

CHAPTER XVI.

—————They sat recline
On the soft downy bank, damasked with flowers.

MILTON.

—————every power above,
Heaven, Earth, Thyself, bear witness to my love!

MONTGOMERY.

Cease, man of woman born! to hope relief
From daily trouble and continued grief.

PRIOR.

AFTER long and hard riding, Miss Malcolm's weariness became so insupportable, that she besought Amherst to halt for a short time. A little brook stole silently along a bank enamelled with flowers, and a grove of tall ash-trees, here and there interspersed with magnificent bushes of holly, furnished at once sufficient shade and retirement.

O'Gollochar having taken the bridles out of the horses' mouths, lay down by them to watch that they might not stray, whilst his master and Miss Malcolm seated themselves at no great dis-

tance in the shade, close to the margin of the rill.

“ Eliza !” said Amherst, after regarding her for some moments with a look of excessive tenderness, “ Eliza ! If yet I dare call you by so dear a name, what have we suffered since our cruel fate last parted us ? What, at least, have I not suffered ?”

Miss Malcolm, pale with the excessive fatigue she had undergone, became yet more like alabaster, as Amherst thus abruptly recalled all her griefs.

“ Oh, talk not of our last meeting, Mr Oakenwold,” said she, with painful energy. “ After what has passed between us, it would be vain to attempt concealing with you, that I too have suffered ! Oh ! bear witness, Heaven, how much wretchedness of heart I have endured, since the sad events of that day, that terrible day, which severed us, as I then thought, for ever !”

“ Oh ! ’twas impossible,” cried Amherst, catching at her last words with a burst of enthusiastic feeling—“ ’Twas impossible that fate could for ever separate two hearts thus throbbing for each other ! No. Heaven itself has interfered to reunite us, and never, never shall we part again !”

Miss Malcolm looked earnestly in his face for some moments, and then bursting into tears—

“ Ah ! no, no, no !” said she ; “ flatter me not with these dreams of bliss—they are not for me. My resolution has hitherto been kept up by the immediate perils which pressed upon me, almost to the exclusion of all other thoughts. But now that I am again awakened to the full recollection of days of former joy, and to the cruel extinction of all my fondest hopes, despair, deep and lasting despair, is all that can ever be mine !”

“ Oh ! talk not thus, Eliza !” exclaimed Amherst, in a tone of the utmost distraction. “ Do not thus torture one whom you do not deny you love. Have you not once already made me the happiest of human beings by the tender acknowledgment ? And will you now sacrifice my happiness, nay, my very existence, to some goblin of the imagination ? No, no, you cannot—I read it in your eyes, those lovely, those unpractised eyes, which know not what it is to deceive—tell me, eloquently tell me, how much, how purely I am beloved.”

Miss Malcolm sighed deeply, and after great agitation, which it required some moments to compose—

“ Amherst,” said she, in a half choked voice, “ ’tis cruel to press me on a subject in which I am so defenceless. My tongue has ever been accustomed to utter my inmost sentiments, when they are called for ; and should it be silent, my eyes would indeed speak them honestly forth in undisguised language. I cannot, therefore, were it even my wish, I cannot deceive you. I do, indeed, love you. The affection with which you have inspired me is not to be worn away like the thin film of gold, that gives a borrowed and temporary lustre to some baser metal. No, it is so pure and enduring, that the delicate vessel itself must be destroyed before it can perish. But why should you urge me thus,—since,—since you already know I never can be yours—nay, since you already know that mysterious circumstances hang over me, which have doomed us to part,—to part for ever !”

This declaration, to utter which had manifestly required the exertion of all her remaining strength of mind, was too much for her ; and hiding her face with her hands, she burst into an agony of tears.

