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## **Virgie's Inheritance**

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# Virgie's Inheritance

Virgie's Inheritance

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"Earle Wayne's Nobility,"  
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"A True Aristocrat," *Etc.*

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Virgie's Inheritance.

Chapter I.

Virgie and the Benighted Traveler.

"Virgie, I shall have to give up the race."

"Papa!"

"My strength is failing rapidly. It was all that I could do to creep home to-night. My trembling limbs, my labored breathing, and this dreadful cough, all warn me that I must set my house in order, and make provision for your future."

It was an apparently old man who spoke thus, and yet the years of his life numbered but a little over fifty.

His hair was silvery white; his face was colorless and haggard, his eyes dim and sunken, and his form was much attenuated and bowed by the disease which was fast consuming him.

He was sitting by a blazing fire, in an ordinary easy-chair over which a heavy coverlid had been thrown to make it more comfortable; but he shivered, and hovered over the blaze, as if he were chilled to the very marrow, while the hands which he held extended to catch the warmth were livid, and trembling from weakness.

The room was small, but cozy and home-like. A cheap, coarse carpet, though of a bright and tasteful pattern, lay upon the floor. An oval table, covered with a daintily embroidered cloth, stood in the center. There was a pretty lamp, with a bright Japanese shade upon it. There were also a few books in choice bindings, and a dainty work-basket filled with implements for sewing. A few pictures---some done with pen and ink, others in crayon, but all showing great talent and nicety of execution---hung, in simple frames, upon the walls. The two windows of the apartment were screened by pretty curtains of spotless muslin over heavier hangings of crimson, while a lounge and two or three chairs completed the furnishing of the room.

Beside the table, in a low rocker, several paces from the invalid by the fire, yet where she could catch every expression of his pale, sad face, there sat a young girl, with a piece of fancy work in her hands, upon which she had been busily engaged before her father spoke.

She was perhaps twenty years of age, with a straight, perfect form, and a face that would have better graced a palace than the humble mountain home where she now abode. It was a pure, oval, with delicate, beautiful brows; soft, round cheeks, in which a lovely pink came and went with every emotion. Her eyes were of a deep violet color, shaded by dark silken lashes, though their expression was saddened somewhat just now by a look of care and anxiety. Her white forehead was surmounted by rich chestnut-brown hair, which was gathered into a graceful knot at the back of her finely shaped head. A straight, patrician nose; a small, but rather resolute mouth, and a rounded chin, in which there was a bewitching dimple; small, lady-like hands and feet, completed the *tout ensemble* of Virginia Abbot, the daughter and only child of a whilom honored and wealthy bank president of San Francisco.

When addressed, as recorded above, the beautiful girl had started and grown suddenly pale, and a look of keenest pain shot into her violet eyes.

Then her sweet mouth straightened itself into a stern, resolute line. There was a moment of solemn silence, which she broke, by saying, in a repressed but gentle tone:

"I am sorry that you are feeling worse than usual to-night, papa. I know you must be weary. You are always that after being all day in the mine, and the storm, of course, aggravates your cough; but if you will rest a few days you will surely be better."

"No, Virgie, it is useless to build upon false hopes. I shall never be any better. My work is done. I shall go no more to my claim, and I have decided to dispose of it to the first one who will offer me a fair price for it. But, dear child, if it were not for you I believe I should be glad to know that my saddened life is almost at an end. I-----"

The weary voice quivered and failed here, and the man sank back in his chair with a bitter sigh.

The young girl, her own face now blanched to the hue of death, laid down her work, arose, and moved swiftly to her father's side, where she knelt by his chair.

"Papa, do not talk so. You must not leave me," she cried, in a voice of agony. "I cannot spare you. There must be something to help you---to build up your strength. Let us go back home, where you can have the best medical advice."

The man sat up in his chair, stopping her with a gesture almost of despair.

"Home!" he cried, hoarsely. "Virgie, we have no home but this. You know that I am already the same as dead to every one but you; that even our real name is sunk in oblivion."

"But, papa, you must try to live for my sake," Virgie cried, clasping her trembling hands about his emaciated arm, and shuddering as she felt how frail it was. "If you will not go back, let me at least send for Dr. Truel. He is skillful. He was always our friend. He will cheer you and give you something to build you up, and he will keep our secret, too. Oh, you ought to have had advice long ago. What shall I do in this dreary place if you leave me alone?"

The sick man unclasped her clinging hands from his arm, and drew her slight form to him in a tender embrace.

"My darling," he said, fondly, "that is just what I wish to talk with you about; so calm yourself and listen to me. Neither Dr. Truel, nor any other doctor, can help me now; if I had called him a year ago he might have prolonged my life; but my pride would not let me face any one whom I had ever known. But I will not speak of the past; it is too familiar and painful to both of us. It is useless, however, for me to think for a moment of going back, even to die, in the home where we were once so happy, for only disgrace is connected with our name---disgrace and wrong, all the more keenly felt

because unmerited."

"Hush, Virgie!" he continued, as a shuddering sob burst from the breast pressed so closely to his, "you must not give way so. I did not mean to alarm you unnecessarily by what I have said; I may not leave you for some time yet. I may be spared for a few months, perhaps until autumn, but I feel that the time has come to arrange some definite plan for your future. I must, however, give up my work, for I have no longer strength to carry it on; but if there was only some one whom I could trust to take charge of my claim. I might even yet reap something of benefit from it to add to the hoard that I have been saving for you against this emergency."

"But, papa, I would much rather that you should spend every dollar that you have, if it would prolong your life; if I lose you, I have not a friend in the world."

The man heaved a heavy sigh, for too well he realized the truth of her words.

"My dear," he returned, with tender pathos, "if it were possible for me to regain my health, at any sacrifice, I would gladly make it for your sake. But I know that it cannot be, and my care now must be to make the best provision that I can for you."

"I have been very successful since coming here," he went on, speaking more cheerfully, "more so than I ever dared to hope, and the claim promises much for the future and ought to bring a good price if sold; so you will have quite a snug little fortune, my Virgie, and I trust that your lot in life will yet be happy, in spite of the dark cloud that has so shadowed it in the beginning. What say you to writing to my old friend, Laurence Bancroft, of New York, confiding you to his care after----"

"Oh, my father, you make me utterly wretched," cried the young girl, reaching up her arms and clasping them convulsively about his neck, while she lifted her tear-stained face appealingly to him.

He bent forward and kissed her white forehead softly with his trembling lips.

"Bear with me a little longer, my daughter, and then we will never mention this again while I live," he returned, huskily. "Laurence Bancroft, as you know, was a dear friend of my early life. He has a cultivated wife, and two daughters about your own age; he will believe me when I tell him the truth regarding our misfortunes, and will, no doubt, give you a home in his own family, and care for your interests until---woman's best gift---the love of some true man comes to you, and you have a home of your own. New York is almost on the other side of the world, and no evil breath of the past will be likely to touch you there. What do you say, Virgie?---may I write to my friend, giving you to his care?"

"Yes, papa," Virgie said, wearily assenting to his project, more to put an end to the painful conversation than because she had any choice in the matter, "you may do whatever your judgment tells you is best, and I will be guided entirely by your wishes."

Mr. Abbot looked intensely relieved.

This question had troubled him for many months, and he had always shrunk from speaking of it, because of the pain which he knew it would inflict. With this vital matter settled, he felt that he could give up all care, and spend the few remaining days of his life in peace with his idolized child, and calmly await the end, which he knew was so near.

"That is right, dear," he said, with a contented smile. "I am greatly comforted. I will write a full account of everything, together with my wishes for your future, and it will be ready to be sent to Mr. Bancroft at a moment's warning. I do not

care to have him know anything about us just yet; hark! what was that?" he broke off abruptly, and started into a listening attitude.

"Only the wind and the storm beating against the house, I think," answered Virgie, lifting her head, and calmed for the moment as she, too, listened to what had seemed an unusual noise.

"It is a wild night, my child. I hope no one is homeless in this storm," said Mr. Abbot. "I am thankful for this peaceful, though humble refuge, after the turmoil and wrong of a few years ago, only it is hard for you to be so shut away and isolated from those of your own age. But surely that was a knock, Virgie."

The young girl started to her feet as a loud and imperative rap echoed through the small entry outside the parlor.

It was seldom that they were disturbed at that hour of the evening, for among the hard working people of the mining district in which they lived, there were few who were not early wrapped in slumber after the labors of the day.

Virgie passed quickly out of the cheerful parlor into the tiny hall, and opened the outer door, though the heavy burglar chain was fastened and would admit of its being opened but a little ways.

"Who is there?" she asked, in her clear, sweet tones.

"A stranger who has lost his way and seeks direction to the nearest public inn," answered a rich, mellow voice from without.

