

CHAPTER II.

And why not death, rather than living torment?—
To die is to be banished from myself;
And Livia is myself. Banished from her,
Is self from self; a deadly banishment!

SHAKESPEARE.

AMHERST had been in bed for several hours, when he was roused from his slumbers by the loud toll of the castle bell, followed by the tramp of horses in the court-yard. He rose, and went to the window, through which the flashing of torches from below gleamed upon the ceiling. To his surprise he saw Lord Eaglesholme in the act of dismounting, surrounded by his attendants. Amherst felt rejoiced at his arrival, resolving to procure the much-wished-for interview next day; and he composed himself again to sleep, to dream of years of happiness.

Lord Eaglesholme, fatigued with his long and late ride, did not appear at breakfast. In about two hours, however, Amherst was admit-

ted to his apartment. His heart beat high with the joyful certainty of the speedy fulfilment of all his wishes. He found his Lordship seated in the same arm-chair, in the same dress, and nearly in the same attitude in which he had first seen him, on the day of his arrival at the castle. He was not, however, so deeply engaged in his author as he then appeared, but was employed in looking out for the threads of those subjects in which he and his young friend had been occupied, when their studies were interrupted. He rose immediately upon hearing Amherst's step, and embraced him with a kindness and warmth which could scarcely have been greater had the latter been his son.

After expressing his hope that Amherst had felt no *ennui* during his absence, "I have been just endeavouring," said he, "to recall those ideas which had arisen in my mind after our last experiments, and which have been put to flight by my absence on other matters. You remember the phenomena which exhibited themselves in our last experiments, and which both of us remarked had been hitherto unnoticed by others?"

“ I do, my Lord, most perfectly,” said Amherst, “ but I must confess to you, that my heart is so filled at present with considerations deeply affecting my future happiness, that until my mind is put to rest, I cannot possibly find room for any other thoughts. It was my impatience on this subject, that induced me to solicit the present interview.”

Lord Eaglesholme assumed the attitude of attention, and was silent, while Amherst proceeded.

“ To you, my Lord, who are best acquainted with the incomparable merits of your niece, I am sure it cannot be surprising to learn, that, in the first moment of my introduction to her, the charms of her person made an immediate and deep impression upon me; and the intercourse I have since enjoyed with her has discovered to me a heart and a mind no less lovely and angelic than the form they animate. As my growing admiration of Miss Malcolm has been so strong that I could not conceal it, you must have remarked it, and it is very probable that I am now only making a declaration, which my whole behaviour, when in her presence, must have led you very early to anticipate. Why then should

I thus formally address, in set phrase, you, whose kindness has convinced me, that I already enjoy your friendship and your good opinion, on my own account, as well as on that of my family? My Lord, I love your niece with an attachment exceeding in ardour any thing that language can describe; and I am happy in enjoying the conviction that our passion is mutual, since I have already ventured to ascertain, from her own lips, that I am not indifferent to her. May I then hope that you will sanction our union?—I need say nothing of my family or of my prospects,—you are, I believe, sufficiently acquainted with both, to know that neither of them are despicable.—Be assured I feel how very inestimable the gift is, which I am now bold enough to ask of you; but the consciousness of possessing such a treasure will teach me to deserve it.”

Whilst Amherst was speaking, Lord Eaglesholme's pallid countenance, and large, dark, melancholy eyes, were illumined with transient rays of joy, lighting them up at rapidly succeeding intervals, like those brilliant and innocuous flashes, gleaming cheerfully across the Italian landscape, during the balmy summer nights. A

pleasure, more intense than any of which Amherst had ever before perceived symptoms, played over his noble features, and the sanguine lover hailed the happy omen in his heart. Seizing his Lordship's hand, with all that enthusiasm he was so apt to give way to, he energetically exclaimed,—“ My Lord ! you have ever treated Miss Malcolm as your daughter,—Oh ! let me then be your son ! ”

