

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### VIRGINIA AT HOME.

THE afternoon sun was shining brightly into a handsomely furnished parlor in Portland, where Mrs. Clifton and Virginia were seated alone together.

"Mother," said Jennie, sauntering up to a mirror, and twisting one of her long curls round her finger, "I must have a new dress for Mrs. Anderson's party."

"Why, Virginia, won't your India muslin do? you have only worn it twice!"

"No ma'am," emphatically replied Virginia, "I'm not going to be known, like Pauline Vernet, by my dress, and hear it whispered, 'here comes Virginia Clifton with that everlasting India muslin.'"

"Well, then! I suppose you must have one. What shall it be? A pink tarleton?"

"Tarleton! no, indeed!" repeated Virginia scornfully. "I'm tired to death of such dresses! At every party, you meet tarletons flounced, or with double skirt, or trimmed in some such way, at every step. No, mother, I'm not going to be dressed in any such common affair."

"What do you want, then?" asked her mother.

"Oh! a lovely white silk, looped up with rosebuds, and trimmed with blond or Valenciennes lace."

"White silk!" ejaculated Mrs. Clifton, in her turn astonished.

"Oh! pink will do as well, if you prefer," said Virginia. "In fact, perhaps pink would be more becoming."

"Why, my child, you are crazy! Think how expensive it would be, and you would never wear it more than twice, either."

"I don't care," persisted Virginia, "but one of two things is certain,—either I have the dress, or I won't go one step to the party."

"And what excuse will you make to Mr. Norton, who has engaged to go with you to Mrs. Anderson's?"

"I leave that to you, mother. You may say I'm sick, or anything else you choose; and he may go with Fan Currier,—she's dying to get him in her train. I'm sure I don't care who he's tacked to, if I only get clear of him. I don't know, on the whole, but it will be the best way, to withdraw a while from the field, and let Fan take him off my hands."

"You talk very foolishly, Jennie," said her mother,—"Norton was the only one of her daughter's many suitors, whom she thought it best to secure, as he was regarded as a very eligible match,—and you treat Mr. Norton very improperly."

"I'll treat him worse than ever," replied Jennie, "if I can't go to the party. I'll see if I can't provoke him, if he has any spirit in him. Oh! I do hate a man that's so like a whipped spaniel; the more you abuse him, the more ready is he to lick your hand!"

"Virginia Clifton! stop, this moment!" exclaimed

her mother, with heightened color and flashing eyes, "Dare to behave as you have proposed, and I will renounce you forever. You may form your own plans, and carry them out as you choose; you shall have no assistance from me."

Virginia quailed a little, for she did not like to brave her mother in her occasional fits of passion, but said, "Well, mother, I'll make a bargain with you. Get me the dress, and I will be as polite as possible to the ancient gentleman, whom you have selected for my cavalier; but, if you do not, I have enough of my mother in me, to do as I have told you."

"I will see," replied Mrs. Clifton, "but I hate to ask your father. Nothing makes him so angry as to ask him for money."

"I leave you to manage that," said her daughter. "But you must ask him to-night, for there are only two days before the party."

Mr. Clifton soon after entered. He was a tall, and fine-looking man, but he looked care-worn and wearied, and threw himself languidly down in a chair, without speaking.

"Does your head ache?" asked his wife, in a low voice.

"Yes," he replied, shortly, and subsided into silence.

Mrs. Clifton looked, appealingly, towards Virginia, who had withdrawn to a window, where she stood, carelessly playing with one of the curtain tassels.

"Just as you choose, mother," she said aloud, in answer to her mother's look.

Mrs. Clifton sighed, and then, approaching her husband, said, "Jennie is invited to the Andersons' to a party."

"Well, what of it?" replied Mr. Clifton, crustily.

"She wants a new dress," continued her mother.

"A new dress!" he repeated, "and where does she expect to get it? How much money will she need?"

"Certainly, seventy-five or a hundred dollars," said his wife.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Clifton, in violent anger, "and where am I to raise it? Here I am, harrassed to death, my notes falling due, and nothing coming in to pay them with. Dunned by everybody for money, to pay bills that your foolish extravagance has run up, at every store in town, and when I come home, tired and worn out with trying to keep myself and you above water, you too, begin to teaze me for money! Oh! you are like the daughters of the horse-leech, crying 'Give! give!'"

"Then, I suppose," said his wife, "you will not let Jennie go to the party!"

