

CHAPTER III.

She was so expensive, that the income of three dukes was not enough to supply her extravagance.

ARBUTHNOT.

Why do they decorate themselves with artificial flowers, the various colours of herbs, needle-works of exquisite skill, quaint devices, and perfume their persons, wear inestimable riches in precious stones, crown themselves with gold and silver, use coronets and tiaras of various fashions, deck themselves with pendants, bracelets, ear-rings, chains, girdles, rings, pins, spangles, embroideries, ribatoes, versicular ribbands? Why do they make such glaring shows with their scarfs, feathers, fans, masks, furs, laces, tiffanies, ruffs, falls, calls, cuffs, damasks, velvets, cloth of gold, silver tissues? Such setting up with sarks, straitening with whalebone,—why, it is but as a day-net catcheth larks, to make young ones stoop to them. And when they are disappointed, they dissolve into tears, which they wipe away like sweat, weep with the one eye, laugh with the other, or, as children, weep and cry they can both together, and as much pity's to be taken of a woman weeping as of a goose going bare foot.

BURTON.

THE rumours regarding the Delassauxs which had reached the ears of Sir Cable Oakenwold soon after his son's departure for Scotland, were not

without foundation. For some years after the arrival of Lady Delassaux and her niece in England, and while Miss Delassaux was yet under age, she was made to submit, though with difficulty, to the haughty commands of her only surviving guardian. But being naturally of a fiery and ungovernable temper, which an injudicious and unsystematic control could hardly be expected to correct, the young lady began to presume upon her rights, and to exercise her own will, at a period much earlier than is usual with even the most forward of her sex. Some discoveries she cunningly made, enabled her to set Lady Deborah's authority at defiance, and to assume the government of herself and fortune. Although her aunt, perhaps, might have legally insisted on continuing the exertion of her authority for some time longer, she, on her part, had secret reasons for considering it prudent to give way.

Lady Deborah was conscious that had Miss Delassaux called her to account for the expenditure of her fortune, she would have found it a difficult matter to explain how large sums of money, deeply affecting her estate, had disappeared. Nature seemed never to have intended that her im-

perious temper should be placed under the subjection of another; but she was compelled to bow down her proud spirit, and to become the most submissive of human beings to a young girl, who treated her on every occasion like an obtrusive relation, an incumbrance both to her actions and to her estate. Sir Godmansbury's income had chiefly arisen from certain public situations he had held, and his Lady's high and extravagant habits were not such as to improve their precarious produce; she had, therefore, comparatively speaking, nothing left to live on at his death, the wrecks of her own small fortune having been wasted away. Her means of support, therefore, were drawn from her niece's estate.

The aunt and niece being so affected towards each other, it is no wonder that their intercourse should have been one of mutual irritation, and productive of frequent unpleasant scenes. On Lady Deborah's side there was something very peculiar in conduct; for though she scrupled not to show to others a disposition haughty, overbearing, and proud, so unlike the softness of human nature, and still more that belonging to the softer sex, yet she not only bent subservient to the will of her

niece, but instead of showing any dislike to her who tyrannized over her, she, on every occasion, where such a feeling could possibly be called into action, displayed a strong degree of attachment, too natural to be mistaken for any thing but real.

Notwithstanding her luxurious rustication, notwithstanding the conversion of Brokenhurst into something liker the fairy palace of an eastern romance, than any thing to which a parallel could be found on earth, time often hung heavy with Miss Delassaux in the country. She therefore spent a great part of her year in London, where, then as well as now, eminence in extravagance and folly was the only indispensable passport of admission to a certain circle of self-constituted select, who looked with contempt on every one around them, of whatever talents, birth, or fortune, who were without these undefinable somethings, forming the free-masonry of their society.

For this circle Miss Delassaux was, indeed, supereminently qualified, and the orbit she moved in was high and conspicuous. There, in a series of balls, masquerades, and gay parties of every description, she ran the feverish and tasteless round of heartless dissipation, to the no small

deterioration of her fortune, as well as of her face. As to the latter, its features being young, and naturally exquisite, were easily restored to more than their pristine lustre, by the use of artificial means ; but the former was not so easily refitted. Nothing seemed so likely to put matters to rights in this particular as an advantageous marriage, and various schemes were accordingly laid for this laudable purpose, during a winter in town ; but the campaign ended without any thing effectual having been done, notwithstanding the great expenditure of *matériel de guerre*.