Mr. Abbot now came out, a heavy shawl wrapped about his shoulders to shield him from the dampness.

"It is more than a mile from here, and a very poor place at that," he said.

The stranger outside gave a low whistle of dismay at this information, and muttered something about being in "a very uncomfortable fix."

Mr. Abbot unfastened the chain, threw wide the door, and invited the unknown to come in out of the storm.

"Thanks," was the courteous response; "but I will not trespass upon your hospitality if you will kindly direct me to the inn of which you speak. The darkness came on so suddenly that I lost my way. I left Oreana at noon to go to Humboldt, but my horse sprained his foot on the rough mountain road, and I have had to come at a snail's pace ever since."

"You are sadly out of your way, indeed, if you are going to Humboldt, for it is a good ten miles from here. Come in--come in out of the pouring rain, and we will discuss what will be best for you to do," returned his host, in a hearty tone, for he was won by the man's frankness and courtesy.

The stranger stepped, dripping, into the hall, a tall, straight figure, booted and spurred, and enveloped in waterproof jacket, trousers, and havelock.

"Thanks," he said, "you are very kind; but allow me to introduce myself; my name is Heath--William Heath, at your service."

"Then, Mr. Heath, come to my fireside and dry and warm yourself; my name is Abbot and this is my daughter," replied Mr. Abbot, leading the way into the cheerful parlor whither Virgie had retired when her father opened the door to the

benighted wayfarer.

Mr. Heath bowed with all the polish that could have been expected of him had he been in a royal drawing-room instead of a rude cottage in a ruder mining district of the mountains of Nevada, while his dark eyes flashed with a look of admiration over the perfect figure and into the lovely face of his host's daughter.

He removed his hat and havelock, revealing a grand head covered with waving brown hair, and a handsome face all aglow with intelligence. His eyes were a dark, wine-brown, his glance as keen and straight as an eagle's, his manner and bearing betraying that he was accustomed to mingle with people of culture and refinement.

## Chapter II.

### The Stranger Welcomed.

Virginia Abbot simply inclined her regal head in returning the stranger's greeting; then taking up her work again, she sat down by the table, with her back toward the fire and the newcomer. She had not failed to notice his look of surprised admiration when introduced to her, and it had affected her strangely.

Five years previous Mr. Abbot and his young daughter had come to that wild region entire strangers--the former, a man of gentlemanly bearing, somewhat past his prime; the latter a wondrously beautiful girl of fifteen, just budding into womanhood, and with a dignity of mien and refinement of speech which, together with her beauty, caused the uncouth inhabitants of the place to regard her with something of awe, and as if they thought she belonged to an entirely different sphere from them.

Mr. Abbot owned a claim in the gold and silver region there, which he asserted that he was going to work himself, much to the surprise of the rough miners, for he was a frail looking man.

He built a small but very convenient house, containing five rooms, which, with the few elegancies he had brought with him, for his child's sake, and which proclaimed that the strangers had been accustomed to the luxuries of life heretofore, became the pride and wonder of the settlement.

The house was painted inside and out; there were carpets upon the floors, draperies at the windows, vases and ornaments on the mantels, pictures on the walls. But though all the furnishings were of the simplest and cheapest, yet, to the rude and unaccustomed people about them, their home seemed a veritable palace.

Another mystery and evidence of superiority was the grave and self-contained Chinaman who came with them, and was installed as cook and servant in general in the small kitchen, and who waited upon the young lady of the house with so much respect and deference.

Here the father and daughter lived in the utmost seclusion. Virgie never was seen outside her home unless accompanied by her father or servant, and Mr. Abbot, when not in the mine, devoted himself wholly to his child.

They made no friends, and did not mingle at all with those about them, although they were always kind and courteous to every one, and thus won the respect of every man, woman and child in the hamlet. Mr. Abbot had the appearance of being much broken in spirit; his countenance wore a look of habitual sadness, and his abundant hair, so prematurely whitened, plainly told that some heavy trouble had overtaken him in the past. Nothing could be learned of their antecedents, where they had lived, or why they were there, though Chi Lu, the servant, was often plied with questions by the curious, and thus they were regarded as a trio of very mysterious personages.

After a year or so, it began to be whispered about that "the governor," as Mr. Abbot was called, because of the respect in which he was held, had "struck it rich," in other words, that his claim was proving an unusually fruitful one, and he was making money rapidly. How this came to be known it would be hard to say, for he was very uncommunicative, going and coming to and from his work quietly and unostentatiously, and living in the simplest manner.

As time passed, Virginia Abbot grew even more beautiful than she was when she had first come to her mountain home. The bracing air agreed with her, her health was perfect, while her simple manner of living and her regular habits were calculated to develop to the utmost every charm, and keep her strong, and fresh, and beautiful.

Her mind was not allowed to lie dormant, however, for her father attended most carefully and faithfully to her education, and not only insisted upon a regular and thorough course of study, but kept her well provided with the literature of the times, embracing many new books and various papers and periodicals.

But for more than a year past, Mr. Abbot's health had been failing. The change, however, was so gradual that Virgie did not observe it until the disease had fastened itself so firmly upon him that he was beyond all human aid. The man himself fought against it for months, striving to prolong his life for the sake of his idolized daughter, although, personally, the world had no longer any charms for him; but it never relaxed its fatal hold, and at last, at the time of the opening of our story, he felt that the time had come for him to give up labor and lay down all burdens, for he knew that his days were numbered.

The question of providing a home and protection for Virgie had long agitated his mind.

They had no relations or friends to whom he could confide her. There were reasons why he was unwilling to appoint a guardian and send her back to their former home, and so, at last, he resolved to commit her to the care of his early friend and college mate, Laurence Bancroft, a wealthy merchant of New York city.

But the matter was to be taken entirely out of his hands, and the beautiful girl's destiny settled in a way wholly unexpected by either father or daughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Mr. Heath, the benighted and storm-delayed traveler, threw back his dripping coat, and seated himself at the invitation of his host, before the blazing fire, Mr. Abbot thought that he had seldom seen a more attractive young man.

He was apparently about twenty-five years of age. His dark eyes were full of intelligence, and fringed with long silken lashes. His features were clear cut, as if they had been chiseled in marble. A dark brown moustache shaded, but did not conceal, a sensitive mouth, from which there flashed the gleam of brilliant teeth whenever he spoke or smiled; his nose was well formed, and his smooth, rather massive chin betrayed strength of purpose and decision of character.

His address was very courteous, even fascinating, and his voice possessed a rich, mellow tone, with a sympathetic ring in it, to which it was a delight to listen, and which won at once upon the hearts and confidence of his entertainers.

"You are unfortunate to be obliged to traverse our rough mountain roads on such a night as this," Mr. Abbot observed, with a shiver, as he drew nearer the fire, and laid another heavy oaken stick across the glowing blaze.

"That is true, sir," responded his guest, yet the glance, which he involuntarily shot at Virgie, bending gracefully over her work, did not betray an overwhelming sense of his misfortune.

"I Am On My Way To Join A Party Of Sportsmen At Humboldt," He Continued. "I Was Detained At Virginia City Upon A Matter Of Business, And They Went On Before, Promising To Wait There For Me Until To-Morrow Evening."

"Are you traveling on horseback?" Mr. Abbot asked, with some surprise.

"No, sir; but the train on which I started met with an accident this morning, which was liable to detain it several hours, and being impatient of the delay, I procured a horse at Oreana, thinking I could easily reach Humboldt by evening, when I could return it by rail. But the unfortunate beast sprained his foot on a rolling stone, as I have already told you; the storm and darkness overtook me, I lost my way, and my courage was just about failing, when I espied the friendly lights of this settlement, and I resolved to stop at the first house I came to and ask where I could find shelter for the night."

Mr. Abbot had been studying the young man's face attentively during this explanation.

He liked his appearance exceedingly; his countenance was honest and true, his story straightforward and well told, and some unaccountable impulse prompted him to take measures to become better acquainted with him.

"If you are going to Humboldt, you should have taken the turn to your left five miles back on the mountain," he said. "It would be impossible for you to reach it to-night, even if you could be set right, for you would be sure to lose your way again in the darkness. The only public house---if you can call it such---in this region, is at least a mile from here, and far from inviting or comfortable at that; so allow me, Mr. Heath, to offer you the hospitality of our home for the night, and to-morrow you can start afresh and refreshed upon your way."

The young man looked up with a glance of surprise, while a quick flush mounted to his brow, at this unexpected and rather extraordinary offer, for he well knew that in a mining district all strangers are regarded with suspicion if not with positive dislike.