"She may go, for all that I care," he replied, harshly.

"But you do not want her to look shabby?" persisted Mrs. Clifton.

"Woman! woman! you will drive me crazy!" exclaimed her husband. "I tell you, failure, dishonor and beggary are staring me in the face, and is this a time to talk to me of ball dresses? I have struggled like a drowning wretch for years past, but I cannot do it much longer. I must sink! You and poor Jen-

nie," he said, his voice softening, "may thank your stars, that you have bread to eat; for if I should die, God knows what would become of you!"

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Virginia, coming to his side, and fondly embracing him, "I will not add to your troubles! I do not want the dress! Oh! if I could only help you, in some way!"

"Poor child! and what can you do?" he said gently.

"Not much," she replied, bitterly. Oh! if I were only a man! How much I would do for you! But it is of no use telling. What we can do now, is to give up this house, sell this expensive furniture, and live within our means. It would be, perhaps, a little mortifying, but it is false pride alone that would prevent. I am willing to do anything to relieve you!"

"God bless you, my child!" said her father, releasing himself from her embrace, and leaving the room.

"Oh! what a curse is poverty!" exclaimed Mrs. Clifton, throwing herself back in her easy chair, and clasping her jewelled hands.

Virginia glanced, with a bitter smile, upon the rich and costly furniture of the room, upon her mother's and her own rich dress, and replied: "Say, rather, what a curse is false pride, and that contemptible fear of what the world will say, that leads us to live beyond our means."

Mrs. Clifton did not heed this remark, but went on—"You see, now, Virginia, what I have to endure! This is only one, of a thousand similar scenes, that

your father gets up, whenever I say anything about money. Oh, my child! never marry a poor man!"

"If I did," retorted Virginia, "I would accommodate myself to his circumstances; not drive him to despair, in trying to gratify my whims."

"You deceive yourself," replied Mrs. Clifton. "With your expensive habits, what you would call economy, would drive a poor man mad."

"It is unnecessary to dispute about that," returned Virginia, "but at least I can do something, if it is but little, to help father. I will support myself! I will teach!"

"Never! Neither your father nor I would ever allow it," replied her mother. "If you are so anxious to help him, do something far better, marry Mr. Norton."

Before Virginia could reply, her father re-entered.

"There," said he, handing her a roll of bills, "take this and get your dress!"

"But, father," began Virginia.

"Do not say anything," interrupted Mr. Clifton. "I have frightened you. Matters are not quite so bad as I represented them."

As she left the room, he said to his wife, "She may as well take what I can give her now. I don't know how much longer I can stagger under my business. This is but a drop in the ocean, and if I deny her request, it will help neither my creditors nor myself."

"But if she should marry Mr. Norton," began his wife.

"Jane!" replied her husband, sternly; "I have violated my sense of what is right, often enough, God knows! I can hardly believe that I am the same man I once was! But I will never sell my child—she shall never be forced into a marriage. Let her do as she chooses"—and he paced hurriedly up and down the parlors.

"But she *shall choose* to become Mrs. Norton," muttered Mrs. Clifton between her closed teeth; then rising, she followed Virginia to her chamber.

"I will not *get* the dress," said Jennie, as her mother entered, "*and* I am sorry enough to have added a feather to father's load of troubles."

"Pshaw, Jennie!" replied her mother; "you don't know your father so well as I do. He has been talking these twenty years, in the same way. He would get along well *enough*, if he only had a little assistance. A lift from a son-in-law would set him on his feet at once, *and* relieve him from this pressure of business; which, to own the truth, I sometimes fear will really make him insane!"

Virginia grew pale!—Insanity! It chilled her very blood. She idolized her father, and, for the moment, thought no sacrifice too great to save him.

Her mother read her thoughts, and thinking she had said enough, left the room, taking with her the bills which Virginia had thrown carelessly on the bureau, for she was resolved that her daughter should look more beautiful, at the coming party, than any of the rival belles, who were candidates for the hand of the wealthy Mr. Norton.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### TWO LIFE-PATHS, AND THE CHOICE.

VIRGINIA reclined musingly upon a sofa, in the parlor of her father's house. She was lying with her eyes half closed, and a pleasant smile parted her lips. A letter, which she had been reading, she held in her hand, and ever and anon she glanced at its pages. So absorbed was she in her reverie, that she hardly noticed the entrance of the stately and handsomely-dressed woman, who approached her, and drawing a chair to her side, asked her "what she was dreaming about?"