It was after returning to the country, that the idea of a marriage with Amherst Oakenwold suggested itself to Miss Delassaux, and we have seen the artifices she employed to accomplish it. But after the distressing scene at the hovel on the edge of the race-ground, she saw that the game was decidedly up, and having become really attached to Amherst during their short acquaintance, she retired to her room in a despair that kept her weeping bitterly for one whole day. Whether any tears of remorse mingled with those of disappointed love, we cannot tell, nor is it our business to inquire how long the recollection of

Amherst remained. Lady Deborah's ephemeral influence expired the moment her services ceased to be of avail, and she was again thrown aside, like an old shoe, which, long since dismissed from its legitimate services, has been resumed as a temporary slipper, until no longer wanted.

It was but a little while before the return of Amherst to Oakenwold Manor from Scotland, that a certain Count Alonzo di Montemarone, an Italian, whom Miss Delassaux had accidentally met in London, and to whom she had given a kind of general invitation, arrived at Brokenhurst. This nobleman was said to possess large estates in the Neapolitan territory. His person was handsome, and his manners, though not such as characterised the English man of fashion of the day, were yet of that smooth, easy kind, that covers every Italian from his birth like his skin.

The arrival of this Count appeared to renew and augment those unpleasant scenes, so frequent between the aunt and niece, previous to the formation of their league against the Oakenwold estates. The Count's attentions to Miss Delassaux were extremely marked, and her reception

of them was far from discouraging. But her aunt, though she showed so much attention and civility to the stranger, as might almost have been mistaken for an approbation of his suit, yet, when in private with her niece, she employed her utmost eloquence to prejudice her against him.

But this was not easily done; nay, the very circumstance of Lady Deborah appearing to dislike him, made Miss Delassaux, from the sheer spirit of contradiction, more determined than ever to encourage him. After one of their daily disputes regarding him, Lady Deborah would leave the room with a countenance, where her efforts to preserve serenity could but ill disguise her strong expression of distress and mortification.

This sometimes struck Miss Delassaux so forcibly, as to do more in shaking her resolution, than all her aunt could have said, and often made her think, and hesitate for a time, as to the course she was pursuing. But then again came the handsome Italian, with his tender compliments, his harmonious voice, and his protestations of entire devotion—his fascinating canzonettes, so delicately accompanied by his guitar—his glowing descriptions of enchanting Italy, in

the genial climate, and under the cloudless sky of so elysian a country, the fair flower he worshipped had first seen the light, and where nature had intended it to bloom. His frequent, though careless and apparently accidental talk, about the magnificence of his Palazzo at Naples, the beauty of his villas, and the grandeur of his *Castell sopra la Montagna*, commanding some of the richest scenes of the Apennines; his immense territories, and his splendid retinue, from the tedious parade of which he professed himself so happy to have escaped for a time, by his visit to England,—these were with her resistless, and love having already taken possession of her heart, all her aunt's prudent cautions were disregarded.

Matters were in this state, when Miss Delasaux signified her intention of giving a splendid masqued ball. Cards were accordingly issued to the different families in the neighbourhood, and to ensure the assemblage of a sufficient crowd, invitations were even dispatched to London, to be dispersed in the circle the young lady had so lately moved in there. The house was magnificently decorated, and Mr Hawkins, the worthy steward,

made many difficulties about obtaining money for the vast expenditure it required.

This gentleman has been already introduced to the reader by name, nor is it necessary that he should know much more of him now, except that on all such occasions as the present, he took especial care to deal with those who were most likely to be pressing in their demands on his mistress, that his own pecuniary assistance might come with the greater effect. But Miss Delassaux took little concern in such matters. If these vulgar considerations are ever entertained at all by the votary of fashion and pleasure, they are generally conjured away by the first twinkle of the lights of the ball-room, and the first notes of the violins which put the dancers in motion.