"Sir, you are very kind," he began, casting another glance toward the lovely maiden by the table, for he had seen her give a quick start at her father's invitation, "but I fear I should trespass beyond all bounds were I to accept your offer."

"No, indeed," returned Mr. Abbot, with more of eagerness in his manner than he was in the habit of betraying over anything. "I could not think of allowing you to go on in this driving storm, and we can arrange it very comfortably can we not, Virgie?" turning toward her.

"Yes, sir," was the low though unhesitating reply.

"But I am an entire stranger to you. How dare you take me into your household? How do you know but that I am a robber or a brigand in disguise?" queried Mr. Heath, with a twinkle in his fine eyes. But still he was strongly tempted to accept the friendly offer, not only on account of the comfort surrounding him, but because he was attracted by the cultivated gentleman and his charming daughter, both of whom were a great surprise to him, finding them as he had in that wild region.

"Nay," responded Mr. Abbot, smiling, yet meeting the frank eyes of his guest steadily, "I think I can vouch for your character as a gentleman even though you are an utter stranger. Remove your wet garments, I pray, and make yourself comfortable for the night."

"But my horse," began Mr. Heath, suddenly bethinking himself of the dripping and suffering animal.

"True. Pardon my thoughtlessness," returned his host, adding, "There is a small shed attached to our dwelling where he can at least be sheltered. Virgie, please go and send Chi Lu to assist Mr. Heath."

Virgie immediately arose and left the room, and soon after a diminutive Chinaman appeared in the doorway, bearing a lighted lantern, and signifying his readiness to "puttee up te hossee."

Mr. Heath left the house with him, and both were gone some time, attending to the animal's injured leg and trying to make him as comfortable as circumstances would allow.

During their absence Virgie, at the suggestion of her father, busied herself in arranging a supper for the storm-beaten traveler, who upon his return was greeted by the fumes of steaming coffee, while an appetizing array of cold meats and other viands was spread upon the table, which had been drawn up before the fire.

"I fear Miss Abbot is making herself trouble on my account," Mr. Heath remarked, with a swift and grateful glance at the graceful form and flushed face that was bending over the glowing coals, where the young girl was toasting to a delicate brown a slice from a wheaten loaf.

"No, indeed; it is no trouble; and a meal after your long ride in the rain will not come amiss," Virgie answered, looking up and meeting his fine eyes for an instant.

She deposited the bread upon a plate, and inviting the young man to be seated, poured with her own hands a cup of fragrant coffee, which she placed before him.

She continued to wait upon him with exquisite ease and grace until his hunger was appeased, which was not soon, for it was a rare pleasure for him to watch her beautiful and expressive face while he chatted with her father, sipped his coffee, and ate his toast.

But he finished at length, and then Chi Lu was summoned the table cleared, and the room restored to its usual order.

Mr. Abbot seldom had met a real gentleman since coming among the mountains; he had lived chiefly within himself and for his child. But now he found that he had not lost all interest in the outside world, and he enjoyed immensely Mr. Heath's account of his travels, and his descriptions of men and things.

Virgie had not seen her father so bright and animated in all the five years of their secluded life, and she began to hope that his fears regarding his failing health were groundless after all. She, too, enjoyed the young stranger's conversation, although she did not join in it. She sat by, with her dainty embroidery in her hands, listening, and showing by her expressive face and shining eyes how rare a pleasure such congenial society was to her.

But by and by she stole away to her own room, where she lay far into the night thinking of the handsome stranger--of his eager yet respectful glances when he looked at her; of the low, rich cadence of his voice when he spoke to her, and feeling that she should miss him more than she had ever yet missed anyone during the last five years, when he should go away on the morrow.

The two men talked some time longer after Virgie left; the Chi Lu was called again, the pretty lounge was converted into a comfortable bed, and Mr. Heath was told that the parlor was at his service for the night.

The young man was very thankful for the hearty hospitality of which he had been the recipient, and felt that he had been extremely fortunate in finding such a pleasant abiding-place; but, although he was very weary from his rough and tedious

ride over the mountain, he found that slumber was hard to woo, and he, too, lay awake for long hours, wondering over the strange experience of the evening, and what hard fate---for hard he felt sure it must have been---could have driven a cultivated gentleman like Mr. Abbot, and his peerless daughter, who was so well fitted to shine in the most brilliant circles of the world, away from the haunts of civilization into that wilderness, and among the rude, uncultured, uncongenial people of a mining region.

### Chapter III.

#### Mr. Heath Talks of Becoming a Miner.

The next morning broke fair and beautiful.

Every trace of the storm had passed away, save that the dust was laid and all nature looked fresher and brighter for the copious bath it had received.

Virgie Abbot, despite her sleeplessness during the first half of the night, was up at an early hour, superintending breakfast for her father and their guest.

If she had been lovely the previous evening she was doubly so now in her pretty flannel wrapper---for the mornings were chilly in that region, even in the summer. The wrapper was of a light blue tint, wonderfully becoming to her delicate complexion, and harmonized well with her eyes and the dainty pink in her cheeks.

Her face wore a brighter, more eager look, than was its wont, this morning, and she was full of life and energy that was born of her youth and sunny, hopeful temperament.

The incidents of the previous evening had been a pleasant break in her hitherto monotonous life, and she was now looking forward, with no small degree of interest, to meeting by daylight the handsome stranger who had taken refuge with them.

During all the years that she had been in that rude place she had not seen one real gentleman, excepting her father; they had never before entertained a visitor, and there had been nothing but her reading and studies, her drawing and fancy work, to vary the quiet, almost dull uniformity of her existence.

Mr. Abbot himself looked brighter and better as he came out from his chamber and gave Virgie his usual morning greeting and caress.

This visit had evidently done him good also, and Virgie took "heart of grace" from the fact, and put aside, for the time at least, the anxious fears that had so burdened her the night before.

Breakfast was served in the simple but clean and cheerful kitchen which led from the parlor, while the small table, laid for three, had almost an air of elegance, with its spotless cloth, its few pieces of silver, china, and cut glass, relics of former glory, and the tiny vase of flowers, with the dew and rain still on them, which Virgie had gathered from the edge of the cliff near by.

Mr. Heath's glance expressed something of surprise as it swiftly took in these appointments; but to him the fairest sight of all was the slim but perfect figure of the young girl who sat at the head of the table, and poured his coffee, and waited upon him with all the ease and self-possession of one who had been long accustomed to the formalities and etiquette of high life.

The young man wondered at it. There was no other woman in the house, nor had been since they came there, for Mr. Abbot had mentioned that he lost his wife more than six years ago; but this girl was a perfect little hostess, and dainty, to the last degree, in her person. Her hands were white and delicate, the pretty pink nails without a blemish; her hair soft and silken, showing a careful wielding of the brush; her linen collar and cuffs were immaculate, her handkerchief white as snow, and fine and sheer, while everything about her bespoke lady-like refinement and a high regard for nicety of toilet.

He could hardly keep his eyes off her, she was so fair a picture; but once or twice she had looked up and caught his glance, flushed, and fearing to embarrass her, he turned resolutely to his host and opened a subject upon which he had been thinking quite, seriously.

"I understood you to say last evening, I believe, sir, that you were desirous of disposing of your claim," he remarked.

"Yes; my health is too poor to admit of my working it any longer, and I should be glad to dispose of it to the right person," Mr. Abbot replied.

"I think I know of some one who would like it, if it is still a promising one," the young man said, but a conscious color flushed his cheek slightly as he felt Virgie's eyes turned upon him.

"I honestly believe that it is richer to-day than when I began to work it," Mr. Abbot asserted confidently. "However," he added, "I do not ask you to take my word for it. If you know a party who would like to purchase, tell him to bring an expert and examine for himself; and even then if he is not satisfied to buy outright, he may work it upon shares until he is convinced of its value."

"That is fair, I am sure," said Mr. Heath.

"Perhaps you would like to take a look at it before you go?" suggested his host, who was eager to dispose of his property.

"I would, I assure you," was the reply; "but there is hardly time this morning, for I feel that I must join my party immediately, else they will be anxious regarding my safety. We are bound upon an excursion through the northern portion of the State, and intend to be absent a week or more; but after that, if you will permit me, I will return here and investigate matters---that is, if you will give me the refusal of the claim until then."

As the young man said this, his glance involuntarily wandered again to the beautiful face of Virgie.

There must have been something magnetic in his gaze, for she raised her white lids just then, and met the earnest, wistful look bent upon her.

A flush leaped to her cheek, and her violet eyes dropped instantly upon her plate again, while her heart fluttered like a caged wild bird.

"I will gladly wait your time, Mr. Heath," Mr. Abbot responded, in a satisfied tone. "I begin to think that your losing your way and falling to our care last evening was providential."

