

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

principal part of the town, with its tall church spires, and the bright lights gleaming from many a happy home, gave life to the picture.

"What is there more beautiful than our winter landscapes?" thought she, forgetting, as we are apt to do, how superior we find the charm of each particular season, in its turn, to anything else at that time.

Perhaps, to a stranger's eye, that same landscape might have looked monotonous and dreary, but, to her mind, the snow-clad ground was associated with all the pleasures of the winter evenings; those long evenings so peculiarly adapted to the joys of home.

It recalled, to her, her youthful romps in the fresh, bracing air, her wild slides down hill with her school-mates, and, later, the cheerful fireside, the bright lights and merry chat of home, where she had pored over so many interesting volumes, in a quiet corner, forgetting the present in the glowing tales of the past that those pages presented; all this and a thousand similar recollections endeared old Winter to her, and made her see new beauty in the familiar scenes before her.

She was indeed lost in thought, till the voice of her friend, who, obeying her summons, had joined her at the window, recalled her from her reverie.

"It looks like the smile on the face of a corpse," exclaimed Maria.

"That is a sad thing to be reminded of by such beauty," returned Esther. "You are not cheerful, and everything takes a tinge from your sadness. Cheer up! my little Maria. You must try and be

hopeful! Do let us see some of your old smiles and gaiety, to-night."

"Are you ready, girls?" asked Emily, tapping lightly at the door of their chamber. "If you are, let's go and give Grandma a call; she'll like to see us ready-dressed for the party. Virginia looks like a beauty, to-night, don't she, Ned?" she continued, as they met him on the staircase.

"It would be very rude in me to contradict you, whatever might be my opinion," he replied, gazing at her with sufficient admiration to satisfy her, however, as the girls passed him.

They reached Grandma's room and tapped lightly at the door; Aunt Mary opened it, and the four girls entered.

"Wall, gals, so you're dressed for the party!" said Grandma.

"Yes, and don't we look handsome?" asked Jennie.

"Oh yes! you're tricked out in all your bravery. You remind me of what the prophet Isaiah says, in the third chapter, 'with your chains, and bracelets, and rings, and wimpling pins, ear-rings, and all your fine apparel,' and the old lady sighed deeply.

"Take care, gals, that you don't do like the darters of Zion, get 'haughty, and walk with stretched out necks and wanton eyes,' lest you have the same cuss that is pronounced on them. This generation does seem to have it. At least part on it is coming true, 'instead of well-set hair, baldness;' for, though you gals has pooty good hair, most of folks seem to be hav-

ing poor heads on't. Can't you see, gals," she continued, "that we're living in the last days?"

"I don't know that I ever thought of it," said Esther.

"Can't you discern the signs of the times?" replied Grandma. "That's the way with you all; even Mr. Hammond don't see it. That's fulfilling the Bible, too, 'blind leaders of the blind.' All on it is fulfilling fast. Don't they 'go to and fro,' and isn't 'much knowledge increased?' The world is dreadful wicked, now-a-days!"

"Oh Grandma! I guess it will bear up a great deal more wickedness than it does now," said Virginia.

"As it was in the days of Noe," replied Mrs. Sidney, "so it shall be then. They were marrying and giving in marriage, and knew not till the flood came and took them away."

"Which looks the handsomest?" asked Emily, as the old lady paused.

"Oh! you all look well enough," said the old lady. "If you only behave as well as you look, you'll all do nicely," and she looked down on her knitting, which she had dropped in the ardor of her speech, and began to make her needles fly fast.

"You used to go to parties when you were young, didn't you?" asked Jennie.

"Wall, yes, child! I can't say but I did—the more fool I."

"Come, girls," shouted Ned, and, bidding good-bye to Grandma, they left the room.

Aunt Mary had clipped off two rose buds from her

single rose-bush, and had added them to the plainly-dressed hair of Esther and Maria.

"I hope you'll have a fine time," she said, as she bade them good-night.

In the parlor, they found Mr. Templeton and Mr. Waldron, whom Virginia had invited to accompany them to Mrs. Somers'. All was gaiety and smiles, and Maria did, indeed, appear more like her olden self.

Charles Waldron devoted himself quite assiduously to Virginia, and, though Maria could not fail to observe this, she thanked him for it.

"If we must part," she said to herself, "it makes it a much easier task for me, if he, too, sees the necessity of it, and bestows his attentions on another."

This apparent indifference, on Maria's part, did not seem to be the object which Charles had sought to gain.

He came towards the latter part of the evening to her side, and said something in a low tone, of which Esther only caught the words "heartless—cruel," but which brought the color to Maria's cheek, and a tear to her eye.

Just as they had bade Mrs. Somers good night, Frederick came up, and requested the pleasure of accompanying Maria home; before she could reply, Charles Waldron, who stood by her side, answered, "I am to serve as this lady's escort to-night," and ere Maria, surprised at such a remark, could collect her thoughts sufficiently to contradict him, Frederick had turned away.