Amherst had no sooner pronounced these words, than he perceived a very surprising change of expression in Lord Eaglesholme. He started up with a look inexpressibly wild and agitated, and striking the palms of both hands violently on his brow, so as to shade his eyes from observation, and turning rapidly away, he paced the room, exclaiming, in broken and half-muttered words, as if his power of utterance was choked by his feelings,—

“ Oh God ! in what a dream of bliss was I indulging ! I—I who am doomed to know no bliss ! —My spirit was treading the flowery paths of Elysium, when hell—blackest hell—was yawning beneath my feet !—No, no, no !—no such earth-

ly happiness for me—and for Heaven!—Oh merciful!——”

Here he sank into the deep arm-chair. He shrouded his features within the ample drapery of his robe. His whole frame was agitated by the violence of his emotion, and he sobbed aloud.

Amherst stood confounded. Even all thoughts of the interesting subject, on which he had so lately been eloquent, were banished by the astonishment that seized him. It was impossible to attribute so sudden a paroxysm to anything but madness, since nothing he had said could have given birth to it. He remained in a state of mute and distressing awe for some time. At length, Lord Eaglesholme's agitation in some degree subsided. He sat in silence for several minutes. Then slowly removing the folds of his robe, he exhibited a countenance, of which affliction had taken complete possession. His eyes were red with weeping, and his cheeks bathed in tears.

“Young man,” said he, in a tremulous and subdued voice, and then, as if he had felt that the expression was hardly kind enough, “My dear Amherst, forgive the emotions excited by certain distressing recollections which always overcome

me. You have on more than one occasion seen that I am not always master of myself. But I have now recovered sufficient composure to tell you—it grieves me to the heart to pronounce it—that Eliza Malcolm never can be yours !” These last words, uttered with peculiar emphasis, and in a deep and hollow tone, sank like the knell of death into Amherst’s heart.

After a momentary pause, arising from the stupefaction occasioned by so calm, yet so determined a refusal, Amherst threw himself at his Lordship’s feet, and grasping his hand,

“ Oh, my Lord ! my Lord !” he cried, with an emotion not inferior to that of Lord Eaglesholme, “ Oh, blast not thus my very hopes of life with one cruel sentence ! What can I have done to forfeit that good opinion I, at least at one time, with truth, believed you entertained of me ? Tell me, I implore you, what I have done to merit your displeasure, and there is no penance so terrible that I will not undergo, and deem it pleasure, if I can by it but gain your esteem, so as to induce you to unsay the dreadful sentence you have pronounced, to me worse than death !”

He looked anxiously in Lord Eaglesholme's eyes, as if he could have read his very soul.

His Lordship slowly and calmly replied, a faint smile of kindness breaking through the tears still swelling from his eyelids—

“ Trust me, my dearest Amherst, the resolution I am compelled to take has no origin in any conduct of yours. Mine towards you has but ill fulfilled the impulses of my heart, if it has not uniformly borne testimony to the affection and the gratitude I have entertained, ever since that eventful night when Heaven sent you as my preserver. No my dear friend, the good opinion I so soon formed of you, and which, as you say yourself, you at first justly claimed by hereditary right, has continued to rise every day we have been together, and now stands high, on the firm basis of the personal knowledge I have enjoyed, of your good sense, of your uncommon attainments, and, above all, of the purity of your principles.” Then, after some deep internal workings almost overpowering his words, “ And do not I owe you more than even the sacrifice of my life could repay? Do I not owe to you the life of my Eliza? of her whom you have so well called my

daughter, since no father ever loved daughter more ?”