"I have no doubt of it, sir," was the grave and reverent reply. "I believe that all our ways are ordered for us; that everything is arranged for us by an All-wise Power."

Something very like a sneer curled the almost colorless lips of his host at this unexpected assertion.

Mr. Abbot was no believer in the individuality of God, and had spoken both lightly and at random when he had referred to the young man's visit as being providential.

"What do you mean by an All-wise Power?" he asked, skeptically.

"I mean God, sir."

"You believe there is a God, then?"

"Certainly; do you not?" and Mr. Heath's kind, grave eyes looked pityingly into the haggard, sunken face before him.

They seemed almost to say, "If you have not this belief to comfort you, with the hand of death laid upon your very heart, I grieve inexpressibly for you."

"If there is, I imagine He must allow Satan to have the control of some of our lives," was the evasive and bitter retort. "Virgie, Mr. Heath's cup is empty."

But his face flushed and his hands trembled as he thus abruptly turned the topic, showing how deeply the subject moved him; notwithstanding his pretended unbelief.

"Thanks; no more coffee for me," Mr. Heath said, with a smile and a bow to his young hostess, as she offered to replenish his cup; but he noticed that there was a troubled, anxious look in her eyes as they rested upon her father.

He made no reply to Mr. Abbot's remark, although he looked a trifle hurt.

He simply said, as he folded his napkin and pushed back his plate:

"I must ask you to excuse me and my lack of ceremony if I bid you good morning, and take French leave. I feel that I ought to get on my way as soon as possible; and believe me I am very grateful for your hospitality and courtesy."

Virgie arose as he spoke, and like the true little lady that she was, assured him that it had been a delight to entertain him, and she should look forward with pleasure to his return.

He thanked her, shook hands warmly with her, and then left the house, followed by Mr. Abbot, who watched him depart with a feeling of regret such as he had not experienced over any one during all the years of his exile.

Still he pleasantly anticipated his coming again, when he meant to make him remain several days.

He had been strangely attracted toward him from the moment when he had first heard his mellow, sympathetic tones, asking to be directed to a place of shelter. He knew that he possessed a grand character, for he carried the stamp of true nobility upon his frank, handsome face.

"That is a promising young man, Virgie," he said, as he returned to the parlor after watching the horse and its rider disappear down the mountain. "I should like to know where he came from, and more about him."

Virgie did not reply, but she turned away from the window where she, too, had been watching the receding horseman, with a shy, sweet smile on her red lips. William Heath's last glance had been for her, as he doffed his hat and bowed low in his saddle when he turned down the road.

During all the week that followed her step was lighter and her face brighter than its wont, and she went singing about the house to the delight of her father, who was now at home all the day long, as he had given up going to the mine.

Mr. Abbot had appeared very thoughtful after the departure of his young guest, often falling into a profound reverie, in which he would sit for hours.

Virgie often wondered what he could be thinking about, but she did not feel like questioning him, lest he should refer again to the painful topic of his leaving her.

One day, however, coming into the room suddenly, she saw her mother's bible in his hands, and she was sure there were tears in his eyes. She appeared not to notice either his employment or his emotion, but soon stole softly away again, and went weeping up to her own room.

After that he busied himself with writing a great deal, and she felt sure that he was making arrangements for her of which he had spoken on that stormy evening. A great dread came over her at the thought of being left alone in the world; and yet, in spite of all, she looked forward to the return of Mr. Heath with more of pleasure and anticipation than she had known for many a year.

Thus more than a week went by, and one afternoon Virgie, her father being asleep and the house oppressively still, took her book and went out to a little nook back of her cottage, where she was in the habit of going to study, and where Chi Lu had built a rustic seat for her beneath a great pine tree that grew out of a cleft in the mountain.

But she could not concentrate her thoughts upon the page before her; they went roving after a coal black steed and its handsome rider, until finally her book dropped from her hands, her eyes fixed themselves dreamily upon the lofty, far-off peaks of the Humboldt Mountains, and she was lost to time and place---everything save her own delightful musings.

So absorbed was she that she was not aware of the approach of any one until a small but exquisitely arranged bouquet of mountain flowers were laid upon the seat beside her, and a rich but well remembered voice said:

"Pardon me, Miss Abbot, for intruding upon your solitude, but Chi Lu told me that Mr. Abbot was resting and could not be disturbed at present, and that I should find you here."

Virginia sprang to her feet, the tint of the wild rose in her cheeks, her violet eyes grown black with repressed excitement.

"Mr. Heath?" she cried, her scarlet lips parting in a bewildering smile.

"Yes; forgive me for having startled you so," he said, gently, then adding with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "You were surely in a very brown study."

"I am afraid I was," she returned, laughing. "But what lovely flowers!" she continued, taking them up and bending to inhale their fragrance. "How kind of you to gather them for me."

The young man's eyes lingered about her in a delighted gaze, for she made the fairest picture imaginable standing there in her soft gray dress with its collar and cuffs of black velvet, a knot of scarlet ribbon at her throat, the brilliant flowers in her hands, and a fleecy white shawl wrapped about her shoulders. Her shining hair was gathered into a satiny brown coil at the back of her head and pinned with a silver arrow, while a few naturally curling locks lay lightly on her forehead. The dark, moss-grown rock was behind her; the softly waving plummy boughs of the pine tree above her, a carpet of tender green beneath her feet.

"You are still trembling from the shock that I have given you," he said in a tone of self-reproach, and noticing how the flowers quivered in her grasp, "pray, pardon me and give me a handshake of welcome, or I shall almost regret that I came."

She looked up frankly into his dark eyes, and laid her small hand unhesitatingly in his.

"You are very welcome, Mr. Heath," she said, "and I am sure that papa will be very glad to see you."

William Heath smiled at her words.

He felt sure that she, too, was glad to see him---that his coming was a pleasant break in the monotony of her life; her varying color, the bright, happy gleam of her eyes told him this.

Her wonderful beauty, so out of place in that wild region, thrilled him strangely. Her queenly manner, her delicacy and refinement astonished him, and he wondered more and more what mysterious circumstances could have combined to drive two such cultivated people so far from civilization to hide themselves in the rugged fastnesses of those dreary mountains.

Chapter IV.

A Mountain Ramble.

"You were reading," he remarked, stooping to pick up the book that had fallen to the ground as she arose. "Tacitus!" he added, in a tone of astonishment, as his eye fell upon the title page.

"Yes, I am reviewing; papa likes me to study a little every day, still," Virgie returned, quietly, while she examined her flowers with a critical eye, and wondered that a gentleman could have arranged them so well.

He must be an artist, she thought, for no one save an artist, or a lover of art, could have taken such pains to harmonize colors like that.

"I should suppose you would labor under serious difficulties in trying to pursue your studies in such a place as this," Mr. Heath remarked.

"Oh, no, papa is a fine scholar, and he makes a most delightful teacher."

"And have you pursued a regular course under him?"

"Yes, partly. I left school when I was fifteen, but I have kept right on the same as I should have done if I had remained, and I graduated two years ago," she concluded, smiling archly at the idea of graduating in that wild country.

"And with high honors, of course," said her companion in the same vein.

"Certainly; with all the honors, since there was no one to compete with me or to bear away the palm from me. But, Mr. Heath, you must be both weary and hungry after your ride over the mountains; come in, and let me get you a lunch," Virgie concluded, on hospitable thoughts intent.

"No, indeed, thank you; I will eat nothing until tea time, when, if you will permit me, I will gladly join you. I should much prefer to sit here and enjoy this magnificent view with you to going indoors."

He seated himself, as he spoke, upon the rustic seat, and Virgie, following his example, they fell into a pleasant chat, which lasted more than an hour.

Virgie never forgot that delicious hour, neither did her companion, who was every moment growing more deeply interested in the beautiful mountain maiden.

He talked upon many themes, and was surprised to find how fluently she could converse with him, showing how much and how thoroughly she had read, and how wisely and carefully her father had superintended her education. She was far above the average woman in point of intellect and culture, he told himself and it was a pity that her life should be wasted in that wretched place.

But they were at length interrupted by Chi Lu, who came to tell them that Mr. Abbot was awake, and had asked for them.

They immediately arose to go to him, and found him sitting upon the tiny porch in front of the cottage.

He was looking thinner and more worn, Mr. Heath thought, than when he had last seen him, and his cough was far from troublesome, even though the weather was milder. It was evident, to him, at least, that the man was in the last stages of consumption, and could not live many months, if weeks, although, as the weather grew warmer, he might rally somewhat.

He greeted the young man warmly, and made many inquiries regarding his trip and the success which he and his party had met with in their sport.

"Very good," Mr. Heath told him, adding, "And now my friends have gone to Salt Lake City, while I have retraced my steps hither to talk with you about that claim of yours."

