

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-

lessly in the face, and to set herself at once about the task of estranging herself from him.

"I must avoid him," she thought, "for I cannot trust myself in his society. Weak, foolish girl, that I am!"

Bitterly she reproached herself, but at last, having made her resolutions, and marked out her future course, she fell asleep.

For several days following, she adhered to her determination. She excused herself on one plea after another, when Mr. Templeton offered to read to her; and if left alone with him, replied briefly to his remarks, and if possible left him. She noticed that this unusual reserve seemed to give him pain; he appeared surprised, but said nothing; and in the presence of others, she treated him as ever in a calm and friendly manner.

One day Virginia, Emily, and Maria had gone out to take a ride. Esther had declined going, as she had several letters to write, and was busily engaged in so doing, when Mr. Templeton entered.

"I am sorry," she said, in a slightly confused manner, "that the girls have all gone away; I will speak to aunt Mary;" and she arose to do so.

"Stop, Esther!" replied Mr. Templeton, looking at her reproachfully; "I am not at all sorry to have an opportunity to ask, what is the meaning of the reserve with which you treat me? Is it, as I have thought, that you have discovered my feelings towards you, and would chill me, by the expression of your indifference?"

"Mr. Templeton," replied Esther, endeavoring to release her hand, which he held firmly in his grasp, "I am not aware that I have given occasion for any grave charge. I regard you as a friend, and ever shall, as a very kind and highly valued one. I hope to be esteemed by you in the same light."

"Friend!" repeated Mr. Templeton; then suddenly exclaimed, "Do not pretend to misunderstand me, Esther. You do not, or at least you shall not! I am ready fearlessly to avow, that I love you, as I never dreamed that I could love woman, with a devotion such as no one ever can offer you, since I am willing even to be called dishonorable to gain you. And now tell me that I am pledged to another; that all the world will despise me; tell me this, and yet I can bear it. For if these are your words, yet in your heart you will not say so, for I have read your inmost soul, Esther. You love me! I read it in your varying color, in your look, even in the coldness with which you have treated me in everything."

Esther's eyes flashed indignantly—for this manner of triumphantly asserting that she loved him roused her pride—as she replied, "Since you have uttered the words that I would have said, you have spared me the pain of telling one, whom I *have* esteemed indeed, that he is about proving himself unworthy of the high place in my regard that I had given him. And *how* have I then given you occasion to make the bold avowal that I return your love, as you are pleased to call your sentiments towards me? You mistake me, Mr. Templeton, if you think that I regard the solemn

tie which binds you to Emily as a light thing, to be cast off as the whim takes you. If I have been so weak as to forget this it was but for a moment. I have some regard for my honor, if you have none."

"Forgive me," returned Mr. Templeton, when she had ceased speaking, "but hear me," he added, as she turned to leave the room. "Is it then more *honorable*, since you tell me I have forgotten it, to marry Emily, when my whole heart is another's? To make her my wife, in the sight of man, when this is but a solemn mockery in the sight of God! Shall I not do her a deeper wrong, in so doing, than if now, before it is too late, I tell her that I was mistaken in my feelings towards her, that I do not love her as I ought. Tell me, Esther! Forgive my rash and passionate words, and show me what I should do in such trying circumstances. Be my *friend* now, if you will not be more."

Esther was much moved, for a voice in her heart was seconding his words. She hesitated—"But Emily! she loves him so deeply, so devotedly; shall I cause her this great grief?" she thought, and despised herself for her momentary hesitation.

"Mr. Templeton," said she, "you do love Emily! It is only a momentary infatuation which has led you to imagine that you preferred me. You have won her affections, and it is right that you should marry her. You will conquer this fancy for me, and, happy in the consciousness of doing right, and blessed with her love, you will forget me;" and as she pronounced these words, which she felt were to separate her from him forever, her voice faltered.

"Oh, Esther," exclaimed Mr. Templeton, "how can you thus do violence to your nature? Are you not doing yourself a deeper wrong than the fancied one to Emily? For, Esther, you mistake me; calm, cold, and unimpassioned as I may have appeared to you, to others, and even to myself, I see now that there is a depth to my feelings of which I had never dreamed, until my love for you has revealed my secret soul. I thought that I loved Emily! But now I see that I knew not what it was to love. You have taught me this! You have showed me what happiness might be mine, and yet turn from me with cold words of duty, bidding me go on, where every step plunges me deeper into misery! Is it the sincere and upright Esther Hastings who condemns me to a life of hypocrisy?"

Esther trembled and turned pale. Mr. Templeton noticed the impression he had made, and added, "Weigh well what you say! for on your decision hangs, not only my life-long happiness, but that of Emily. Think you that she will not soon perceive that my heart is not hers? and will she not reproach me for the tenfold greater wrong that I do her, in marrying her, than if I had taken the straight-forward course of telling her the truth now? It may cause her a little sorrow at first, but I know her; she has not the depth of heart that you have, Esther."