In taking Miss Delassaux's directions, Mr Hawkins never once exalted his voice above the whining tone of a most obsequious servant, and upon this occasion, as upon every other, he carefully avoided the introduction of any thing so unpalatable as advice.

The ball then was got up in a style of splendour, outdoing every thing Miss Delassaux had ever before exhibited. It was difficult to say

whether the decorations of the magnificent mansion, arranged under the immediate eyes of the Lady and the Count, were more to be admired for the richness of the materials they were composed of, or the taste with which they were selected and combined. Then the surrounding grounds were peculiarly well calculated to receive and give proper effect to those magical illusions produced by multiplicity of lights—music—and gay draperies—and moving figures in fanciful costumes, dispersed here and there amongst the trees, the temples, and along the verdant banks of the pieces of water, under the obscurity of a deliciously mild night, and a balmy air, breathing a mingled perfume from extensive shrubberies, filled with exotics. So inviting, indeed, was the pleasure of rambling unconfined by any walls but those of leaves, that superb as every thing was within doors, the house was in a manner entirely deserted, and its thousand lights continued to blaze in comparative silence and loneliness, while the continued buzz of voices, and the frequent laugh of joy ran through the varied alleys, that swarmed with human beings beneath the pale glimmering of the lamps, almost as thickly as

they had done with those myriads of bees that came to plunder the flowers of their honey in the broad sunshine of day. But more of the poison than of the nectareous fluid was extracted by these nocturnal insects.

Miss Delassaux walked out, hanging upon the arm of the tall and handsome Italian Cavalier. They were unmasked, but very gorgeously attired in the costume of Spanish Grandees. Their dresses shone with jewels, which, if not all of real value, had at least the appearance of being of price almost inestimable. However that might be, made up as they were, by every thing that dress and ornament could do, it was impossible to look on them without admiration, so perfect were the forms, and so noble was the bearing of both. As they promenaded through the various walks, the masks instinctively gave way, and all eyes were turned upon them, whilst the queen of the entertainment, her soul swelling with conscious pre-eminence, returned the bows and compliments of her guests with an air, where self-approbation and condescension were delicately blended. Admiration it was indeed impossible to refuse, but as the libation was poured out in their path, en-

vy and malignity lurked at the bottom, and were expressed in loud and bitter whispers as the crowd closed behind them. Such is fashion, that amongst all those groups who were revelling in frenzied mirth at the expence of the mistress of the demesne, there was hardly one individual who did not join in the gibe and the sneer that followed her.

Lady Deborah, who had strongly opposed this fête while it was yet in contemplation, was peculiarly out of humour on the night of its taking place. Seeing, however, that there was now no remedy, she endeavoured to assume a placidity to which her soul was of late very much a stranger. According to the etiquette prescribed by her niece, which she was obliged to adopt, she too, though dressed in the character of a lady abbess, was unmasked. Her manner and her looks so far corresponded with the recluse habit she wore, that she seemed, amidst all the surrounding noise and gaiety, to be entirely wrapped up in the gloomy thoughts of a religieuse. Nor was the fact very much at variance with appearances. The wild merriment of the scene recalled to her some of those nights of a similar description which she had

passed in her earlier days, when her feelings were very different, when, borne on the bosom of the triumphant tide of prosperity, she commanded the gratification of every passion as it arose ; but the recollection now filled her bosom with adders. Good Heavens ! what would she now have given to have had her years to live over again ! To religion she had indeed at one time turned with the hope of consolation. But, ignorant of the grand principles of our faith, she could not participate in its rational hopes, and her malady was rather augmented than allayed, and her guilty mind was filled with the most horrible anticipations of the future.

These she endeavoured to banish whenever they arose, but generally without effect, and on this night they came upon her, and adhered to her with an unusual degree of tenacity. She even seemed at times to be unconscious that she was not alone ; and in the midst of the most perfect seeming abstraction, she would suddenly start away, as if stung by some fresh remembrance, and then, pressing after her niece through the mazes of the pleasure-ground, she would hang on her rear, as if in anxious contemplation

of all her actions, and as if afraid to lose her. Now and then she would join her for a moment, but when she did so, she was but ill received, and there was always an evident inclination on the part of the young Lady to escape from her.