Virgie looked up quickly at this, a lovely flush rising to her cheek. If only he would become its purchaser.

The eyes of the two young people met, and held each other in a glance that sent the blood coursing more rapidly than usual through their veins.

Mr. Abbot's face, brightened.

"Then you still think that you know some one who will purchase it?" he said, eagerly.

"Yes, sir---if---if it proves all that you have described it, I think I may like to buy it myself," Mr. Heath answered quietly, but with rising color.

"You! you don't look like a person who would care to take to mining for a living," returned his host, in a surprised tone.

"I might say the same of you, sir," said the young man, smiling.

Mr. Abbot flushed, and for a moment appeared considerably agitated and unable to speak.

Then he said, with something of hauteur in his manner:

"Sometimes a person is compelled by circumstances, over which he has no control, to adopt a pursuit, which under other conditions he would shun as both unfitting and obnoxious."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Abbot," Mr. Heath hastened to say, in a deprecatory tone. "I had no intention of calling to mind anything of an unpleasant nature; my reply was lightly and thoughtlessly given. However, I have always had a desire to see something of mining, and although I may not attempt to work at it myself, I think I should like to own a claim."

"Very well; then to-morrow I will show you over the premises; and explain all that you may wish to know; perhaps, though you may not be quite so much in favor of a miner's life when you come to realize the difficulties attending it."

Chi Lu now interrupted with the information that tea was ready, and Mr. Abbot repeated the invitation that Virgie had already given to their new friend, insisting further, that he should remain their guest until he should decide regarding the purchase of the claim.

Upon being assured that it would inconvenience the household in no way, he consented, nothing loath at the prospect of being allowed to bask in Virgie's presence, and to have an opportunity to study her character more fully.

After tea, which was really a dainty meal, far better and more acceptably served than any the young traveler had eaten since leaving San Francisco three weeks previous, Mr. Heath, seeing that Mr. Abbot was weary and more inclined to rest upon the lounge than to converse, asked Virgie if she would allow him to be her escort and go out for a ramble.

The young girl flushed with pleasure at the request, and cordially assented.

She wrapped her fleecy shawl once more about her shoulders, and tying a dainty hat---which Chi Lu's skillful fingers had woven from mountain grasses, and her own fair hands had trimmed---upon her pretty brown head, they sauntered forth.

The sun had gone down, but the western sky was all ablaze with crimson and orange, which gradually faded into soft purple and deeper blue in the upper sky. There were mountains all about them, some darkly green with fir, spruce, and pine, others of brighter and tenderer tints in their dress of oak, maple, and birch, while here and there arose one bald and gray, all of solid rock, with now and then a patch of moss clinging to its time worn sides, but giving variety to the scene and enhancing by contrast the whole picture.

"Where would you like to go?" Virgie asked, as they passed out of the little gate into the rough road.

"Wherever you will take me," Mr. Heath replied, as he looked smilingly down into the beautiful face upraised to his.

"Then I will take you up to the Bare Ledge; the finest view can be obtained from there," the girl replied as she moved on to hide the blush which his look had called to her face.

It moved her strangely whenever she met the gaze of the grand man, for grand her soul told her he was, with that magnificent head, that intelligent face, and that quiet, yet high-bred dignity of manner which she had never seen in any other save her father.

"The Bear Ledge?" repeated Mr. Heath. "Why is it called that? Is it haunted by wild beasts? If it is, I shall certainly object to your going there."

"Oh, no; it is not that kind of a bear at all," laughed Virgie, the silver ripple of amusement breaking like music upon the evening air. "It is called so because it is a mass of rock entirely barren; nothing will grow upon it; it seems to be the one spot in all this region that is absolutely desolate, and yet from it you may view a world of beauty."

On they went up the mountain, conversing now upon one topic, now upon another, yet both conscious of but one prominent fact---that they were together, and supremely happy in each other's society.

At last, however, their climb was over, and following a rough path that led along the side of the mountain for some distance, they at length came out upon a broad ledge or table rock, which was indeed barren to desolation.

But the vista that opened out before them was beautiful beyond description.

Mountains everywhere---above, below, and on either hand; but between them were fertile little valleys, with here and there glittering lakes with tiny streamlets trickling into them, that seemed like silver brooches and chains garnishing nature's emerald vestments.

The youthful couple stood wrapt in silence for several minutes, viewing the varied landscape. To Virgie the scene was familiar as an oft-repeated tale, and yet she was never weary of it. To her companion it was one of the loveliest views that he had ever gazed upon, even though he had visited many lands and climbed many a mountain.

"It is grand!" said Mr. Heath, at last.

"It is grand!" echoed Virgie, drawing in a deep breath of pure air, and sweeping a delighted glance over all the fair scene.

"I thank you very much for bringing me here," her companion continued. "I would hardly have believed there could be such an exquisite view in this region; my disagreeable ride, when I came here before, rather prejudiced me against the locality. Do you come here often?"

"I used to, before papa's health failed him," Virgie answered, with a regretful sigh, as she remembered how little her father had been able to go about of late. "We used to come here almost every Sabbath in fine weather, with our books and papers, and spend half the day---it is all the church we have had---and I shall always love the spot."

"No doubt you do, and yet----"

Virgie looked up inquiringly as he paused abruptly.

"I was thinking," he continued, in reply to her glance, "that this mountain must be a wild and lonely place for one like you to spend your life in."

"Yes, it is lonely," the young girl responded, with a wistful gleam in her violet eyes.

"Have you lived here long, Miss Abbot?"

"Five years---a little more."

"So long? Surely you cannot have had much congenial society," Mr. Heath remarked, as he contemplated with no favoring eye the rude hamlet far below them on their right.

"None, save my father."

"And have you never been lonely, and yearned for youthful companionship?"

"Oh, yes, often," and the bright tears sprang quickly into Virgie's blue eyes, as she thought of the nights she had wept herself to sleep from sheer homesickness and a feeling of utter desolation. "But," she continued more brightly, and winking rapidly to keep the tell-tale drops from falling. "I can bear loneliness, or almost anything else, for my father's sake."

"Poor child! brave little woman!" thought the man by her side, "it must have been very much like being buried alive, and she has borne it like a heroine; but she will not have to endure it much longer 'for her father.' I wonder what will become of her when he is gone."

"Mr. Abbot seems very feeble," he said aloud, "do you not think a change would be beneficial to him?"

"I---do not know," Virgie began wistfully; then added, more to herself than to him, "Where could we go?"

"I would advise the sea-shore. I should think the salt air would do him good. Santa Cruz, Monterey, or any of those places on the California coast, would be both pleasant and healthful."

A startled look came into Virgie's eyes, and her face grew pale.

She had often been to Santa Cruz and Monterey, in the old delightful days when her mother was living, where she had reigned like a little queen, and they had all been so happy, with no suspicion of the black shadow that was creeping upon them so surely.

"No, no, we could not go there; I---I do not believe that papa could be persuaded to leave home," she faltered with evident nervousness and embarrassment.

"There is a sad history and a secret here," said Mr. Heath to himself, and he wondered more than ever what cruel misfortune could have driven these people thus into exile.

"Has Mr. Abbot ever consulted a physician?" he asked.

"No; there is no physician near us. But papa understands something of medicine himself," Virgie answered, sighing, for her heart was very heavy whenever she thought of her father's condition, and it was evident to her that Mr. Heath considered him to be in a very critical state.

He saw that it troubled her to talk about it, and resolved that he would not refer to the subject again.

As they stood there the gorgeous tints faded out of the western sky, a purplish haze settled over mountain and valley, like a gauzy veil softening all their outlines, and a mist was beginning to rise from the depths below.

"The dew is falling, Miss Abbot. I fear you will take cold in this dampness. Shall I take you back now?" Mr. Heath asked.

"Yes. I think it will be hardly safe for us to linger longer," she replied. "But, Mr. Heath, be careful as you go down; the path is not altogether safe."

The young man laughed lightly.

"I have scaled greater heights, climbed steeper and more rugged paths than these, Miss Abbot," he said. "The Alps, the Pyrenees, the Caucasus, are all familiar ground, and this is but child's play compared with them."

"Oh, then you have been in Europe?" Virgie cried, with animation.

"Yes, in almost every portion of it," he answered, watching her kindly face with admiration.

"How favored you are," she sighed wistfully. "I have longed with a mighty longing to visit foreign lands."

"Have you? Perhaps some time your wish may be gratified. I hope it may be," he returned, in an earnest tone. "Now give me your hand, and let me assist you down this slippery path."

"No, no. Please care for yourself, Mr. Heath, and let me follow you," the young girl pleaded. "I know every step of the way, and it is all strange to you."

