

CHAPTER V.

For marriage is a matter of more worth
Than to be dealt in by attorneyship.

SHAKSPEARE.

Of wiles
More inexpert, I boast not.—Then let those
Contrive who need, unworthy of our might.

MILTON.

AMHERST had arrived at Oakenwold Manor from Oxford only a short time previous to the marine trip that carried him, as we have just seen, to Scotland.

His father, Sir Cable Oakenwold, was the representative of an ancient and highly respectable family in Kent. Having been born a second son, and in a maritime county, he went early into the navy, and rose, by his bravery and good conduct, to the rank of Admiral of the Blue. Just before

he got his flag he married Amherst's mother, the daughter and heiress of a gentleman of fortune, whose estate lay in the vicinity of the New Forest in Hampshire. Warm in his affections, he was devotedly attached to his wife, and her death, which happened a few years after their marriage, preyed upon his mind, and soured his temper. This event was soon followed by the death of his elder brother, Sir Theophilus, for whom he had the strongest fraternal love and veneration, and for whose loss the succession to his title and immense estates but ill repaid him. These circumstances, added to long habits of uncontrolled and undisputed command, combined to make him testy, impatient of contradiction, and extremely liable to fits of violence, of no long duration to be sure, and of which he was always afterwards ashamed, and ever ready to make treble reparation for what they might have led him to say or do while under their influence. His strong attachment to his wife was naturally transferred with tenfold interest to her only child, and indeed, he doted so on Amherst, that he must have been inevitably ruined from over indulgence, had not the Admiral's eminence in his profession

kept him so constantly employed at sea, that he was compelled to place his boy at a public school, where he remained till he went to Oxford.

Until the period of the Admiral taking up his residence at his paternal seat, that is, a few years previous to the time we are now speaking of, the father and son had rarely met for more than a few days at a time, and that at considerable intervals. But the old veteran's warm heart so dissolved itself upon these occasions, as to make Amherst fully aware of the intrinsic value of its metal, and the young man consequently returned his father's fondness with all the strength of filial love.

As Amherst was the sole hope of the Oakenwolds, and was now almost of age, and the heir of a very large fortune, it was very natural that his father should look anxiously to his making a speedy and respectable marriage; and as the time was hardly past, when fathers used to think that they had a right to be the chief negotiators in such treaties, Sir Cable began to cast about in his mind to discover what fair one would be most worthy of the hand of his son, without such

a notion ever entering into his head, as that there was a chance of his choice being disputed by him for whom it was made. After some little consideration, his thoughts rested on the niece of Lady Deborah Delassaux, a young lady somewhat younger than his son, and whose history had something peculiar in it.

She was the only child of Sir Marmaduke Delassaux. Her father died at Rome, and grief for his loss occasioned her mother's untimely dissolution in bringing her prematurely into the world. She was therefore an orphan as soon as she saw the light, and that too in a foreign land. The charge of the child naturally devolved on her uncle, Sir Godmansbury, who succeeded to his brother's title, whilst his large property descended upon the infant Olivia. It so happened that Sir Godmansbury was travelling in Greece at the time of his brother's death, so that his wife, Lady Deborah, daughter of the Earl of Llanstephan, whom he had left at Naples, took immediate charge of the child in her husband's absence. But the infant was fated to lose her second father, for soon after his return to Italy, and before he could join his lady, Sir Godmansbury

fell by the hand of assassins, or banditti, in a manner the particulars of which were never very well known. Lady Deborah having given way to all those professions of grief becoming a widow, continued to reside abroad for some years, and then returned to England with her niece. They took up their residence at the young ladies' seat of Brokenhurst-Hall, within a few miles of Oakenwold Manor, and it was immediately converted into a magnificent abode by all that wealth could effect.