"I was thinking of the future, mother," she replied. "I believe this letter was the beginning of my dream, and the end,—oh, I don't dare to tell you the end," she added, smiling, as she gave the letter to her mother.

"The end of all day-dreams, I suppose," replied Mrs. Clifton, as she took the letter; "they usually share the same fate—an airy nothing, which melts 'into thin air;' 'the baseless fabric of these visions leave not a wreck behind.'"

"Well," she continued, when she had finished the perusal of the letter which her daughter had given

her, while Virginia had been anxiously watching her features, endeavoring to read her opinions, but without success—"well, Jennie, let me read, now, the reply to this eloquent gentleman's letter. He has really a very poetical name—Edward Sidney. Where is your reply? I suppose it is a rejection, and that you have consigned him, like so many more of your admirers, to that sad state, where life is a blank, &c. &c., until they forget their woes, in a new love-affair—

'Even as one heat, another heat expels,  
Or as one nail, by strength, drives out another,  
So the remembrance of their former love  
Is by a nearer object quite forgotten.'

But your reply, my dear?"

"I have not yet written one," replied Virginia; "but, mother," she added, speaking with difficulty, and blushing deeply, "I had not determined to reject him."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Clifton, coolly, looking at her daughter with a searching glance, "and why not, pray? I do not regard him as a very eligible match. Why not?" she repeated.

"Because, mother," answered Jennie, "I do really love him, and though he is not rich, nor will he probably ever be, as he himself says, yet I know I should be happy with him. For oh, mother, wealth is not always happiness. He is so noble, so good,—he will check all my faults, and I feel sure that under his direction, I shall be a more noble and true woman."

"Can he assist your father?" asked her mother coldly.

"I know that he would," replied Virginia, enthusiastically; "he would make every exertion in his power, for he is the most unselfish, generous man in the world."

"Have you finished," returned Mrs. Clifton, as Virginia paused. "Because I must say that I am surprised. That you, a sensible girl, should talk in this way is perfectly incomprehensible. But this love, as they call it, what fools it makes of all the world! What do you think a paltry sea-captain's pay would do, towards relieving your father? Nothing! It would be swallowed up, like a grain of sand in the sea; but setting aside this consideration; think of yourself, with beauty, talents, accomplishments, all wasted on a common sailor; and some half-civilized villagers your only society. Picture yourself, Virginia, as the wife of such a man, whose frequent absence must be employed by you in sewing, or quietly spending a few afternoons with his mother. A man who would be forever finding fault with your lively manners, for you would be often exciting his jealousy by your attractiveness, and your coquetry; for, Miss Jennie, though your mother, I can see that you *are* a coquette, and a few words, which tie you for life to any man, will not change your character. You will sigh for society—you will brook no restraint, and though *you* may imagine that you will find perfect happiness in a union with Edward Sidney, *I* see only a brief dream, to be followed by a bitter waking, and long years of repentance. See now,

how different will be your future as the wife of Mr. Norton."

Virginia shuddered. "Oh mother!" she exclaimed involuntarily, "Do not name him!"

"Don't be so silly!" retorted her mother. "Let me tell you, that by a marriage with him, you step at once into a sphere to which you are suited—a leader of fashion. You can thus free your father from all his harrassing cares! The wife of an elderly man, proud of the beauty and charms of his young bride, you can do with him what you will, that is, if you manage him right, and I have no fear of you there. You know very well, Virginia, what it is to be struggling through a lifetime with poverty, or you know enough at least to keep you from falling into the delusion of 'love in a cottage.' It may do very well now for a few years, but look farther. See yourself, in one case, a pale, feeble woman, worn out and harrassed by the petty cares of life, careworn and every vestige of beauty gone, most probably bereft of that love for which you have braved all this; for it is true enough, that when 'poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window;' or, in the other case, the same years have but added to your beauty. You will be still one of the brightest ornaments of society, and happy in doing right and in following the advice of your mother, whose interest and yours are one. Choose now, my dear Jennie," said her mother. Look at it well, and decide."

"Leave me, mother," said her daughter, in a hollow voice. "To-morrow——"

"No, Jennie, decide *now*. Which shall it be, the wife, or rather drudge of Edward Sidney, or the elegant Mrs. Norton? Remember, too," she added impressively, "that your father stands or falls on your decision, though I have said but little about that, and these are not the times when children are ready to suffer for parents. You know all, and I need not repeat what you already know so well."

