiling infant.

The future charge he meant to take of it appeared the only possible reparation that could

now be made to Maria, whose situation, in regard to pecuniary matters, set any indemnification of that description totally out of the question on her own individual account, though to their child it might hereafter be of consequence to fulfil the duty of a parent in this respect.

As the modern man of fashion, when an exterior compliance with the tonish habits of high life rendered simulation and conformity necessary, he generally acquitted himself in a style that seemed to say he was only in his proper element, and met with his equals alone in the first circles of elegant society; but the real character of this young and amiable man never appeared in its true colouring to such advantage, as, when freed from the trammels situation and circumstances frequently imposed upon it, he found himself at liberty to follow the genuine bent of inclination, which secretly pointed to rational enjoyments, pleasures unaccompanied by the sting of after reproach, and a participation in all the milder and more tranquil virtues to be met with in the less elevated stations of private life. This had proved so much the case since his introduction at the Hermitage, that it had now become almost the ruling principle of his mind, and nearly taken the lead over every factitious sentiment hitherto adopted in his former intercourse with gayer scenes of the world. No wonder, then, if all his better feelings were, at this period, roused into action, and the sensibility of his soul called forth by the powerful demands nature made upon them.

At length Stella thought it necessary to interfere; having therefore reminded him of the time that was elapsed, she insisted upon being permitted to retire with her little charge—a request which he did not, however, seem at first much disposed to comply with. The child had fallen asleep in his arms: these had never before formed a cradle for such a purpose; and it was not without more than one remonstrance from our heroine that she finally prevailed with him to relinquish the precious burden.

As he softly replaced the unconscious innocent on her bosom, and with parental fondness bent forward to imprint a farewell kiss on its little forehead, a sudden exclamation of mingled surprise and horror, burst from Stella, which speedily fixed his eyes on her face with an air of astonishment scarcely inferior to her own. He followed the now silent direction of her looks, and discovered a female figure, rising from a garden chair near the obelisk, whom he instantly recognised for Mrs. St. Vincent. On perceiving she was observed, she curtsied in a style of derision peculiar to herself, and then disappeared in the plantations.

“The supposed illusions of sleep are thus, then, converted into sad reality!” sighed Stella, languidly sinking upon the window-seat as she spoke; “yes, they were not, as I would willingly have persuaded myself, the idle chimeras of a disturbed imagination, but apparently commissioned to forewarn me of approaching evil in the form of my persevering an unrelenting enemy. I have slighted the gracious intention of my guardian angel, and must abide the consequences. Save your innocent child, however!—she, too, was implicated in the same scene that presented itself in the course of my last night’s perturbed and, as it now seems, portentous visions. Nay, Captain Montague, restrain that incredulous smile till you are better acquainted with the cause of my alarm, and then I trust you will acquit me of a bias to superstition, when I declare, that from the bottom of my soul I regret the facility with which I agreed to indulge you with this interview, and no less the weak and childish attention to appearances which led me to leave the door of the grotto open in order to avoid an inferior evil, should any casual intrusion happen to break in upon the secret and mysterious nature of our interview.”

Our heroine, as well as her agitation would permit her, now proceeded to relate the particulars of her dream, as already mentioned, and the deep impression it had at the time made upon her feelings; an impression ultimately renewed and strengthened by the wonderful

coincidence of circumstances which had thus recently occurred, and which Montague, in spite of all his subsequent attempts to eradicate from her mind, either by the force of reason or ridicule, could not help privately reflecting upon as something peculiarly strange and incomprehensible.

CHAP. XXV.

“I am involv’d
“And buried in the web myself have wrought.”
YOUNG.

IN the course of this discussion, Stella frequently mentioned the unequivocal marks of enmity perpetually shewn her by Mrs. St. Vincent; and expressed much astonishment that such should be the case, when no conscious offence had ever been given on her part to merit treatment so cruel and unprovoked.

The solicitude evinced to ascertain the motives of that lady’s actions, and the touching manner in which she spoke of her feelings when subjected to the influence of Mrs. St. Vincent’s capricious humours, sensibly affected her auditor; and, for the first time since the commencement of their acquaintance, he ventured to glance at the probable cause of her displeasure.—“I presume not, however, to direct you, my dear Stella,” he added, “in an affair of so delicate a nature: nevertheless, were I sure of being pardoned for intruding my advice unasked, I would just hint at the necessity of avoiding all opportunities calculated to promote any further degree of intercourse with Major St. Vincent and——”

He was proceeding, when Stella, extremely hurt and agitated by the implied censure on that part of her conduct apparently contained in this admonition, rose from her seat with a dignified air, and entreated he would spare his premature caution, as the danger on her side was, she could assure him, more imaginary than real.

“In one point of view certainly so,” he relied; “for are you not good and virtuous? and is not my friend the noblest fellow under the canopy of heaven? But yet——”

The latter part of this sentence seemed to vibrate on a softened chord, and her countenance beamed with a ray of inexpressible delight; but the momentary gratification afforded by the impressive eulogium on St. Vincent instantly disappeared, when the humiliating circumstance to which it alluded recurred: she resumed the same look of disapprobation, and once more abruptly interrupted him in the middle of something he was going to say.

“Good evening, Sir!” with a cold and reserved air, said the secretly agitated Stella; “it grows late, and the child ought to be at home.”