The Admiral, and his maiden sister who kept house for him, were the only people with whom Lady Deborah and her niece were in the habit of holding much intercourse at the time we are now speaking of. The proud and haughty bearing of both the ladies made them by no means favourites with the neighbouring families, with whom they only associated when formally called on to do so; and the very marked attention they invariably paid to Sir Cable and Miss Margery Oakenwold, was naturally enough interpreted by busy talkers, into a desire to secure so eligible a match as Amherst for Miss Delassaux. But to the good people who were the objects of these observations,

no such political notion ever occurred. In our endeavours to account for the civilities of others towards us, we are seldom at the trouble of looking further than to those merits we are always very ready to give ourselves credit for possessing.

It was after returning from one of his visits to Brokenhurst-Hall, during which more than ordinary attention had been shown him, that the Admiral first conceived the idea of uniting his son to Miss Delassaux. As he was accustomed to carry every scheme into immediate execution as soon as it was engendered, he lost no time in ascertaining the sentiments of Lady Deborah. This he had a very early opportunity of doing; for the ladies of Brokenhurst came to spend a day at Oakenwold Manor. Sir Cable was on the fret until he could detach Lady Deborah from her niece and his sister, that he might open his mind to her in private on the subject of his thoughts.

Miss Margery, all alive to entertain her guests, arrayed in her fawn-coloured satin gown of long and slender waist, and her black silk hood and scarf, and supported by a tall thin cane with an

ivory head, trotted about on her high-heeled shoes, dragging the young lady and her aunt from one object of curiosity to another,—from pasture to shrubbery walk,—from canal to flower plot,—from gold fish bason to tulip bed,—and from Chinese bridge to aviary;—the Admiral panting after them all the while big with his secret, and moist with perspiration, until his small stock of patience began to be exhausted.

“Margery,” cried he at last, “you will over-fatigue yourself;—go in, my good old girl, and take Miss Delassaux with you, to show her your piping bullfinches, and your cabinet of shells. I will lead Lady Deborah on to the extremity of the dark walk, to show her the view of the sea from the seat.”

“Very true, brother,” replied Miss Margery, “very true,—that’s well remembered; it would be a pity, indeed, not to show her ladyship the moss-house. It is all new since you were last here, Lady Deborah, and I may say it was all my own doing, and I am sure it will be a great pleasure to me to show it to you.”

“No, no, Madge,” cried the Admiral hastily, “go in, go in, I tell you,—you know you have

had rheumatism lately, and you are overheating yourself."

At any other time the contraction of her name, that invariably argued a coming storm, would have instantly silenced Miss Oakenwold into implicit obedience. But she was now so fairly mounted on her hobby, that she did not even perceive it.

"I have had no rheumatism these six weeks, brother!" said she.

"I tell you, Madge, I know better, you have rheumatism, and are damned lame at this moment,—and you are as hot as a furnace,—so don't make a fool of yourself and put me in a passion,"—raising his voice,—“don't put me in a passion, I say!"

"I believe, Miss Oakenwold," said Lady Deborah, who was probably as desirous as Sir Cable could be, to have a conference with him in private, "I believe my niece had better return to the house;—she is somewhat delicate, and the sea air, even though coming from a distance, is not always beneficial. I will just walk to the point of view the Admiral so kindly proposes to

lead me to, and then return to look at your shells, of which I am passionately fond.”

Miss Oakenwold stammered,—looked disappointed,—and dropping a curtsy of the old school, said in a submissive tone, “As your ladyship pleases.” And Miss Delassaux, who was not usually remarkable for yielding to the dictation even of her aunt, followed her, on this occasion, with alacrity, from which it might almost have been supposed, that she had actually guessed at the nature of the conversation about to ensue between her and the Admiral.

✓ Sir Cable, to use his own language, was not a man to stand shilly-shally, or to keep firing round bowls at a distance from the enemy. He boldly ran alongside and poured a broadside into her at once. He expatiated on the merits of his son,—on the extent and value of the estates to which he would succeed at his death,—on the antiquity of his family,—and lastly, on the advantages that must accrue to both parties from the contiguity of their respective territories, and the union of both. Nor did he “haul his wind,” until he had exhausted all his oratorical ammunition. Lady Deborah heard him with the greatest

inward delight; but, like an experienced politician, she did not choose to lower the value of her accession to the treaty, by appearing to embrace it too eagerly, or with all the keenness she really felt. She drew up her tall and dignified figure, rendered yet more majestic by the high and rich head-dress she was crowned with, and then seating herself with all the magnificence of a condescending queen, on the mossy seat they had by this time reached, she turned her full piercing black eyes on the Admiral.