At the mention of Emily, Esther recovered herself at once. "You do *not* know Emily," she said, "if you think she has not heart. Her very life is in the affections. You are wound into her inmost nature; and if you leave her now, you cast a blight on her

young life. You deceive yourself, if you hope for happiness, when you have rushed on in the path which wild, reckless passion would point out as the true one, heedless of the broken heart of one whom you have vowed to cherish. No, it *is* right for you to marry her, and in the right you will find the only true happiness."

"And shall I cause no sorrow to you, Esther?" asked her companion, in low, tender tones.

She made no reply for a moment, then answered: "You have already caused me pain, by speaking to me as you have done, and I should never have listened to such words from the betrothed of my friend. Such weakness I must expiate by repentance. But you do not inflict on me a life-long grief, as you would on poor Emily."

"Then you will not admit that you love me?" he exclaimed.

"To what purpose do you ask me to do such a wild and foolish thing?" replied Esther. "You have promised to abide by my decision. You have done Emily a great wrong, in gaining her affections, while you have withheld your own. The only remedy in your power is to strive now to give her your whole heart."

"Noble girl!" replied Mr. Templeton, as he looked at her, with ardent admiration. "I will follow your counsels; let me still remain your friend. Forget and forgive my mad folly," he added, taking her hand, almost reverentially, and, bidding her farewell, left her.

Once alone, Esther's assumed fortitude gave way.

She hastened to her chamber, and, fastening her door, flung herself upon her couch, and wept bitterly. Yet she did not regret the course which she had pursued. She looked into the future. Alas! all was a blank there. "Shall I, then," she thought, "because I have met with one heavy blow, sink, crushed beneath it? I, who can counsel others so bravely, shall I, then, at once yield to despair? No! let me now act as I have advised others; let me be up and doing. And have I not, too, been in danger of forgetting the great Creator, while fixing my affection on one of his creatures!"

She arose, and, falling upon her knees by her bedside, prayed fervently to be aided in the path which she felt that she had done right in choosing. As she prayed she grew calmer; and there anew she devoted herself to the cause of Christ.

She had hardly arisen from her position, when a tap at the door was heard. She opened it, and admitted aunt Mary.

"You are not well to-day," said she, fondly smoothing Esther's disordered hair. "Let me bathe your head now, for your eyes show plainly enough that you are suffering from a head-ache."

Esther suffered her to lead her to a seat, for a faintness was coming over her, and she fell back, pale and death-like, in her chair. Aunt Mary, at once dashing cold water upon her, restored her to consciousness.

"My poor child," she whispered, softly, as she bore her to the bed, "what has happened to you?"

"Oh! it is nothing," replied Esther, "or, at least,

nothing that you can help," and tears, which she could not restrain, flowed over her cheeks.

"At least I can sympathize with you, my child," returned Aunt Mary, "and perhaps I have read your coming sorrows, even before you yourself knew them. Do not tremble so, my love. One, who has suffered as I have done, gains a marvellous quickness in seeing the woes of others. Am I not right in thinking that Mr. Templeton loves you?"

Esther buried her face in her hands, and murmured, in the deepest humiliation, "alas, Aunt Mary, I have been so weak and so wicked as to return it."

Miss Sidney pressed her warmly to her heart, and, lying on her motherly bosom in tears and blushes, Esther told her all.

"God bless you, my own noble child!" said Aunt Mary, when she had finished; then, folding her in her warm embrace, added, "your secret is as safe as if you had entrusted it to your mother's keeping."

Several days had passed. Esther had regained her calm cheerfulness of manner, but she felt restless and unhappy. Strive as she might against depression, she could not wholly overcome it. "I must busy myself about something," she resolved, and soon made known her determination to return to Newton.

Emily warmly urged her to prolong her visit, but she had decided and was unmoved. Maria and Virginia, too, said that they had already prolonged their stay longer than they had any idea of doing, and, in the course of a few days, the three friends left together.

Esther had no sooner reached Newton than she an-

nounced her intention of teaching again, and was resolute in her determination, though it was vehemently opposed by both Margaret and her father and mother.

Mr. Wilton, at last, finding that it was of no use to say more to her, obtained for her a situation as assistant in a flourishing boarding-school at Newton, so that Mrs. Wilton might not be left alone, he said.

Employment, she felt, was what she needed, and, engrossed in her duties, she soon felt, as she appeared, like her olden self.

Months slipped rapidly away, and, in the autumn, a letter from Emily announced her approaching union with Mr. Templeton, and requested Esther to be her bridesmaid.

This announcement, though it was what Esther had desired and expected, caused her some sadness, but she reproached herself, and struggled violently to overcome her weakness. In a great measure she succeeded; but she felt that she could not perform the friendly service which Emily asked.

She wrote her kindly and cheerfully, wishing her all happiness, but declining to act as bridesmaid, alleging, as an excuse, her inability to leave her school duties, as, indeed, it would have been very inconvenient.

Long letters from Virginia and Maria soon reached her, giving her glowing descriptions of the wedding. Maria, in a postscript added, that Ned Somers had, at last, been rejected by Virginia, and was about sailing for Europe.