They were now alone together;—it was the oppor-

tunity which Charles had long sought, but which he had not been able to gain.

"How *could* you do so, Charles?" asked Maria, in an almost pleading tone, as they walked homeward. "You know, as well as I, that we are separated, and that we must try to forget the past."

"Forget!" he repeated, bitterly. "That may be very easy for you, but for me, death is preferable to life without you. Oh, Maria!" he went on passionately, "you are mine in the sight of Heaven, and mine you *shall be* in the sight of man. I love you more than my life, and you, too, you cannot deny it, return my affection. I see it in every glance of your eye, in every expression of your face. You may try to overcome it, but it *is*, and it will be, in vain. 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.'" "

Maria made no reply, she was weeping; she had never before seen him so violent, and was half afraid of him. A tear-drop fell on his hand, and a half-suppressed sob met his ear.

"Forgive me!" he said, in a low and tender voice, contrasting strongly with the triumphant tone he had been speaking in a few moments before. "Forgive me, dearest!—I can never forgive myself for causing you, whom I would die to save from annoyance, a moment's pain. Say you forgive me, Maria, for, it is my great love for you that makes me forget myself. Oh, Maria!" he continued, "since you left me I have tried to steel my heart against you! I have tried to think you heartless, and when I could not, for your

words, when you told me of your love, ever sounded in my ears, then I would try to drown my sorrows in the wine-cup. There I found temporary oblivion! What do I care, if I am utterly ruined, soul and body? You will only see in me a wretch to shudder at, as you do now! And since no one cares for me, why should I wish to live? The sooner I die, and free you from my persecutions, as you have called them, the better it will be. For I tell you, Maria, solemnly, that I *never will* give over my pursuit of you, till *you are mine, or I am dead!*"

"Oh, Charles!" exclaimed poor Maria, over whose weaker nature his violent and determined spirit always gained the ascendancy, "You will kill me! This continual struggle between my duty and love for my father, and my love for you, is wearing me out! Even Esther sees how pale and sad I am. Your pursuit of me may terminate in a way, you do not seem to think of—in *my* death. I sometimes think that you will break my heart."

"But are you doing your duty?" asked Charles. "Is it right for you to drive me to dissipation, as the only means of forgetting your cruelty? And must you," he continued, "even if you resolve never to be my wife, yet treat me as an outcast, shun me like a monster? Why not receive me as a friend, if no more—will you not do so?" he asked, in those soft, low tones, which Maria could never refuse.

"I will do so," she replied, forgetting that she had felt that her only safety was in leaving him altogether.

A triumphant smile passed over his face. He had gained his object.

"Let her receive me as a friend," he thought, "and she is mine, in spite of all the world," as he bade her good night, and lifting her hand tenderly to his lips, left her.

"Oh, Esther!" said Maria, as she sat by her friend's side, "Charles does at last, I hope, see how vain it is to importune me;—he is to be my friend now, and nothing more."

Esther shook her head doubtingly, but made no reply. Several days passed, and, as usual, Charles Waldron was a frequent guest at Mrs. Sidney's.

His lively sallies of wit, and frank manners, made him a favorite with all, particularly with Edward, since he had told him, that he would by no means interfere in his suit of Virginia.

Maria saw him often, for it was his delight to sit by her side while she sewed, to stand near her when she sung, to turn her music when she played, and, in short, anticipating her very wish. Whenever she was joked at all about her lover, as Emily and Virginia now began to call him, she would reply half pettishly, that "it was very singular that a lady could not have a gentleman friend, without being teased about him, as if she must be wishing to marry him."

She avoided now all conversation with Esther, declaring, whenever she was alone in her chamber with her, which she took care should be only when she retired, "that she was extremely sleepy;" and as

Esther saw that any interference on her part was unwelcome, she ceased to say anything to her.

Late at night, she was aroused by a slight noise,—she was a light sleeper,—and opening her eyes, she saw Maria, ready dressed, standing by her bedside.

"Why, Maria!" she exclaimed, "What are you dressed for?"

"Hush, Esther!" replied Maria, "Since you have waked up, I may as well tell you; I am going away."

"And where?" asked her friend. Then, as the truth flashed upon her, she continued, "*Not* with Charles Waldron?"

"Yes," returned Maria, calmly, "with him. I have decided that I ought to do so."

"But your father," said Esther, looking at her fixedly. "Imagine him in his desolate home, his grey hairs bowed with sorrow, over the disobedience of the child he trusted, and that he loved so well."

"Spare me!" exclaimed Maria, as tears streamed over her cheeks. "I am indeed wretched! Which ever way I turn, I bring misery!"

"Do not go, Maria! Your first duty is to your father. He is no tyrant! You see, as well as he, that this rash step would plunge you into misery. You are blinded by your love for Charles, bewildered by his arguments. If you do this, you will never cease to regret it. Depend upon it," continued Esther solemnly, "the curse of Heaven will rest on such an act of disobedience!"

