

CHAPTER XII.

Enfin parcourez toutes les passions, c'est sur les cœurs des Grands, qui vivent dans l'oubli de Dieu, qu'elles exercent un empire plus triste et plus tyrannique.

MASSILLON.

LADY DEBORAH DELASSAUX had no sooner retired to her apartment, than she lighted a taper, and opening the letter she had so mysteriously received, sat down eagerly to peruse the following appalling words:—

“ The day of retribution has arrived ; artifice can no longer avail !—Thou art called upon for restitution !—Resistance can but provoke deeper inquiry, that may unfold thy darkest secrets, and hurl thee to perdition !—Bow, then, to the will of thine offended God !—Be thankful that he yet permits thee to make tardy reparation for even a fragment of thy crimes !—To redeem all were as impossible, as for the earth and sea to yield up

their dead at thy puny command!—But mercy on high may yet be purchased by penitence!—Resolve, then!—for the vengeance of Heaven is unrolled, and already quivers over thy devoted head!!!”

The Lady Deborah’s eyes glared as they decyphered the characters of this strange communication. They seemed to her to blaze as she read them. Her countenance was distorted by the most horrible expression, and she sank back into her chair.

“Mercy!” said she, in a deep soliloquy, mingled with incessant groans, “mercy! where can there be mercy for me? Oh that indeed it were possible for the sea to give up its dead! Oh that I could pluck back my years from the gulf of time into which they have irrecoverably floated; or that an ocean of oblivion would roll over them to drown the memory of their events for ever! From myself, alas! I cannot hide them. I must still carry the burning remembrance of them in this tortured breast, until I am consumed by the fire it nourishes within its recesses. But I at least thought that my name would remain unsullied—that my reputation

would be safe from the taunts and insults of the vulgar world. My worst crime was known but to two in this country.—No, no,” continued she, after a pause, “it cannot be. One of these has fallen by the hand of the other, without any fresh guilt to me, and the arch-fiend Antonio, is by this time himself unconscious. How long have my life and reputation hung trembling beneath his threats, ready to be blasted at every moment by the breath of his malignity. But I trust that, ere this, his venomous tongue is put to sleep, by a poison yet more potent than its own; and then,—pooh! he died by his own hand.—A felon flying from the messengers of justice, by whom he was pursued for a double murder, and the pitiful robbery of a horse!—”I was most excellent!—Yet who can have known as much as this paper hints at? Antonio, however vacillating, cannot but have been faithful as yet. But his assistant,—I have but too much reason to think that he may have proved treacherous. But, then, granting that he has been so, he now no longer exists to support his own tale; and coming, as it must do, at second hand from him to whom it has been bequeathed, it can have but

little force against the high testimony of such a person as Lady Deborah Delassaux. I had no one to fear, save that viper whom I have so long cherished in my bosom, who threatened to sting me, but whose sting, I trust, is by this time harmless. My life and my character are still safe, and I may defy all empty, unsubstantiated accusations. That there will be some attempt to frighten me into concessions, this paper seems to assure me. Let me then be again that woman, whose very look could wither, and if any attempt should be made, a wary scanning of my way, must enable me to judge how far it will be prudent to yield or to resist. As for her, she must stand or fall, as circumstances shall unfold themselves; if my fame can but be preserved, she merits no sacrifice at my hand. Much have I done and suffered for her, and how ill has she requited me! If fate has resolved to punish her haughtiness, she must submit; and, in truth, she has so ruined herself by her headstrong misconduct, that little remains to be taken from her. At all events, come what may, when both are struggling in the sea of hazard, where life and fame with me are both in peril, she shall not tug

me down. I'll shake her strangling death-grasp from off my neck, and let her fortunes perish !”

After a night of tossing on a sleepless pillow, she was roused by the noise occasioned by the arrival of several carriages. She listened, and heard the steps of a large company ascending the staircase, while the names of Sir Cable Oakenwold, and Sir William Percival, were announced to her, accompanied with a request that she would honour them with a private conference for half an hour. She thought of Amherst, and her niece, and their union. But recollecting that the gentleman who attended the Admiral was one of the most active magistrates of the county, less pleasing anticipations broke in upon her mind, and she recurred to the paper of the previous night. As she dressed herself, however, she ran over her reflections upon it, and, summoning up all her courage, she descended to the drawing-room with a firm step. Before reaching the door, there was something in the very sound of her tread that prepared the gentlemen for her magnificent *entrée*.

She was habited in a long-waisted black velvet robe, clasped by a large and brilliant diamond buckle, and she wore a valuable necklace of the

same precious stones, set in massively-wrought gold. Her head-dress was of a height that added to her lofty and commanding aspect. The gentlemen rose and saluted her as she came in, and she curtsied to each of them with that formality, in former days considered as the *acmé* of grace. Her face was pale, and its pallidity was more remarkable from the contrast it afforded to her black drapery. Her piercing eyes were sunk and oppressed; yet haughty determination sat upon her brow. To an uninformed spectator she had all the appearance of being totally unsuspecting of what was about to occur.