“You leave me in displeasure, Stella!—I cannot consent to part with you thus.—Say we are friends?—say you pardon me?”

“When good is the end in view, we must overlook the disagreeable mode in which it is sometimes dispensed, even by friends.—I pardon you, Sir.”

“What! with that frigid air, and cold severity of accent!—indeed, Stella, my dear Stella, we part not on such terms.”

The heart of our heroine began to swell, “more in sorrow than in anger:” she bent over her still sleeping charge to conceal a truant tear that refused to be restrained within its proper limits, and again moved towards the threshold.

“Good Heavens! my sweet friend, how have I merited this unlooked-for reproof, this silent contempt? If the most disinterested esteem, the most sincere solicitude for your welfare, have unhappily led me to wound your feelings, the fault is surely venial, and ought not to be attended with consequences so seriously distressing. By my soul, I repeat it, we separate not on such terms!—give me your hand, and say the past is consigned to oblivion, as shall henceforth

be the subject from whence the whole has originated!”

The transient displeasure of our heroine had already subsided; but her increasing emotion prevented an articulate reply. She now blamed herself for thus giving way to the weak sensations of wounded pride, when conscience whispered the suspicions of Captain Montague had probability at least for their basis; and extending the hand he requested, which was speedily conveyed to his lips, she burst into tears, and again sunk upon her seat.

A tacit agreement, however, seemed to have taken place, for the purpose of avoiding the former forbidding theme. Montague, after a short silence, began to speak on less interesting topics; and, amongst other, mentioned the continuance of his intention in regard to returning to Dumfries early on the following morning. He likewise presented her with a few guineas for the nurse of his little girl, to whose house he accompanied them when returning composure permitted her to depart from the grotto. Montague did not, however, enter the habitation of Mr. Thompson, lest others than the immediate members of the family should happen to be present, and his appearance create either curiosity or suspicion in the spectators. At a small distance from the house, he waited her return; and having conducted her to the vicinity of the Hermitage, after an affectionate adieu, struck into a path leading to Rossgrove, while his late companion proceeded alone to the abode of her benefactress.

It had been the intention of Mrs. Bertram either to become the bearer of the child to its father, or to accompany Stella in the execution of that office, as she judged it improper for her young *protégée* to be the sole agent in such a transaction. Unfortunately, this design was, some how or other, neglected to be mentioned in time to our heroine; while on the part of her nominal mother, the appointed hour for the interview was mistaken, and a later one chosen in its place. Mrs. Bertram, therefore, made no immediate enquiry after Stella, on the termination of her devotions; and when the supposed period arrived for the above purpose, she discovered our heroine had already been absent too long to think of putting her scheme in practice. To remedy the evil in part was, nevertheless, yet in her power, and she determined to join the party in the grotto, in order to walk back with Stella. Disappointment seemed to be the allotted portion of Mrs. Bertram this evening: her wishes were again frustrated by the unexpected arrival of the clergyman's wife; and she was at length forced to renounce every thought of attending the child.

Stella gave a faithful account of all that merely related to the father and child: for her own share in some part of the evening's transactions, some reservation was supposed necessary, and of course adopted. Mrs. Bertram, however, appeared satisfied; and unable to see miss Campbell after so recent a separation from the two beings who usually proved the chief subject of their *tête-à-têtes*, our heroine pleaded a return of her morning headach, and retired at an early hour to her chamber.

Harassed and overcome by the effects of the preceding night's distressing occurrences, in conjunction with those of the day, she hurried into bed, where corporeal fatigue proving superior to every other sensation, the torpor of deep repose immediately succeeded, and soon obliterated every painful reflection, for the present, from her memory.

The casual discovery of the interview at the grotto afforded Mrs. St. Vincent a sensation of pleasure to which she had long been a stranger: for bad dispositions can never experience more than a short-lived and transient gratification from the indulgence of their evil propensities. This enjoyment had indeed been pretty frequently obtained by Mrs. St. Vincent of late; but in proportion to its magnitude at the time, the consequences that succeeded generally proved detrimental to her peace; for the breach between her and her husband became gradually widened on every return of ill-humour; and unjustly blaming Stella for what was merely the natural

effects of her own caprice, the antipathy she had long encouraged for a character so diametrically opposite to her own daily increased, and led her to seize every plausible opportunity that occurred to vent the spiteful effusions of her rancorous heart.

After what has already appeared, it cannot, nevertheless, be denied that her suspicions were not altogether groundless; but candid, or well-disposed minds, would have rested perfectly secure on the prior knowledge they possessed of the principles and conduct of those they subjected to such an imputation: an imputation which could not, however, attach any actual blame on either side of a personal description; and for what merely related to mental feelings, no human being ought to be considered answerable, as long as they are confined to the bosom which gives them birth, and not permitted to interfere with the interests or tranquillity of society.

In the present instance, that accusation even the prejudiced Mrs. St. Vincent herself had no right to bring against them; for the suspected parties seemed mutually bent on maintaining their integrity, and avoiding every circumstance that could render them liable to the censure of the world, or the far more insupportable burden of self-reproach. Her own violent and ungovernable temper proved the cause of all those ideal torments she frequently suffered, and sufficiently avenged the injured objects of her hatred by the poignant nature of the anguish they inflicted: thus may it ever happen, that

“Evil on itself shall back recoil,”

and the unmerited mischief done to another, finally lacerate the breast of the inflictor!

END OF VOL II.

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