“ Hold !—Hold, Eliza, I implore you !” exclaimed her impassioned lover, in an almost fran-

tic tone, “drive me not to madness by the repetition of Lord Eaglesholme’s dreadful sentence,—a sentence pronounced under the influence of some inexplicable delusion, but to which it is impossible he can adhere. Time, at least, must remove those imaginary obstacles to our union, arising like phantoms before his mind, to pervert his better judgment. Our age, our inclinations, our sentiments—all combine to proclaim us born for each other. As an individual, he does not object to me, nay, he has honoured me with a more than ordinary portion of his approbation. He knows my prospects as to fortune too; and he is well acquainted with the irreproachable honour and antiquity of our family, and ——”

“Aye, there!” exclaimed Miss Malcolm, interrupting him with a start, and involuntarily seizing his hand,—“there is the obstacle!—your ancient house!—the hitherto uncontaminated purity of your blood!—your father’s pride!—merciful powers!—But where am I wandering?” added she, after a pause, during which she slowly relinquished the hold she had taken of him.—“Would to Heaven we had never met!—yet to say so is more than I can endure!—But had I never known you—or had I sooner known myself—I

might have been still the simple and the happy, as I am now the wretched, though innocent Eliza !”

“ Good Heavens ! Miss Malcolm, then you are acquainted with the nature of your uncle’s objections to our union ? I entreat you relieve my racking curiosity. I cannot longer exist under the agonizing mystery in which I have been left ever since that unhappy day when I bade adieu to Eaglesholme Castle. In pity remove it, that I may know the full magnitude of the difficulties I have to surmount ;—for, trust me, they must be no trifling difficulties which I will not speedily overcome !”

“ Alas ! Amherst,” said Miss Malcolm, in a tone of deep despair,—“ they are not within the reach of your control,—yet you must know them. I do not usually lack resolution. But though my brightest hopes are dead, I feel I could not bear to tread over the grave in which they have been laid for ever. I have not strength,—I have not self-command enough—now to unfold the dreadful secret. Ask me not then to tell you now. Though Heaven itself seems to have thus willed our meeting, I even now feel a certain self-disapprobation, for thus indulging in converse with one whom I have been compelled to renounce for ever.”

“Compelled to renounce!” repeated Amherst, with a keenness and fire he had not hitherto exhibited, excited perhaps by the recollection of some of Lord Eagleholme’s expressions at the time of their separation. “Who has dared to use compulsion with Miss Malcolm?” Then perceiving that the violence of his action had in some measure agitated Eliza, he proceeded, in a milder tone:—“Surely Lord Eaglesholme—the noble—the generous—the gentle—the affectionate Lord Eaglesholme, has not been so cruel as to resort to means so brutal! And if he has,” added he after a pause, “surely Miss Malcolm cannot believe that duty would require a submission to measures so arbitrary. Heaven seems, as you say, to have again thrown us together, Eliza; and it has done so for the beneficent purpose of bringing about the consummation of our happiness, in despite of all unjust opposition. Oh let me persuade you to yield to its dictates, and to aid the wisdom of its plans. Let us fly together to England,—and there, under my father’s roof!——”

“Hold!” interrupted Miss Malcolm, in a firm and decided manner, “I cannot permit you, Mr Oakenwold, to remain a moment under the erro-

neous impressions you have so hastily taken up. Lord Eaglesholme used no restraint with me. The only compulsion I alluded to, was that voluntary restriction imposed upon us by a sense of duty, teaching us to avoid what is in itself wrong. But had it been otherwise, and had Lord Eaglesholme acted as you have supposed, you mistake me much, if you imagine that I could be induced to disobey the will of him who has been the guardian of my youth, or to forsake one who has cherished me with the fondness of a parent, from my tenderest years, and to whom all my duty, as well as my affection, of right belongs."

These words fell with calmness, as well as determination, from Miss Malcolm, and stilled all feelings of irritation in the bosom of her lover.

"Oh, forgive me, Eliza!" cried he, seizing her hand with extreme fervour,—“forgive the hasty burst I was betrayed into by a sudden passion, combining, with the misery of my fate, to deprive me of reason. I was, indeed, very wrong—deeply to blame. But say you forgive me; and do not blast me with the first look of unkindness you ever threw upon me!"