“ Sir Cable Oakenwold,” said she, slowly advancing towards them with grand and easy motion, “ Sir Cable Oakenwold, it is so long since you have honoured my house, I mean my niece’s house, with your presence, that I had almost begun to fancy one or other of us had innocently given you umbrage. I am glad to see, however, that I have been mistaken, and that we are not entirely forgotten by the family of Oakenwold Manor.

“ Sir William Percival, I believe,” said she, turning to that gentleman with solemn reverence, “ I am happy to have the honour of seeing you,

for the first time, if I err not, at Brokenhurst ; for I do not remember that I ever before had the gratification of a visit from you. Pray be seated, gentlemen," added she, as she studiously selected and occupied an elbow-chair that stood with its back to the light.

The Admiral replied only by a silent bow, as he shuffled himself backwards into a chair ; but Sir William Percival entered immediately on business.

" On this occasion, Lady Deborah," said he, as he seated himself, " neither my friend, the Admiral, nor I, can be entitled to take credit for a complimentary visit. But although the subject on which we come to treat is of a sufficiently disagreeable nature, yet I trust the proposals we have to offer you are such, as will at least convince you of the friendliness of our intentions."

" I am utterly at a loss to understand what business you can have with me, gentlemen," said she, carelessly lounging back within the recess of her chair ; " but whatever its nature may be, I shall give it all the attention I am capable of, or that a racking rheumatic headache I now suffer from will permit me to bestow."

“ That we may keep your Ladyship as short a time in suspense as possible,” said Sir William, “ I shall, without farther preface, inform you, that certain rumours have gone abroad that the young lady, whom the world supposes, (and whom I am bound to believe that you also have all along considered,) to be your niece, and proprietrix of the Delassaux and Brokenhurst estates, has no just pretensions to either of these titles, but was in her infancy, somehow or other, imposed as such upon society!”

“ That is a good shot to bring her to,” thought the Admiral, as, in combination with Sir William, he employed himself in scanning her countenance, as narrowly as the unfavourable light she sat in would permit him. Lady Deborah started with a well-feigned astonishment.

“ Olivia Delassaux not my niece!!” she exclaimed, with a corresponding action; “ do I hear you correctly?—Oh it is impossible you can mean to say to!”—She paused, and Sir William paused also, and for such a time, too, as he was satisfied she would not have permitted to pass without further interrogation, had the subject been new to her.

“ I certainly said, Lady Deborah, that the young lady, called your niece, is believed to stand in no such relation to you.”

Lady Deborah started; but there was now more of nature in the movement. She seemed to listen more earnestly, and Sir William proceeded,—

“ In short, men believè that she is no daughter of the late Sir Marmaduke Delassaux.”

Lady Deborah had recourse to her essence bottle.

“ I’m confounded, gentlemen!” said she, after a pause. “ On what evidence, I entreat you, do you conceive yourselves authorized to make, what is to me, so incredible an assertion?”

“ It is on no unsubstantial ground that we do so,” said Sir William, willing to lead her on, and in some degree shifting her question for the moment. “ A claimant upon the Delassaux estates, and upon your affection as her aunt, has arisen in the person of a young lady now in the neighbourhood. It is understood,” continued he, after a pause, “ that a certain woman, who assisted on the melancholy occasion, when Lady Delassaux, your Ladyship’s sister-in-law, was deprived of her life in bringing a daughter into the world, is still able

to swear to the child she then saw born, of whom she has never since lost sight."

Lady Deborah was deeply moved for some moments. A lengthened pause ensued—after which, having apparently regained her presence of mind,—

"Gentlemen," said she, "you will easily believe that to discover that one whom I have so long cherished as my niece, and upon whom I have for so many years lavished all my affection, proves to be the bird of some strange nest, whilst she who is the real blood of my poor departed husband's family has been an outcast from her paternal hearth, and from these arms; you must grant me, gentlemen, that to make such a discovery as this, admitting the facts to be substantiated, must be to me most painfully embarrassing. On the one hand, I shall have a tender,—an exquisitely tender tie to break," and as she said so, she wiped her eyes; "whilst, on the other, I shall have duties to perform to one of whose habits, temper, and disposition, I am at present utterly ignorant. You will readily give me credit so far as to believe that, when the proof becomes convincing, I shall be the most anxious of all to do justice to her to whom duty will in that case demand, that my affections

shall be paid, whilst, on the other hand, I may be excused for feeling some lingering attachment to her who has so long engrossed my whole tenderness and care.—But proof, irresistible proof, will be required, before I can believe a circumstance so extraordinary.”

“ I can understand your Ladyship’s feelings on the present occasion,” said Sir William, with a look that penetrated to her soul; “ evidence shall not be withheld from you; and if you should wish to bring the matter to public investigation, I shall be most ready to indulge you; meanwhile, we shall take the liberty of leaving you for some little time to consider of what you have already heard, and we shall be at your Ladyship’s command when you are pleased to require our attendance.”