“Sir Cable,” said she, “I am not unacquainted with the merits of Mr Oakenwold—public report has done much for him; neither am I ignorant of the respectability of your family. The value or extent of your estates I have never thought of, nor in any union of the kind to which you allude, would such paltry considerations be permitted to enter either into my own or my niece’s mind. Her fortune is, thank Heaven, on a scale of grandeur equal to the high blood from which she is descended by both sides of the house, which might command the proudest alliance. By my good troth,” said she, rolling her large eyes loftily around, “I see not

any reason that she should snatch at the first party that may offer, as if she were an humble spinster !”

Lady Deborah's refined politics had rather carried her too far here. The hasty Admiral, always taking it for granted that the stream of other people's ideas must run in the same direction as his own, was not prepared for any such rhodomontade. Not quite understanding what she would be at, he was taken altogether aback for some minutes, until finally interpreting her ladyship's high tone into a decided rejection of his overtures, the discovery produced a commotion in his mind like the meeting of a swollen river with a furious spring-tide.

“ Oh, very well,—very well, Lady Deborah Delassaux,” exclaimed he, starting abruptly from the mossy seat to which his fatigue had very willingly brought him ; “ as you please—as your ladyship pleases, and as your niece pleases ; my boy is no beggar's brat to go knocking at all the doors in the parish for a wife. Though I say it, who am his father, he has metal in his composition, and purity in his blood, that will entitle him to cock his beaver at e'er a she in Old

England.—But come, come,” continued he, moderating himself a little—“ come, come—no offence on either side ; and since my proposal is not agreeable, let us e’en shake hands, and part friends, and say no more, or think no more, about it.”

“ Admiral Oakenwold,” replied Lady Deborah, keeping her seat, yet relaxing somewhat of her overwhelming importance, whilst a smile disarmed her eyes of much of their haughtiness, “ Sir Cable Oakenwold, you mistake me ; what I have said was by no means intended to convey any objection on my part to the highly respectable, and highly advisable party you have offered my niece in the person of Mr Oakenwold, your only son. My expressions were rather elicited, naturally enough, by the surprise of an unexpected proposal, and dictated by the partiality of an affection for my niece, which I may well call parental, since she has now no other parent than myself. Be assured, however, that my surprise is not unmingled with pleasure. But Miss Delassaux can have no thoughts of marriage as yet, and consequently none of Mr Oakenwold, whom she has hardly seen, though I

think it by no means impossible, that a little intercourse may produce a mutual attachment between the young persons ; and if my influence can at all weigh with her, I have little hesitation in giving you my promise, that it shall not be wanting to direct and foster those favourable first impressions Olivia may receive from an acquaintance with your son."

The Admiral's countenance gradually brightened up during Lady Deborah's speech. He apologized awkwardly for his hasty interpretation of her first reply to his advances, and after a long and confidential conversation, it was ultimately agreed, very much to the satisfaction of both the negotiating powers, that Amherst should be introduced as a visitor at Brokenhurst-Hall, immediately on his arrival in the country.

Lady Deborah and her niece had no sooner left Oakenwold Manor, than the Admiral became impatient to break the secret to his sister.

"Margery," said he abruptly, as they sat *tête-à-tête* after dinner, "I am going to marry Amherst as soon as he comes home."

Miss Oakenwold stared with surprise,—“Dear

me, brother Cable!—what, marry the boy already? why, he is but a child——”

“ Child! you old goose, the lad is nearly of age.”

“ Aye, dear me!—married!” said Miss Margery; “ what will become of all the jellies and preserved fruits I and Mrs Glass have been making, early and late, all this season, and all for Ammy?”