But he stood still in the way, with his hand outstretched to her, resolute yet smiling. He would not yield his point, and without another word she laid her own within his, and together they went down the mountain path, he guiding her steps as carefully as if she had never been over the ground before, and she finding it very pleasant to be so shielded and attended.

When they reached more level ground he drew the hand he held within his arm, and they slowly wended their way back in the gloaming to the cottage, Virgie feeling strangely light-hearted and happy, and almost as if a new and beautiful life was about opening before her, while William Heath, with a twinkle of amusement in his fine eyes, wondered what his aristocratic mother and sister would say; what another brilliantly beautiful woman would think to see him thus playing the devoted cavalier to this simple and unpretending mountain maiden whom he thought so lovely.

He had at that moment in his pocket, letters from two of them, begging him to "quit his wanderings," to "come home and settle down to the real business of life. The property needed his care, and---Sadie had not been like herself since his departure."

These words came to him now, but they did not change in the least the purposes that were taking root in his mind---the determination to remain in that isolated hamlet as long as *Virginia Abbot's father should live*.

## Chapter V.

"Who Is He, and Why Is He Here?"

The next morning Mr. Abbot and his young guest visited the mine, and, after a thorough examination of the former's claim, and instituting some inquiries, more for form's sake than anything else, regarding the wealth of the mine generally, Mr. Heath became the purchaser of Mr. Abbot's property, and at once set about hiring competent miners to work it for him.

"It may prove but a foolish, quixotic undertaking after all," he told himself, when his negotiations were completed, "but I must have some excuse for remaining here. That girl is the most beautiful being I ever met. She has power to move me as I was never moved before. I simply *cannot* go away and leave her. I am sure her father can live but a little while, and then---"

What was to happen after Mr. Abbot should be taken away remained unsaid, and Mr. Heath walked on for a while with bent head and thoughtful brow.

He was looking about him a little to find a place in which to live while he should remain on the mountain, for he was resolved that he would trespass upon Mr. Abbot's hospitality no longer than he was obliged to, although every hour in Virgie's presence was perfect delight to him.

"I would give a good deal to know their history," he resumed, after a little. "It is the greatest mystery--their being here. The man shows culture and familiarity with men and things; he is unusually keen and shrewd in business matters, while the way he has managed his daughter's education betrays the scholar and a mind of no ordinary power and ability; and to be *here*, working with the common herd in a *mine!* I do not understand it!"

While he was speculating thus regarding his new friends, Mr. Abbot and Virgie were engaged in the same manner with reference to him.

"Well, Virgie, I have sold my claim, and for a generous sum, too. Mr. Heath is no haggler, and gave me my price without a demur; but I think that it is very queer that a young man of his stamp should care to engage in any such business."

"It is rather strange," Virgie admitted, absently.

"He is far above the people with whom he will come in contact," continued her father. "He has evidently been accustomed to the very best of society, is well educated and fine appearing, and seems to have an abundance of means. What do you make of him, dear?"

"I should say that he is very much of a gentleman, papa," replied the young girl, flushing, as she remembered their walk of the previous evening, the care and attention which he had bestowed upon her, and the delight which she had experienced in his presence.

"Yes, that goes without saying; but, does he seem like an American to you?"

"I had not given a thought to his nationality," Virgie answered, looking up curiously.

"Well, it strikes me that he may be English, although there is nothing in his speech or manner to betray it. He is built like an Englishman, and somehow the idea has taken possession of me that he belongs over the water, and so, his desire to settle here seems all the more incomprehensible."

"It may be a whim--a romantic desire to learn something of a miner's life," observed Virgie; "or," with more animation, "he may be an author, papa, and is taking this way to study certain phases of character with reference to writing a book."

"Well, Virgie," said Mr. Abbot, smiling, "I must confess that is the most reasonable explanation that could suggest itself, and possibly, with your woman's intuition, you have hit upon the right solution of the mystery. Yes," after a thoughtful pause, "I shouldn't wonder if you were right. His saying that he did not intend to work the mine himself goes to show that it is a secondary object, and he does not care particularly about the profit of it. He is very pleasant company. I believe his coming has done me good."

"I am sure it has," Virgie answered, brightly; "and papa, now that your mind is relieved of all pecuniary care, don't you think you will continue to improve?"

"No, Virgie," her father returned, gravely; "do not allow my temporary improvement to deceive you. A fatal disease has fastened itself upon me, and I know that I have not long to live."

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed the lovely girl, sharply. "I will not believe it. Pray, *pray* try what medical advice will do for you."

"Hush, my child," Mr. Abbot returned, deeply moved. "I did not mean to refer to this again, but you force me to do so; nothing short of a miracle could give me a sound pair of lungs again."

"Then let us try change of air---anything so that I may keep you with me," Virgie pleaded, yet knowing, as she did so, that there was no place on earth that held so much attraction for her now as the humble home which heretofore had seemed so lonely and isolated.

A subtle charm seemed suddenly to have fallen upon it; everything looked brighter; all things surrounding it had become dearer.

"No, dear; no air will be so good for me as this pure, bracing mountain atmosphere," her father replied, gently. "I would shrink from going to any place where we should be likely to find familiar faces---nothing would break me down so quickly. Be patient, Virgie for a little longer, and then *you* shall go back to the world, where you ought long ago to have been with people of your own age."

"Oh, papa! I care nothing for the world nor for society without you," she sobbed, realizing more fully than she ever had done, that she would soon be fatherless.

"But it is not right that you should spend your life in such a place as this," responded Mr. Abbot. "I have written to Mr. Bancroft, and if anything happens to me suddenly you will find the letter in my desk, and must send it to him immediately. I would mail it now, only---I cannot feel reconciled to having any one learn of our hiding-place while I live. One thing more I must speak of. I should have done so the other night if we had not been interrupted. When I am gone I want you to lay my body here, under the shadow of the old pine tree."

"Papa, papa! you will break my heart! Surely you would wish to lie beside my mother!" Virgie cried, the tears raining over her cheeks.

Mr. Abbot's face was almost convulsed with pain for a moment.

"Yes, if that were possible," he said, at length, "but no one must ever know the fate of Abbot Al---Ha! Virgie, I had nearly uttered the dishonored name!" he panted.

"Papa, you shall not talk so," the girl cried, wiping her tears and turning on him almost indignantly.

"I would not pain you, my darling," he answered, gently; "but if there were no cloud hanging over us, I should be only too glad to go back to our old home to die and be laid beside my loved ones. It cannot be, however," he concluded, sighing wearily.

"But, dear papa, the dreadful past was caused by no fault of your own, and it is not right that you should suffer as if it had been," Virgie said, passionately.

A cynical smile curled the lips of the sick man.

"The world would tell a far different story if it should ferret out my grave and see my name blazoned above it; and as long as its poisonous tongues continue to speak slightingly of me, it must never know aught about me. So do as I bid you; promise that you will obey me, Virgie."

And the almost broken-hearted girl promised, but feeling as if it would be almost more than she could bear, to go back to the gay world, where she would be kindly cared for and sheltered, and leave her dear father lying in his lonely grave upon that desolate mountain.

William Heath entered with great apparent interest upon his mining operations, and although he frankly acknowledged his entire ignorance of the business, exhibited a goodly amount of judgment and common sense which warned the workmen whom he had hired that it would not be well for them to attempt to take advantage of him.

He was unable to find any place in which he was willing to live, so he caused a small cabin to be erected just opposite Mr. Abbot's dwelling, furnished it simply but comfortably from the nearest supply station, and with Mr. Abbot's permission, contracted with Chi Lu to keep his table supplied with all needful provisions.

No one would have supposed from his humble surroundings from the industrious and energetic life which he led, and the total absence of anything like arrogance or assumption, that he belonged to an almost royal family, and had been for years the petted darling of fashionable circles and drawing rooms, the catch of many seasons, and the prize for which fond mammas and beautiful, aspiring maidens had long angled in vain.

But such was the fact, and William Heath had thus isolated himself from his home and all that he held most dear simply because, while on a pleasure trip, he had accidentally met a beautiful girl who had chanced to touch a chord in his heart that had never vibrated before.

These two young people were now thrown almost daily into each other's society.

Mr. Heath was quite literary in his tastes, and after the duties of the day were over he invariably sought the companionship of Virgie, sometimes reading to her while she worked, and often with her as she still persisted in reviewing certain studies and authors which she loved.

The failing invalid, too, received much of his care and attention, while many delicacies, which he had never taken pains to procure for himself, found their way to his table to help sustain his waning strength.

It is easy to see whither all this tended.

Virgie soon learned to look for Heath's coming, to listen for his footsteps and the sound of his voice, as she had never looked for or listened to anything else in the world before. She began to rely upon him, to experience a sense of restfulness and content in his care that sometimes made her wonder how she had ever been able to live without him.