His voice sank altogether, as if quite overcome by his feelings. But again recovering himself, he added, “ Were there not objections—did there not exist insuperable objections—which I cannot—which I dare not unfold—Heavens! how I would clasp you to my heart as the husband of her affections, and which I still may do as the preserver of her life !” Saying so, he tenderly embraced Amherst as he knelt before him. “ How would I cherish,” continued he, “ the lovely offspring of those who are so dear to me !” A transient gleam crossed his mind, called up by the pleasing picture he had drawn in it. “ But,” added he, with returning gloom, that increased as he proceeded in a firm, though hollow voice, “ an uncontrollable fate forbids me to indulge in such blissful, but seducing visions ; and I must repeat, solemnly repeat, that Eliza Malcolm never can be yours !”

Amherst rose from his knees in frantic despair. “ Oh, my Lord ! my Lord ! you know not the agony you are torturing me with. You cannot, you have not the cruelty to persevere in

a refusal that must rob me of my life. But what is my worthless life! You love your niece. You love Miss Malcolm with all the strength of a parent's affection. You have seen our growing mutual attachment—you know her heart. Ah! little do I know it, if to her the doom you seal will not be as certain as that you have passed on me. In mercy!—thus, on my knees, I entreat you, my Lord!—crush not two young hearts, so twined together, that their very life is as one!”

“ I see it all,” said Lord Eaglesholme calmly, after a pause. “ I see it all now—I should have opened my eyes to it then; but, forgetful of circumstances, I was lulled into a fatal apathy, or rather into a pleasing dream, from which I now awake to all this misery. I feel how deeply I have been to blame. But reproach me not, Amherst. Alas! I am sufficiently punished by those recollections to which I have just been roused. Merciful powers!” added he, after pausing and looking up to Heaven, whilst every fibre shuddered as he said it—“ Grant that I may not be more severely punished in the hap-

less fate of her, by whom alone this life is rendered tolerable to me !”

Amherst instantly caught a ray of hope from these last words. He clasped his Lordship's knees. “ Aye, my Lord !” said he—“ her fate ! Think that her life hangs on the same frail thread with mine. Oh, in mercy snap it not ! We have loved, until love is the only food left for us to feed on. Deprive us of it, and we sink from very lack of nutriment. What obstacle but must yield to considerations affecting the life of your niece—your more than daughter !”

Lord Eaglesholme was silent for some minutes. 'Twas like the silence preceding the dread thunderpeal, that sinks the very hearts of the trembling peasants, over whose frail dwellings it is about to speak in awful sounds. He appeared to labour within himself, as if arming his soul with resolution sufficient to enable him to pronounce, what some mysterious, but no less imperious fate required of him, and to terminate a conversation equally torturing to the feelings of both. With a countenance resolute, though not unkind, he slowly and solemnly addressed Amherst—

“ Young man,” said he, “ we are wearing ourselves out, by giving way to these emotions. They are unavailing, and must be suppressed. I am now compelled, for the third and last time, to declare, that circumstances do exist, rendering it absolutely impossible that Eliza Malcolm can ever be the wife of Amherst Oakenwold. Would that I could have stopped here ! But sensible as I now am how culpable I have been, in permitting a freedom of intercourse between you, I cannot allow myself to persevere in error, now that my eyes are opened. So very imperious are those circumstances which forbid your union, that though it were to risk the life of her I hold so dear, I should consider myself called upon to offer up even such a sacrifice on the altar of duty. Having said thus much, you cannot be surprised, that after the extreme violence your passion has betrayed, I should add to the prohibition of your union, the still more severe sentence of eternal separation. The laws of hospitality—nay, more, that gratitude towards you, which must ever throb in this breast, whilst it continues to be animated by the pulsations of life—the strong affection I bear you—all, all forbid that I should, in plain

terms, desire you to quit the roof of Eaglesholme. But good feeling, on your part, will prevent you from taking advantage of this, and when I tell you, that whilst you remain here, Eliza Malcolm must be banished from these walls, which have been her shelter from infancy, I say all that can be said by one whose wishes towards you are warm, and who cannot bear that his words should be cold; or that need be said to one, possessing too much purity of sentiment to render plainer language necessary."

