

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PEEP INTO FUTURITY.

THE morning sun shone brightly into Esther's face, as she woke from her troubled sleep, and glancing at Maria, she was almost frightened to see the pallor of her cheek. She was already awake, and in answer to Esther's inquiries, said that "she had not slept at all."

"You are unable to go down to breakfast," replied Esther; "I will make excuses for you. Try, now, my dear, to sleep a little, for you need rest and quiet."

"Maria is not well this morning," repeated Esther, in answer to the numerous questions which met her, on her entrance of the dining-room. "She did not sleep much last night, and is trying now to make up for the lack of it."

Breakfast was soon over, and they had hardly entered the sitting-room, when a note was handed to Emily, from Charles Waldron, telling her that he was obliged to leave town suddenly, which must be his excuse for not coming to make a parting call.

"I'm really sorry that he has gone," said Virginia, "for he's such a nice, pleasant, social companion."

"We shall certainly miss him a great deal," re-

marked Emily, while Esther went to her chamber to tell Maria that he had left Belfast.

To her great satisfaction, she found her friend sleeping, and returned to the sitting-room.

Emily and Virginia were talking together quite earnestly. "Emily is calling her names!" said Jennie, as Esther re-entered.

"What is she calling you?" asked Esther.

"Oh! a coquette!" replied Jennie. "Now, it isn't true, is it?"

"Emily!" called Mrs. Sidney, "come here a moment!" and she hurried out of the room to obey the summons, while Esther replied: "Since you have asked me such a home question, I must say, that I think you are! And, Jennie," she continued, "allow me to use the freedom of a friend, in telling you, that I think you are cruelly trifling with Edward Sidney and Frederick Somers. It seems to me, that you ought to decide between them, and not keep them both in a state of suspense, as you now do."

"Really, Miss Hastings!" replied Virginia, her eyes flashing fire, and cheeks flushing with anger, "you have given me quite a lecture.—As if I must choose to find a husband, in either Edward Sidney or Frederick Somers! At any rate," she added, "if I do flirt a little, I do not practice my arts upon the betrothed of another, like some others I could name."

"What do you mean?" asked Esther, in her turn indignant.

"Just what I say," replied Virginia. "If the coat fits, take it."

Esther looked at her, in speechless indignation.

"Really, Esther," said Virginia, after a moment's pause, "I wish I had your eyes. You make a pretty good use of them, I confess, but I could do better. I suppose that is a withering glance, of which I have heard so much, though I have never been favored with one, of such power, before. I wonder that I am not annihilated, yet I am, I believe, unscathed. I must be encased in a three-fold coat of armor."

Esther was on the point of replying that she was right, that nothing could penetrate her protection of assurance, but she made no such reply: "I do not know what you mean," she said instead.

"Then, why, my dear, did you fly into such a passion, and blush so deeply, if you were so innocent? No, Miss Esther, with those deep-seeing eyes of yours, you are not unconscious that Mr. Templeton is dead in love with you."

"Virginia!" replied Esther, calmly, "I hope you are jesting; at any rate, I must request you to abstain from such expressions. If your words are in jest, they are unwelcome; if they are serious, they are insulting."

"Esther, my dear," was Jennie's reply, "you should go on to the stage. Your air and manner would do justice to any Tragedy Queen. I have no doubt that you would be a star in a very short time." Then turning to the window, she began humming—"Oh, no! we never mention her," while Esther, half vexed with her, said nothing.

Emily soon entered. "What shall we do with our-

selves to-day?" she asked. "I have just been in to see Maria; she says she feels much better, and is about getting up. What do you say, after she has taken her breakfast, to going to old Mrs. Watson's, and having our fortunes told?"

"That it would be capital sport," said Virginia, while Esther smilingly replied that she should like to go also.

"Very well, then, we will have the horse harnessed, after Maria has breakfasted, and ride there; it is only about a mile from here, and the drive will do Maria good."

They were soon ready, and started on their way; at last, they reached the house—a little low cottage, which, failing to receive any paint from its owner, had assumed, from the hand of Time, a dirty brown hue.

Emily pushed open the outer door, as it was ajar, and stepped in. The entry was unfinished; there were no balusters to the stair-case, and the sides of the place were lathed only. Several water-pails ornamented the entry, over which they very nearly stumbled.

They knocked at the inner door for some time in vain, though they heard heavy footsteps in the next room.

At last the door opened, and a small-framed woman, a little bent by age, stood before them. She was far from prepossessing in her appearance; her complexion sallow and face wrinkled, her hair hung in elf-

locks from under her cap, and her eyes were keen and piercing.

"Wall!" was Mrs. Watson's first salutation, "What under the sun do you stand there, knockin' and knockin', as if you was goin' to tear anybody's house down. When you hear folks round, and they don't come to the door, you orter go where they be; of course they're busy, and don't want to be called off."

"Can you wait upon us, this morning?" asked Emily.

"I dunno," was the reply, "I hev hed lots of company this mornin'. 'When it rains it alus pours,' and they alus come the wrong time. I hedn't got my bed made nor nothin' done, and I was detarmined to git my bed done, when I heerd you; that's what I was a doin' on when you come. It's most dinner-time now, and my old man 'll be hoppin' mad, ef his dinner haint ready when he gits home. But you might as well come in; you're coldin' my room, keepin' the door open. I don't want to warm all out doors."

The girls obeyed her summons, and wiping the dust out of four chairs with her apron, she offered seats to her company, all the while talking.

