

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

It was a fine day. "Just the day to return some of your calls, girls," said Emily, as they were seated together.

"Oh!" sighed Maria, "of all things on earth I detest making calls, and it is too bad to press such a beautiful day into such service."

"So much the better," returned Virginia. "If the task is disagreeable, you should have all the pleasant things possible; but, for my part," she continued, "I like to make calls."

"I cannot conceive of such a state of mind," said Esther; "yet it must be a very desirable one for people who think of having much society, for it is an unavoidable evil."

"Well," replied Jennie, "I'm just weak-minded enough to like it. I don't have a large amount of subjects to converse on, but I can do pretty well in a five minutes chat on the weather, the last fashion, and the like, and that's pretty much all that's required in making calls."

"For my part," rejoined Maria, "I can never think of anything to say till it's time to leave."

"Well, that's my sphere!" returned Virginia; "now, I'm out of my element when I get into intellectual society, where you, Maria, are at home."

"Why, I'm sure," said Maria, "you appeared to be having a fine time last night, talking with Mr. Hammond on Henry Ward Beecher's lectures and sermons, on Whipple's essays, Mr. Giles' lectures, and the like."

"Ah, well," replied Virginia, "I had heard all three of those gentlemen lecture, and so got along pretty well; but when he got on to Hudson's lectures on Shakespeare, I was really frightened! I didn't know as I could stand my ground, but by considerable exertions, I managed to come off with flying colors."

"Why, Jennie, hadn't you read them?"

"Never a word," replied she, "and what was worse, I never read more than two of Shakespeare's plays in my life."

"Why didn't you say so, then?"

"Oh, I had no idea that he was going to talk on the subject an hour, and as I had allowed him to suppose that I knew something about them in the onset, I couldn't get off afterwards. How shocked you look, Maria!" she continued, "why, it's the most common thing in the world for people to pretend knowledge that they don't possess."

"I should advise you to read Mrs. Opie," said Maria.

"Read it yourself, my dear," returned Jennie, "I dare say you tell as many white lies as I do. Come,

now, how often do you reply to invitations to call, a thing that you have owned you detest, 'I should be very happy to do so?' If I had time, I could show a great many more such lies, for so they are. The truth is, I'm no worse than the rest of you, girls, but I speak out what the rest of you think. But come, let's get ready to act a few of these same falsehoods."

They hastened up to their chambers, to dress for their expedition. Emily and Virginia walked along together, while Esther and Maria followed.

They had made quite a number of calls, and were returning home, when a young gentleman crossed the street, bowed gracefully to Maria and Virginia, and shook hands very cordially.

Esther looked at Maria in some surprise, for the color had entirely left her cheeks, and she trembled violently. Her companions did not appear to observe her agitation, and Maria, controlling herself, presented Mr. Waldron to Esther and Emily.

Virginia seemed very happy to meet him; had a thousand questions to ask him concerning Portland, whence he had come, but Maria scarcely said a word. She seemed confused whenever he addressed her, and answered as briefly as possible.

Mr. Waldron was tall, and quite handsome. He was pale, and did not seem in good health, but seemed to be in excellent spirits. He had relinquished the task of conversing with Maria, and was now playing the agreeable to Emily and Virginia.

As they reached home, Virginia asked "how long he intended to remain in Belfast."

"He had come on business," he replied, "and it was rather uncertain how long his stay would be, as it depended entirely on circumstances."

He declined going in at present, in reply to Emily's invitation; but assured her that he would call often while in town; he then bowed gracefully and took leave.

In answer to Emily's inquiries, Virginia told her that Mr. Waldron was a young man of good family in Portland, and a very gay and pleasant acquaintance. "Gentlemanly in his manners," she added, "as you may see for yourself. Report says, a little dissipated, but I guess, very much like young men in general."

Mr. Waldron was as good as his word; he called that evening, and many successive ones.

Maria seemed as distant as ever in her manners towards him, while Virginia amply made up, in her graciousness, for all her companion's deficiencies.