Upon this the two gentlemen arose, and, bowing to Lady Deborah, left her. Her eyes remained fixed on vacancy for a time; but she started on hearing the door of the inner chamber open suddenly, and looking round, she beheld,—the *Dwarfie Carline*!

The tiny figure stood proudly in the door-way on tip-toe, as if to make the most of her pigmy

stature, with her head thrown back, as was her common attitude, and her eyes, glaring fiercely on Lady Deborah, who sat petrified. She frowned silently for some minutes. Lady Deborah, though so much appalled, was the first to break silence.

“ Whence come you ?—monster ! of face and figure hardly human !—So many years have passed away since mine eyes have been cursed with the sight of those hideous features, that I had hoped they no longer blasted the earth. Comest thou to pour thy vengeance on me ?—Yet what can thy weak wrath effect ? Why should my bold heart quail before a thing like thee ?—begone !”

“ Lady Deborah,” said the figure with a harsh stern voice, “ you must hear me ere I go. Know that the thread of your life hangs in these hands, and were it not for one who bids me hold them, thus—thus would I rend its fibres !” and as she said so, she snapped in twain a cord she held stretched between them.

“ What mean ye, fiend ?” exclaimed Lady Deborah with considerable perturbation.

“ Fiend ! aye, fiend perhaps I would be,” cried she, with a laugh of mingled scorn and bitter-

ness. “ To see the noble lady whose hours of recreation were wont to be devoted to the torment, the bodily and mental torment, of the poor orphan dwarf,—to see her dragged in some sorry cart to where the assembled vulgar should stand in one dense mass, gaping with idle expectation to behold the ignominious end of all her black adultery and foul murders, and brought to that by me,—that would indeed be triumph!—And could I resist so great a satisfaction, were not my tongue tied down?—But why stand I thus in parley?—If she, whose fair domains have now so long been held by your accursed spawn, shall not be righted ere another hour, my tongue will then be free and fluent. Shall I glad you with a brief rehearsal now, to prove how much I know?—The arbour where the willing minister of your wickedness was tutored to your scheme of foul assassination!—the murder witnessed!—and the murdered——”

“ Hold, hold, for mercy’s sake!—all, all shall be restored!” cried Lady Deborah, sunk at once from the high pinnacle of dignity on which she had placed herself, by these dark hints of something so dreadful that she even feared to hear it

repeated. “ I see—oh horrible !—my fate is indeed in thy hands.—But have mercy on me !—oh have mercy !” said she, in a tone of the most abject and earnest entreaty, as she threw herself on her knees before the dwarf ; “ save, oh ! save my name from eternal ignominy, and all shall be restored !”

A grim smile of ineffable contempt shot, like the lurid glare of a meteor, over the wild features of the dwarf. The soul of the wretched woman was humbled to the dust ; she fell forward at full length on the floor, and lay for some moments overpowered by the poignancy of her feelings. Then, starting up, she clasped her hands, and again repeated—“ Oh, save me !—save the name of my house from eternal disgrace !” But the Dwarfie Carline had vanished !

The Lady Deborah gazed around, oppressed by a kind of stupor. Her eyes wandered into every corner of the apartment, afraid again to encounter the figure that had so lately filled them with dread, and returned, relieved by their ineffectual search after it. She slowly recovered herself so far as to rise from the humiliating posture her fears had thrown her into, and reclining for

some time in the chair she had formerly sat in, she gradually brought her mind to something like composure. At length she rang the bell violently, and ordered her maid to carry her compliments to Sir William Percival, and to request an immediate interview with him.

The gentlemen lost no time in obeying her summons, and they had no sooner entered the room, than, rising with all the majesty, she had formerly exhibited,

“ Sir William,” said she, “ from an interview I have just had with a person who was a domestic in my family while I was abroad, I have had such evidence as leads me fully to believe, that she, who has so long passed as my niece, has been imposed on me as such. She is, in truth, no niece of mine,—and I am willing to declare so, that she may give up her estates to the proper owner. I am yet so astonished, that I have not recovered my usual tranquillity of mind. I feel hardly equal to the agitating scene of a last interview with her whom I have hitherto believed to be my niece, and the first meeting with her who is so in reality, to whom my protection must now be given, and my life henceforth devoted.”

The two gentlemen looked at each other.

“Lady Deborah,” said Sir William Percival, “it gives me pleasure to observe, that you are already satisfied as to the true state of the case. Nothing now remains but to introduce the real Miss Delassaux to you, and that you should publicly acknowledge her unquestionable rights. Let me beg of you to retire to compose yourself, and to prepare yourself for the meeting. Meanwhile you may sign these papers.”

Lady Deborah’s frame shook from head to foot. She hastily glanced over the writings,—took up the pen,—and, with a trembling hand, attached her name to the documents Sir William presented to her. Her signature was immediately witnessed by the two gentlemen

She then bowed, and slowly left the apartment.