There came new beauty, and light, and earnestness into her face, a tenderer smile to her red lips, a more musical cadence into her voice. The hours dragged heavily without him, and they took to themselves wings when he came.

Before she realized the fact she had learned to love him with all the strength of her nature, and her destiny was sealed.

Thus weeks and months went by.

For a time the warm, genial summer weather seemed to hold Mr. Abbot's disease somewhat in check, and, as he was cheerful, and enjoyed the novelty of having two young and charming people about him, there was a little season during which that small household was very happy.

He studied the young stranger attentively, and was more and more prepossessed in his favor. They conversed frequently upon topics which Mr. Abbot had long been in the habit of scoffing at, but there was an element of reverence in Mr. Heath's nature that commanded his respect in spite of preconceived ideas and a tendency to skepticism. His arguments were always reasonable and convincing. He could not fail to feel this influence; and it was not long before Virgie could see that a great change had taken place in her father's feelings regarding his relations to an overruling power and the future, which hitherto had seemed so vague and uncertain.

Yet, notwithstanding all this, he often experienced a feeling of uneasiness.

He could not fail to perceive that Virgie was learning to care a great deal for their new friend, and that Mr. Heath was deeply interested in his daughter.

This was all well enough if Mr. Heath was what he appeared to be, and his intentions were honorable.

But he could never quite divest himself of the feeling that there was something rather mysterious in his desire to remain in that remote region, and it would be terrible if any harm should result from it to his one ewe lamb.

He had always guarded her so tenderly and carefully no breath of evil, scarce a sorrow, save their one great sorrow, had ever touched her. Once or twice the thought had come to him, prompted, no doubt, by the circumstances which had driven him to that place, that the man might have become entangled in some wrong or crime, and was hiding, like himself, from the world and justice; and yet it was difficult to fancy that he was not all that was honorable and upright, for his life and conduct from day to day were beyond reproach.

"If they love each other, and he is all he seems, I could give her to him, and feel more content than I ever thought to be," he said to himself, while brooding upon the subject one afternoon while Virgie and her lover were out on a ramble. "She would be far better off under the care and protection of a kind husband, than she would be to send her to New York. Her future would be settled, and there would be no fear on account of the snares and temptations of society in the gay city.

"Still I really know nothing about him. He says nothing about himself, his home, or his family. If it should turn out that he has a suspicion that she will have money, and he is seeking her for that, it would be a fearful blow. I could not bear that her young life should be ruined."

He sat in troubled thought for a long time, considering the subject from every point, sometimes reproaching himself for not having foreseen the danger of allowing the two young people to come together, and refused to sell his claim to Mr. Heath; then again feeling a sense of shame for his unworthy suspicions of one who bore the stamp of true nobility upon his very face.

At length he was aroused from his reverie by the sound of the voice he knew and loved so well; and, sitting suddenly erect and speaking with resolution, he said:

"I am her father. I have a right to know. He shall tell me who he is, and why he is here."

Chapter VI.

"Will You Give Me Your Daughter?"

"Papa," said Virgie, putting a flushed, beautiful face inside the room where her father was sitting, and all unconscious of the very serious considerations that were agitating his mind: "I have invited Mr. Heath to take tea with us. A basket of the loveliest peaches came to us this afternoon from some mysterious source, which, however, I am inclined to think, he could tell us something about if he chose. So, if you entertain him for a little while, I will go and prepare a dish of them for him to share with us."

"Yes, yes. Come in, Mr. Heath. I was waiting to see you. Run away, Virgie, and attend to your peaches, and I will see that our friend is properly entertained until tea is ready," the invalid responded, with unusual animation.

Virgie tripped lightly up to her chamber, where she removed her hat, and stopped a moment before her glass to rearrange the locks that lay lightly upon her forehead, and blushed a conscious rosy red as she looked into her eyes and read the strangely happy expression that lay in their clear depths. Then she tied a long white apron around her slim waist, and went down to pare her peaches, never suspecting the vital questions that were being discussed in the little parlor so near her.

"Mr. Heath," Mr. Abbot began, as the young man had seated himself, "I was thinking of you just as you entered, and had resolved to ask you a couple of very plain, and to me, important questions."

"Which, no doubt, I shall be very glad to answer if I can do so," his companion responded, smiling, yet flushing lightly as he began to suspect what the nature of the invalid's inquiries might be.

"Thank you," responded Mr. Abbot, courteously, and then added, gravely: "I do not need to remind you, I am sure, that as a father I am often anxious regarding my daughter's future, and for this reason I feel compelled to ask you that which, under other circumstances I should not feel at liberty to ask. Will you tell me who you are?"

"My name, Mr. Abbot, is---William Heath," the young man began, looking thoughtful; then seemed to hesitate to go on.

"Is that all that you have to tell me about yourself?" the invalid inquired, with some dignity, and attentively studying the face opposite him. "I knew that before," he went on, a suspicion of sarcasm in his tone, "but I have long felt that there was something of mystery connected with the circumstances of your being here. It is rather extraordinary that a young man of your talent and culture should desire to locate in a rough place like this. It has been evident to me for some time that your mining operations were of secondary importance to you, for you cannot reap much if any profit. It must take nearly all you realize to pay the two men you hire to work your claim, while you lead, comparatively, a life of leisure. My second question was regarding this---why are you here?"

William Heath lifted his frank, dark eyes, and looked straight into the face of his host, and said, in a low tone, but with an earnestness which betrayed that he felt he had much at stake:

"Mr. Abbot, I will answer your last question first, as frankly as you have asked it, though, no doubt, you will be greatly surprised, and perhaps startled, by my reply. I am here simply and solely to try and win Virginia Abbot for my wife."

Mr. Abbot sat erect, looking astonished indeed at this astounding statement, and a spot of deep red settled in each hollow cheek.

"What can you mean? You never saw her until three months ago!" he said, excitedly.

"True, I never saw her until that wild, stormy night when I came to you a weary, dripping traveler and you so kindly extended to me your hospitality. But I began to love your daughter that very evening. I do not need to tell you that she is beautiful, for you know it; but to me she seemed the fairest woman that I had ever seen; her presence moved me as I had never been moved before, and I felt as if I could hardly go on to join my friends and leave her. But I suddenly found a pretext for returning when you mentioned that you desired to dispose of your claim. I resolved that I would become the purchaser. I would come here and remain to study the character of your daughter, and if she proved all that I fancied her, I would strive to win her for my wife. This, my dear sir, is why I am here; and now---will you give her to me?"

"Have you said anything to Virgie about this?" Mr. Abbot asked, looking very grave.

"No, sir; I have not breathed a word of my intentions to her; but I accepted her invitation to tea this evening with the determination to tell you this, if I could make the opportunity, and ask your sanction to my suit before speaking to her."

Mr. Abbot looked gratified.

"That was honorable of you," he said. "It meets my estimate of your character."

"Thank you, sir," Mr. Heath returned, flushing slightly, then continued: "I am not given much to rhapsody or extravagances of language, but I know that I can never be a happy man unless I win Virgie, and if you will give her to me, I promise most solemnly to devote my life to her happiness."

"Is William Heath your true name?" Mr. Abbot questioned, determined to know all about him before committing himself.

"Yes, sir. I hope you do not think I have been masquerading under a false name," returned the young man, a quick flush mantling his cheek.

"Pardon me; but you must remember that I could not account for your being here, and---and I was a little suspicious, I own, that you were not quite what you pretended to be," said the invalid, apologetically, and yet regarding him keenly.

The flush on William Heath's face deepened. He looked very thoughtful for a moment, then said:

"Mr. Abbot, you have read between the lines better than I thought. I would have preferred to remain plain William Heath to every one until after I had won my love; but perhaps I had better be perfectly frank with you. I am not an American."

"I thought so," returned his companion, quietly.

"Did you?" asked the young man, looking surprised. "I compliment you upon your penetration then, for I have passed for one of your countrymen almost everywhere since coming to this country."

"I think you are an Englishman," said Mr. Abbot.

"I am, sir. I have an estate called Heathdale in the county of Hampshire, England. I own another in Surrey. Mr. Abbot, I am an English baronet, and I have simply been a visitor and traveler in this country during the last year."

"You, an English baronet!" exclaimed Mr. Abbot, excitedly, a vivid flush suffusing his face, then quickly receding, leaving him deadly pale.

"Yes, sir; but, pray believe me, I had no intention of boasting of either my wealth or title," observed the young man modestly.

"Oh!" sighed the sick man. "I am afraid then that you can never marry Virgie."

"Sir! Why not? What is there in what I have told you to debar me from making your daughter my wife? I should suppose you would feel that I have it in my power to make her all the happier on account of it."