Both Edward and Mr. Somers were thrown entirely into the shade, by the appearance of Mr. Waldron, and both did not fail to sneer at him as a "dandy, and mere lady's man."

To Esther, however, he did not appear in such a character. She did not believe, what Virginia very plainly intimated, that he was one of her lovers, who had followed her, to urge his suit; but, as day after day passed, and still he lingered in Belfast, she began to doubt that his business detained him so long, in that quiet place.

"Maria," said she, one night, when they had gone

to their chamber, which they now shared together, "what do you suppose keeps Mr. Waldron here? Shouldn't you think he would go before long?"

"I wish he would," exclaimed Maria.

"Do you dislike him so much, then?" asked Esther.

"No—yes—" replied Maria, blushing deeply; then hiding her face in her hands, she burst into tears.

"What is the matter, my dear?" whispered Esther, drawing her friend tenderly to her bosom. "Let me share your trouble, and try to console you, as I used to long ago."

"I will tell you all, Esther," replied Maria. "Charles Waldron is the only one for whom I ever cared at all. Ever since I came home from school, he has been so kind to me, and so delicate in his attentions, that almost before I knew it, I began to love him. At last, he asked me to become his wife; I owned my affection for him, and if my father should consent, promised to be his. How happy I was that day! I never dreamed of any obstacle, and what was my surprise, when my father came to me, looking, oh, so pale and wretched! I never saw him so agitated! He held me in his arms, and told me I was his all, and begged me never to have any thing more to say to Charles. He said that he was very dissipated, and that he could not trust his only daughter to him. He said that it was my best good he sought, and he convinced me that I must give Charles up. I did as father advised, though it gave me great pain. For oh, Esther! I did not know

how very much I loved him, till I set about trying not to care for him. Father was very kind to me, doing every thing in his power to make me happy, and I tried to appear cheerful. Charles did not come to the house, but I met him at parties, and I tried to avoid him; for, oh, Esther! when he talks to me, I cannot think of any one else, and he makes it out, that I ought to marry him, and seems so unhappy, that my only safe way is to shun him. I was glad to come here, and just as I am beginning to be more like myself, he comes too, and I have got it all to do over again."

"My dearest child," said Esther, "you are doing right, and I love you better than ever, and honor you for your dutiful conduct to your father. You are indeed his all, my love, and you know what a cruel blow it would be to him, if you were to marry one who would make you wretched, for your father is right."

"I know he is," sighed Maria, "and I shall persist in avoiding Charles. If he stays much longer, I shall go home."

"Come to me in your trials, Maria, as you would to an older sister," said Esther, "and I will try to advise you and help you; for yours is an unpleasant position."

Maria buried her face on her friend's shoulder, weeping silently.

"I have been very unhappy," she said, "but it is a relief to me that you know all."

Esther did not attempt to check her tears. She felt

that they would relieve her ; and at last Maria ceased, saying, as she looked up into Esther's face, "You think me a silly child !"

"No, dearest," said her friend, "I never was farther from such a thought ; but now let us prepare for bed, for I fear you will be sick to-morrow."

Maria obeyed and they were soon wrapped in slumber.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARIA.

A few days passed in the usual manner, sleigh-rides, walks, and company in the evenings helped the hours away agreeably.

There was to be a party at Mrs. Somers' in honor of Emily's guests that night, and a lovely night it was.

"The clear moonlight shines on the white surface of the snow-clad fields beautifully ; come and look, Maria !" said Esther, as, ready dressed for the party, she lifted the curtain from the window and looked out on the landscape.

Deacon Sidney's house was situated on a hill, and, from the front windows, the large evergreens somewhat interrupted the view, but, from the side-window where Esther now stood, might be seen not only the waters of the bay, sparkling, clear, and cold in the starlight, but the wide-spread fields, with their drifted and uneven surface, looking like the tossing waves of a suddenly frozen sea, where, occasionally, a leafless tree reminded her of the dismantled wrecks of that same sea, were also visible, and, farther below, the