"But I have promised Charles, that I will meet him near the church. He will wait for me! I must go,"

said Maria, breaking from the clasp in which Esther enfolded her. "I will tell him that I cannot go with him to be married. I will repeat to him, that I never will be his wife without my father's consent."

"And he will urge you," interrupted Esther, "and you will forget everything in the world but him, and you will do as he wishes."

Maria wept silently. At last she spoke. "I *must* see him to-night, if we never meet again. Do you go with me, and I will come back with you. But oh! I must go! and, if you do not accompany me, I shall go alone."

"But what if I arouse the house?" asked Esther.

"Oh! you cannot be so cruel! Do go with me!" pleaded Maria, "and I will promise that it shall be the last time that I see him."

Esther hesitated. "I don't know but I am doing a very foolish thing," she said, as she, at last, yielded to Maria's entreaties, and, dressing herself, walked softly out of the house.

It was but a short distance to the church; there Charles awaited Maria with a horse and sleigh. He sprang to meet her, exclaiming, "Then you are here at last. Spring into the sleigh, and, in a few hours, we shall be beyond pursuit; you shall be mine, and no one can take you from me."

"Oh Charles, I cannot go!" whispered Maria.

He started, and, for the first time, noticed her companion. "Miss Hastings!" ejaculated he. "The devil!" he muttered between his teeth; then, addressing her, with much politeness, said, "you are too kind

to accompany Maria. I presume you intend to act as brides-maid!"

"No, Mr. Waldron! I hope to assist this poor infatuated girl to free herself from you. Your present conduct proves you unworthy of her. A man, who can persuade a daughter to forget her duty to her aged parent, will not find it a difficult task to free himself from his own duty as a husband. Maria has come to bid you farewell forever!"

Charles Waldron listened, with ill-disguised impatience, to Esther's remarks, then turning to Maria who stood near, he said, "Speak, Maria, tell me that this is not so!"

"It is indeed the truth," replied Maria. "I have come to bid you farewell! This is our last meeting!"

"It can not be so!" exclaimed Charles, "or, at least, you have been frightened into saying so, by Miss Hastings. You do not really mean it! You could not be so cruel, to hold the cup of happiness to my lips but to snatch it away untasted!"

"I have done wrong," sighed Maria, "but because I have taken one false step, I must not take another. I have decided," and she sprang to Esther's side, clinging there, as if for protection against his anticipated violence. But, instead of the burst of passion which she had expected, he addressed her in a low, sad, and reproachful voice.

"Then you despise me! You cannot trust me! You dash the last hope from me; instead of giving me kind words of encouragement and your assistance in the difficult task of reforming and breaking off from

my associates, you turn from me coldly, you loathe me, and leave me to the only ones who speak to me as a friend, my boon companions, and this," he added bitterly, "is that boasted thing, woman's love! Like the rest of the world, you, Maria, cast off the rope to which the poor struggling wretch clings!"

"Oh Charles!" exclaimed Maria, in a voice choked with emotion, "you will break my heart! Let me go!" she said wildly to Esther, who held her firmly in her arms. "Let me go! I will not forsake him in his wretchedness! My place is by his side!"

"Remember your father!" said Esther; "when he, sick and feeble, calls vainly for his child, shall a stranger's voice reply to him? a stranger's hand supply his wants? Remember that you make his home a wretched one; you leave him, in his old age, desolate and childless!"

"Choose between us!" said Charles, approaching her, for he felt sure of a decision in his favor.

"Oh Esther!" exclaimed poor Maria, "what shall I do?"

"Mr. Waldron!" said Esther, turning to him, "you, alone, are the cause of the misery of one you profess to love! It is your dissipation alone, which causes the objections of her father; it depends on you, alone, to remove that. If you love her, as you say, call that strong will, which you now exert to overpower Maria's weaker nature, to aid you in reforming! If you cannot break from your associates without her help, you never can with it! Take your stand firmly, as a man should. Do not picture your future to her as that of a desolate

wretch, which is untrue, but go into the world, and show yourself worthy of her. Be worthy of yourself! You have talents of a high order. Go, and, in a few years' time, if you choose, you may claim her as your bride, and receive her from her father's hands, with that father's blessing, instead of, as now, stealing her away, carrying sorrow to an old man's heart, and, perhaps, pursued by his curse!"

Charles Waldron hesitated; his better nature was roused. "Is this what you would say, Maria?" he asked.

"It is," was her reply; "go, and may God bless you!"

"One last embrace," he said, and as Esther hesitated, he added, "Do not fear me! I will not take her against her will!"

He pressed her convulsively in his arms, and repeated, "I promise to claim you, in the presence of the world, in four years' time, if I have the right to do so,—or if I fail, we never meet again."

He laid the half-fainting girl in Esther's arms, and, springing into the sleigh, was soon lost to sight.

It was with great difficulty that Esther bore her to the house; but here, Maria made a great effort, that she might reach her room without awaking any one, and succeeded in doing so. And as Esther laid her upon the bed, she fell on her knees, by her side, exclaiming, involuntarily, "Thank God! she is saved!"