"It's alus jist so; I niver knowed it to fail. Folks alus foriver comes the wrong time. Now, last week, I should hev been glad to seen somebody, but here I sot, day after day, and no livin' cretur come nigh me. And to-day and yesterday I was so driv that I didn't actually know whether I was on my head or my heels."

While she was delivering her tirade, Esther looked around the room with some curiosity.

The floor was unpainted, but clean; a bench stood under one window, and a table under the other; a small cooking-stove occupied the centre of the room; behind this was a clothes-line, on which hung several towels, a pair or two of stockings, and an apron. The chairs were of Indian manufacture, with straight backs and basket-work seats; a small closet, or rather a few shelves, covered with dishes, stood opposite the window; by the side of this, upon a water-pail, laid the dough-board and rolling-pin, close to which hung a roller-towel.

While Esther was making observations, Emily was urging the old lady to tell their fortunes.

"You will have plenty of time," she said, and at last Mrs. Watson pulled out her table, wiped it with her apron, which seemed to answer a great many purposes, and going to a bag which hung in the corner, took out an old and much worn pack of cards, and shuffling them, handed them to Virginia to cut in three piles, telling her to wish each time.

Virginia drew her chair to the table and did as she was commanded.

"Wall!" said the old lady, taking her cards up, and laying them, one by one, on the table, in rows. "Wall! You're a gal that hez a great many beaux—you go into a great deal of company, and haint never hed no great trouble. You wisht somethin' about a dark-haired feller, and you'll git your wish; but you'll hev a little trouble gittin' on't. There's a

light complected feller, that bears a good heart for you, but you don't care nothin' about him—your back is turned to him," she said, pointing to the queen of hearts, which was the card she called Virginia. "There's an old man dreadful taken with you," she went on. "He wants you orfully; see, he's standin' on his head, he's in sich a hurry," pointing to the knave of clubs. Cut agin, and I'll tell ye whether you hev him or not."

Virginia did so, and the old lady re-commenced:

"You don't live where you're stayin' now; you're goin' to move soon. There you be; there's good luck round you. This is a good fortin'; you've seen your wust days. There's money round that old feller; he's nearer you than tuthers be this time. Cut agin!"

The third time she announced that there was a letter coming to her. "Good news in it," she said. "You'll be married in six weeks or six months to the old feller. He'll be a good husband to you."

Maria's turn now came, and very nearly the same fortune was in store for her; it was varied, however, by a present, and a journey over the water.

"You won't be married quite so soon as t'other gal, nor you haint got quite so good a fortin', but it's pooty good. There's an old man got a good heart for you; I guess it's your father. There's a light complected feller and a dark complected feller in love with you. You wisht about one on 'em, but I'm afeard, my dear, that you won't git your wish; there's a disappointment near it, but you may git it arter all: there haint no very bad ceards round it. You're goin' to hev a

bit of sickness, you or somebody very near you, p'raps it's your father, but he'll git well again."

She now proceeded to tell Esther's fortune, first filling her tea-kettle, and putting in some potatoes to bake.

"We must hev dinner for all fortins," she said, as she resumed her seat. Esther, she told that she had lost a near friend not long since, which Esther's dress indicated, and at which she expressed no surprise.

"You're a quiet kind of a gal," she said, "and don't meddle with nobody's business but your own. You have seen your wust days; there's good luck in store for you. You are goin' to be married sooner than you think fur; in less than a year. You won't have no greats of a house, but you don't care about show; you'd rather hev one room, and keep it neat and clean. Sally Jenkins was in here last night," she went on, suddenly pausing in the midst of her fortune telling. "She and a real nice-looking feller. Do you know whether she's courted or not?"

Esther did not, as Miss Jenkins was not one of her acquaintances.

"So Peggy Baker is married at last," continued Mrs. Watson, handing the cards to Esther to shuffle. "I alus thought she'd come to, and hev him."

"I never did," said Virginia, very demurely, while her companions looked at her in astonishment.

"Oh! I knowed she would," returned Mrs. Watson. "I see his love-letters. I s'pose I've heerd five hundred read, but his'n beat all. Oh! they made my very blood run cold! so good, passages of scrip-

ture in 'em. 'Oh, Peggy!' says he, 'I love you dearly, I do wisht I could see you; I shall sartin die without you!' Oh, it brought tears to my eyes to hear um. Wall! he'll make her a good husband."

She now proceeded to finish telling Esther's fortune, which was speedily accomplished. Emily declined having her's told; the ninepences were paid, and the girls bade her good-bye, thanking her for her repeated invitations to come again, as she said she hadn't "half time to tell their fortins."

"She is a great curiosity," they repeated, and laughed gaily at the similarity of their fortunes.

CHAPTER XXV.

A TRIAL.

It was night. Maria slept quietly by her side, but Esther tossed restlessly upon her sleepless couch.

The words of Virginia, "Mr. Templeton loves you!" seemed ringing in her ears. "Is it so?" she thought, "and if so, why should my heart bound exultingly at the idea? Have I then given my affections to the betrothed of another?"

She would have banished the unwelcome thoughts, and in a pleasant reverie, pictured to herself her future as the wife of one so noble, good, and generous, as Mr. Templeton.

She hardly thought of Emily at all, but a pang of self-reproach struck her as she reflected on the fate of her friend.

"Shall I then bring wretchedness upon her?" she asked herself, "selfish, heartless being that I am!" She tried now to cheat herself into the belief that it was only as a friend that she regarded him; but the pang that struck her heart, as she thought of him as the husband of another, convinced her of the truth, unwelcome as it was, and she resolved to look it fear-