“ Jellies and preserved fruits, indeed!” cried the Admiral; “ is the woman a fool? Why, what a plague, do you take Amherst for a nursery baby, to be fond of such trash?—I’ll tell you what it is, Madge, don’t provoke me with your damned nonsensical old maid’s store-room balderdash. I will marry Ammy, and that directly.”

“ Well, brother,” said Miss Margery, recollecting herself, “ to be sure you know best; but may I ask who is to be the happy bride?”

“ Miss Delassaux, to be sure,” gruffly replied the Admiral.

“ Miss Delassaux!—well, dear me, that is surprising;” and then, in a somewhat lower

tone, she added, "well, after all, they won't be lost."

"What won't be lost, you old carraway comfit?" cried Sir Cable impatiently.

"My preserves, brother," said Miss Oakenwold; "I was just thinking, that as Miss De-lassaux knows nothing of such matters, she cannot have prepared a supply of sweets, and I know Ammy likes them; and as the marriage will most likely be at Brokenhurst-Hall, I was just thinking, that, with care, my preserves would carry that distance very nicely, and make a pretty show at the wedding-feast."

"What a damned old fool you are, Madge; you are enough to make a parson swear. But, come, stir your stumps, old girl, and see that Mrs Glass puts every thing in order for the boy's reception, for, you know, 'from his letter, he will be here to-morrow, or next day, without fail."

Miss Oakenwold hurried off on this most agreeable of all errands, leaving the Admiral to enjoy the repose of his easy chair, and Morpheus never steeped his eyelids in a sweeter balm, than now descended upon them.

He had not dozed above half an hour, when his slumbers were broken by the sound of horses approaching the house; a voice was heard in the hall—it was his son. But I shall leave my reader to imagine the delight that glistened in the old man's eyes, as he rushed to the landing-place of the oaken staircase to meet him; how he strained him to his bosom; how he held him off at arm's length with his left hand, whilst, with his right, he cleared his eyes of their gathering mists, that he might get a more satisfactory view of him. Nor shall I attempt to describe the joy of Aunt Margery,—nor the bustle of the thrifty Mrs Glass,—nor the honest half familiar, half respectful greetings of Tom Cuddy, who had been the Admiral's body-servant and ship-mate for forty years, and who had dandled Amherst in his arms.

The million of questions, generally crowded together without arrangement, by paternal affection, on a first meeting with a darling child, after a long absence, occupied Sir Cable too much, to allow him to broach the subject of the embryo marriage that evening. He thought of nothing else all night, however, and the result of

his reflection was, that it would be as well, perhaps, after all, to let Amherst see the young lady, before he made him aware of the proposed match. He accordingly ordered the coach after breakfast, and drove with his son to Brokenhurst-Hall.

Amherst was received by Lady Deborah and her beautiful niece with a kindness, that, with its usual effect upon young minds, soon won his good opinion of both, and his visit was in every respect so agreeable, that, before leaving the house, the old Admiral was delighted, by hearing him give a very ready acceptance to the warm invitation he received to be a frequent guest there. Seeing matters in so favourable a train, and doubting not, in compliance with the sanguine wishes of his heart, that the match was almost as good as concluded, he resolved to leave his son to make his own approaches, and carry on the siege in his own way, contenting himself with watching the consequences. By thus keeping his schemes *in petto*, he promised himself the pleasure of giving Amherst a most agreeable surprise, when he came to communicate them.

Every succeeding day added to the Admiral's

satisfaction. His son's expeditions to Brokenhurst-Hall became more and more frequent, and in the course of a week or two, the old man began to chuckle with a delight, almost enough to have betrayed him, when, in answer to his inquiries, as to where Amherst had rambled with his gun, he found that his day had been entirely spent there; and as he rallied him on the circumstance of his returning so often with an empty game-bag, he secretly congratulated himself that the youth was fast entangling his heart in the gold and silken meshes he had so ingeniously spread to catch him.