"I meant not to be unkind," said Eliza, softened by the earnestness of his appeal. "Heaven

knows, unkindness would ill become me towards one to whom I have more than once owed my life—from whom my heart has taken impressions which nothing but death can eradicate. But,” continued she, sighing deeply, “time wears,—and our conversation, I fear, draws on without being of any real advantage to either of us. I again repeat, that I dare not now attempt an explanation of what I find is to you still a mystery. But I solemnly promise to inform you by letter, of that which I cannot now bring my tongue to utter in words. Let this content you for the present; and let me entreat that you will prosecute the small remainder of our journey, without again introducing a subject which can only agitate and distress us both.”

To this request Amherst was compelled, though unwillingly, to submit, without a murmur.

The remainder of their journey was without adventure. The lovers vainly tried to keep up a conversation on indifferent subjects. As they entered the wild grounds of Eaglesholme, all attempts at dialogue ceased; and each of them dropped into a fit of musing, holding, as it were, mental converse with the other, in language more

intensely interesting than any they had dared to employ when addressing one another in words. Amherst was aware that the gate of the Castle must soon divide them. Hope forbade him to think for ever ; but yet he could not tell for how long. And though the horses were hardly able to crawl, he checked poor Brisk more than once, and rated him for going so fast. As for Miss Malcolm, when they began to draw near the Castle walls, she trembled so, that Amherst sensibly felt the agitation of her frame.

O'Gollochar rode forward with alacrity to ring the great bell, nothing doubting but that it was to be the peal of joy to every one, both without and within, and to no one more than to himself and the light-hearted Mademoiselle Epingle. His master and Miss Malcolm reached the gate just as the old Swiss had opened it. Amherst dismounted tardily from his horse, and he had no sooner done so, than Miss Malcolm fainted into his arms. In an agony of apprehension, Amherst bore her hastily into the porter's lodge. The failure of nature was but for a moment ;—she recovered,—opened her eyes, and looked wildly up—then starting from the chair in which her lover had placed her, she waved her hand

with frantic action, and before Amherst could even attempt to detain her, she rushed through the entrance into the inner court-yard, and disappeared. With his hands over his eyes, Amherst, overwhelmed by the pressure of his feelings, found his way almost instinctively out of the great gate, then throwing himself wildly upon his horse, he galloped off with a speed, of which the poor animal could hardly have been supposed capable.

O'Gollochar stood for some moments petrified. He had been indulging by the way in delightful dreams of anticipation. He had been figuring to himself the surprise and the joy of the lively Mademoiselle Epingle at his unlooked-for return; and had been revelling in expectation of the hilarious evening he should spend, after all his hardships and dangers. So intensely occupied had he been in these happy visions, that he had had no time to examine the barometer of his master's face. It is no wonder, then, that he was thunderstruck when the cup of bliss was thus suddenly dashed from his lips, just as he thought he was on the eve of tasting it.

“Och ullulloo!” cried he, with a prolonged howl, that made the massive battlements resound

again. “ For the love of St Patrick, now, Mr Switcher, can ye be after telling me the maning of all this?—Och, master dear! won’t you wait a bit, an it were only to see how the poor sowl gets into the house?—Och, sure he’s bewitched after all!—So much for going a-hunting with the divil’s dam houlding the bridle!—By the Powers, and the Seven Churches, he’s off!—Mamsell Spindle! Och! if some good angel now would but just whirl her here for one moment!—Holloah! master dear!—Sure one of Brisk’s shoes is off.—Troth and I believe they are all off, horse and all, in rale arnest; and faith, now, and so must yours, Maister Braidbottom, and be sorrow to it!”——

He fairly burst out a-blubbering, and lifting himself like a sack upon the weary back of his horse, he followed Amherst at a jog-trot, every shake forcing out a sob from the very bottom of his heart.

END OF VOLUME SECOND.

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