Virginia made no reply for some time. At last she looked up from the sofa, where she had buried her face in her hands.

"I have decided," she said. "I will do as you wish!"

"Spoken like my own daughter," replied her mother, while Jennie, who had hoped even against hope, that her mother would not compel her to make such a sacrifice, fell back, pale and fainting, upon the sofa.

No gleam of pity softened Mrs. Clifton's eye, as she looked on her child; she merely remarked, as she applied some restoratives, "You should learn to control yourself! Mr. Norton is to receive his answer from me, and he will be here to see you to-night. Remember! no foolish shrinkings. You have chosen him of your own free will!"

"Oh, mother!" groaned Virginia, "This is more than I can bear! I cannot, will not see him to-night!"

Mrs. Clifton looked at her, and saw that she did indeed appear too feeble to see any one.

"Well, then," she answered, "I will excuse you to him for this time."

A mute look of gratitude was her only reply.

"And this letter, Virginia? Will you answer it, or shall I?"

"I cannot," replied her daughter.

"Very well! I will do it," said Mrs. Clifton. Then taking Jennie's hand, continued, "You had better go to your room and lie down a while."

Virginia complied with her mother's advice, and as she left the room, Mrs. Clifton looked after her, murmuring, "It is for her good."

Alone in her chamber, Virginia thought of all that had passed. It seemed almost like a dream, that she had refused the man she loved, and was to become the wife of another; but as her thoughts gained form, she began to agree with her mother. She had seen too long the struggle to keep up appearances, which had galled her mother's proud spirit, had seen too many of the shifts to which poverty had driven her, to wish for a similar life. The thought, too, that she had saved her father, added strength to her resolution. By degrees she began to grow reconciled to the idea of her wealthy lover, and she knew that he must have no idea that she was his unwillingly, if she would retain that power which she knew she possessed over him.

Resolutely, then, she determined that she would go on in the path she had chosen. The crisis in Virginia's fate had come! Henceforward no weak regrets should hinder her from walking steadily forward in

her chosen way. When once she had fully decided, she lay exhausted awhile, then at last fell asleep.

Her mother found her sleeping when she entered her chamber, and pressed a kiss upon her brow, satisfied that the true happiness of her child was secured to her. "She shall never suffer what I have borne so long—the sting of poverty," she murmured. "Her proud spirit shall not be broken, nor her life be made miserable, by the meannesses to which want compels its victims. My darling child!" she uttered audibly, as she kissed her again fondly, and stole quietly from the room.

It was quite late when Virginia awoke from her sleep. She rose hastily and went into the parlor. Her father was slowly walking the floor.

"Is it true, my child, as your mother tells me, that you have, of *your own free will*, consented to marry Mr. Norton?" he asked, approaching her, and taking her hand.

"It is true!" replied Virginia, calmly.

"God bless you, my love!" returned Mr. Clifton, "and may you be happy!"

"He shall never know," thought Virginia, "that I make a sacrifice for him, and indeed I do it willingly, though he is too noble to allow it, if he knew all."

"And when is the marriage to take place?" asked Mr. Clifton.

"As soon as possible," she replied briefly, and going to the piano, began playing a lively air.

"You have not deceived me, Jane?" said Mr.

Clifton, almost sternly, to his wife, who was at the opposite side of the room.

"Does she look like a miserable victim?" asked his wife, glancing at her child, who wore the excited and heroic look of a daughter, as she felt she was, about to save her father.

Her father looked at her, and though but half convinced, was forced to be satisfied.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### ALMOST AN OLD MAID.

"THIRTY years old to-day!" repeated Esther Hastings, musingly, as she sat alone in her quiet chamber. "Thirty years old! I am indeed, as I have overheard my pupils call me, an old maid. But why should I shrink from the title?" She went on, thinking half aloud, "Though the duties of wife and mother may not be mine, yet I may fill a place in society equally noble."

The vision of Aunt Mary rose before her, pure and holy, dispensing joy wherever she went, soothing the sad, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. "Help me, oh Father!" she murmured, "to take cheerfully, like her, the path destined for me, that when death comes, I may receive the welcome, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

She rose from her seat, by the open window, and standing before the mirror, began to arrange her abundant brown hair, which the wind had tossed, somewhat rudely displacing it.

Time had not made any ravages on Esther's smooth cheek; it had but added beauty to her noble and cheerful countenance. Decision, tempered by gen-