With these words, Lord Eaglesholme threw his arms around Amherst's neck, and embraced him three or four times, with a flood of tears, and an agitation that sufficiently spoke his inward torture, and the struggle it cost him to part thus with his young friend; then tearing himself from him in a state bordering upon distraction, he covered his forehead with his hands, and rushed out of the apartment.

Amherst sank down on the floor, felled as it were by the overpowering weight of the feelings which oppressed him, and lay for a time stunned by the unexpected result of an interview, to which both he and Miss Malcolm had looked forward

as about to crown their happiness. His ideas floated through his brain with a confusion defying arrangement. He started up, as if he required to convince himself that he was really awake, so strange, so absolutely impossible did the reality of the last hour appear to him. He seated himself, in despair, in the deep velvet chair Lord Eaglesholme had so lately occupied, and his ears rang again with those fatal words, which condemned him to perpetual banishment from her, without whom life was to him as a blank.

His Lordship's resolution was too fixed to expect that it could be shaken, at least (as lingering hope whispered him) *at present!* "In some weeks—nay, perhaps in some days hence," said he within himself, "when those gloomy and superstitious forebodings of an opposing fate are less in ascendancy over his mind, he may become more accessible to reason; at all events, cruel as it is to banish myself from this roof, which covers all that is now, or ever can be dear to me on earth, to remain under it for a moment longer at this time would not only be inconsistent with propriety, but would be subjecting my frail hopes to certain shipwreck, as well as exposing Miss Malcolm

to additional misery. Would that I could see her before I go!—But to attempt to procure an interview with her, would be a breach of honour, that must inevitably destroy the good opinion he entertains of me, now so much my desire, as well as my interest to preserve. Yet to leave the house without communicating with her, is a thought too dreadful to be entertained.—But would not a secret letter appear in the same light to her uncle as a stolen interview?—I must address his Lordship, and endeavour at least to induce him to make her acquainted with those reasons so imperiously commanding my involuntary retreat, at the very moment when we expected to be united for ever.”

A violent agitation, excited by the recollection of what his hopes had been that morning, and how cruelly and incomprehensibly they had since been blasted, put a stop to the current of his ideas for some moments. At length, becoming a little more composed, he took up a pen, and hastily wrote the following letter:—

“ TO LORD EAGLESHOLME.

“ MY LORD,

“ My feelings are too deeply wounded to leave me sufficient self-possession to write coherently, or to say what I ought. But I obey your implied request—I leave your house; for, torn as my heart is, I cannot forget the kindness I have received in it, and of that I should be unworthy were I to remain. Did I not carry with me a ray of hope, that something may yet occur, perhaps at no very distant period, to remove those, to me unknown, objections you are disposed to consider insurmountable, my going would be to me as a departure to death itself. Extinguish not, in charity, this feeble spark, which must now be all the comfort I can possess.

“ I entreat you, my Lord, as an act of justice, to explain to Miss Malcolm the mystery of my sudden departure. After what has passed between us, this much at least is necessary for my justification. As my sense of honour forbids me seeking to inform her by undue or secret means, I trust that yours will induce you to take care that I do not suffer in her estimation. That we may yet

meet under happier circumstances, and that our union may yet receive your blessing, is now the only solace remaining to the wounded heart of your sincerely attached

“AMHERST OAKENWOLD.”

Amherst had sealed and addressed this letter, when he heard steps approaching through the adjoining library. They were those of Robertson. He immediately put it into his hand, with a request, that he would deliver it to Lord Eaglesholme; and, begging of him to send his servant to his apartment, he hastened thither.

When O’Gollochar appeared, Amherst summoned up resolution to tell him to pack up his baggage, and have it transported to Sanderson Mains.

Without waiting for a reply, he hastily wrapped himself up in his cloak so as even to shroud his features from observation, and, arming himself with that artificial courage, which so often carries the victim of tyranny or of justice with a firm step to the scaffold, he walked down stairs, across the two courts, and out by the gate of the castle, in a state of mind that rendered him unconscious of the objects around him.