"But you do not know, you cannot understand, you English are so proud, so tenacious of honor and caste. Ah, my poor child!" Mr. Abbot cried, incoherently, and appearing greatly agitated and distressed.

"I am sure, my friend, I cannot comprehend this excessive emotion," Sir William---as we shall call him henceforth---remarked.

"Would you be willing to marry a woman whose name is irretrievably linked with disgrace?" Mr. Abbot asked, while cold perspiration started out upon his forehead, and his face was almost convulsed with his anguish of mind.

He knew that Virgie had grown to love this man. He was conscious of the pride and prejudices of the English aristocracy, and he believed that when he should tell the story of his life, as he knew it was only right he should do, Sir William Heath would no longer care to make his daughter his wife, and her heart would be broken.

Sir William looked up, startled at this question, his own face paling suddenly.

"Surely, Mr. Abbot, you cannot mean anything so bad as that," he replied, in a low, pained tone.

"I will tell you all about it," said the sick man, "and then you must decide for yourself whether you are still willing to wed the daughter of a dishonored man. Of course you have seen from the beginning of your acquaintance with us that no pleasure or profit that might accrue to us from this kind of a life could ever reconcile us to it; that only some terrible misfortune could have driven me and my beautiful darling into such a wild and desolate region as this."

"Yes; I have felt that there was something mysterious in your being here---some secret reason why you should have shut yourselves away from all comfort and civilization," Sir William admitted, as his companion paused for strength to go on. "But I have never attributed it to any willful wrong on your part."

"Thank you for your faith in me," returned Mr. Abbot, gratefully. "I only wish the world at large was as charitable; if it had been, I need not have been here now, on the verge of the grave, nor been obliged to doom my lonely child to a life of exile, when everything should be at the brightest for her; neither should we have been obliged to disown a name which, until recently had always been an honored and respected one".

"Then your name is not Abbot," said Sir William.

"Yes, but that is not the whole of it; I will, however, confide that to you later. But of course I tell you this in strictest confidence; whatever your decision may be after you hear my story, I charge you not to betray me to any one."

"You may trust me," said the young man, quietly.

"Then draw your chair closer, for not even Virgie knows the very worst, and I would not make her burden any heavier when there is no need."

The young baronet did as he was requested, but he looked both troubled and pale, for he knew not how this story might affect his future prospects. He was not different from his kind in some points; he belonged to an old and honored family; no shadow had ever tarnished their fair fame; he was proud and tenacious of honor, and his heart was heavy with apprehension as he thought that he might be about to hear some story of crime or wrong that would forever separate him from the woman whom he had learned to idolize.

Mr. Abbot leaned nearer his companion, and in a low voice gave him a brief and rapid account of his life and the adverse fate that had served to banish him to the sparsely populated mountains of Nevada. It was a strange, sad story of sin, and wrong, and shame, in which a complication of evidence and circumstances had permitted the real offender to escape justice and another to suffer the consequences of his crime.

Sir William Heath never once moved or spoke during its recital, but his fine face expressed pain, and sorrow, and sympathy throughout, and when at length it was finished he still sat for several minutes in his chair, exhausted and panting from weariness and excitement.

At last the young man turned to his companion, a great pity and tenderness shining in his fine, clear eyes.

"Mr. Abbot," he said, "you have told me one of the saddest stories that I have ever known, and I can find nothing but sympathy and regret for you in my heart. You have been but the victim of an atrocious wrong---no stain rests upon your character, if there appears to be upon your name, and so I ask you again, will you give me your daughter, if I find that I have been so fortunate as to have won her love? What you have related to me can never make any difference in my feelings toward her, and since I shall take her to another country, where nothing of this will ever be known or cast a shadow upon her future, as Lady Heath she will be honored and respected, and I trust, happy."

Tears welled up into the eyes of the invalid as he listened to the words of this true, earnest lover.

"God bless you for a noble, royal hearted man!" he exclaimed, reaching forward and clasping the young baronet's hand. "Yes, I can say God bless you now---for you have taught me to believe there is an Infinite Father and I can reverently invoke His benediction upon you. Of course I will give you Virgie and feel that she is richly blessed in having won such a husband and thus I can die with not a care upon my heart."

"You have given me the richest boon that it is in my power to crave," returned Sir William, his face kindling with happiness. "But you need not speak of dying. A sea voyage would prolong your life. Come with me at once to England and to Heathdale where you shall have every comfort and attention, and the change will do you good."

A sad smile flitted over Mr. Abbot's wan features.

"It is too late," he said, sorrowfully. "I shall not live through another month; but my mind is at ease and it will be a restful season---the little time that I am spared. No, I shall never leave this place, but I have a request to make of you."

"Tell me, and it shall be granted if it is in the power of man," returned Sir William, eagerly.

"I should like, if you can win Virgie's consent, to see her your wife before I die. It will be better for you both; then, after I am gone, you can take her away as soon as you choose, and perhaps among new scenes and with new ties she will not grieve so bitterly for me."

Sir William Heath's heart leaped with joy at this proposition, though there was an expression of sadness on his handsome face as he looked upon the wreck before him, and realized how truly he had spoken. He knew that he had very little time

to live.

"If I can win her, nothing would make me happier than to accede to your wish," he said, in a low, earnest tone.

At this time, a light step was heard in the hall, and the next moment the door was opened, while a sweet young voice called:

"Come, papa and Mr. Heath--tea is ready; the peaches are delicious, and Chi Lu has obtained, from some mysterious source, real cream to eat with them."

Chapter VII.

"Will You Be My Wife?"

In spite of the exciting conversation of the last half-hour Mr. Abbot appeared more than usually cheerful during tea. He was indeed more like the brilliant, entertaining host that he used to be in their former beautiful home in San Francisco, than Virgie had seen him since their troubles had come upon them.

At the same, time the young girl wondered what could have occurred to make their guest so silent and preoccupied. It was evidently an effort for him to converse at all, while two or three times he was addressed more than once before he responded, but his glance whenever it met hers thrilled her strangely, and kept a beautiful flush upon her cheeks throughout the meal.

When it was concluded the two young people went out upon the porch to view the sunset, while Mr. Abbot retired to his room where he began looking over and rearranging the papers in his desk.

There was no need now to send that written history with its request for fatherly care for Virgie, to Lawrence Bancroft. He had not a doubt as to the result of Sir William Heath's wooing. He was sure that Virgie loved him, and he was filled with a blessed content and fervent gratitude that so bright a future was opening before his darling.

She would go to another country where none of the old troubles could touch her, where no one would be able to point the finger of scorn at her and whisper that her name had been branded with dishonor, and where, surrounded by her noble husband's love and care, occupying a high social position with every good thing that wealth could secure, her life would be one long summer of peace and happiness.

Meantime an awkward pause had fallen between Virgie and her lover standing outside upon the porch.

It was broken at last by the baronet with a very trite remark:

"What a warm evening."

"Yes, it has been a very warm day," answered Virgie, feeling very much inclined to laugh, for never before had they been forced to talk of the weather in order to keep up a conversation.

"Let us go to our seat under the old pine tree," said Sir William, and without waiting for her consent, he stepped down to lead the way.

Virgie glanced at him questioningly.

The unusual gravity which she had observed during tea still rested upon his face and vibrated in his tones.

She wondered at it, and yet, although she could not have told why, her heart began to beat with quickened throbs on account of it.

Reaching their favorite nook, Sir William gently seated his companion, and then stood looking down upon her a moment without speaking.

Then he spoke, and there was a tenderer note in his voice than she had ever heard before.

"Virgie," he said, "have you ever wondered why I came here and turned miner?"

She looked up quickly as he spoke her name thus for the first time, then her eyes suddenly drooped beneath the look in his.

"Yes, I have thought it a little singular that you should choose just this work and this locality," she answered, in a low tone.

"May I tell you why I came?" seating himself at her side.

"Certainly, if you like."

"It was because I found here the only woman whom I could ever love. Virgie, you are that woman, and my heart told me on that first evening when I came to you, cold, wet, and hungry, that I must win your love or my future would be void and desolate. So I seized upon the first reasonable pretext I could find for remaining, and that, you know, your father offered me in disposing of his claim. Sometimes I have hoped that you were learning to love me in return; sometimes I have feared that I should not succeed in this, the dearest object of my life. My darling, I resolved to-night that I would put my fate to the test. Will you give yourself to me for all time, my beautiful mountain queen? Do you love me well enough, dear, to put your hand in mine and tell me that you will go with me wherever I will, as my loved and cherished wife?"

Virginia Abbot sat there, her perfect form outlined against the dark, moss-grown rock that arose, rugged and grand, behind her. The softened light, as it fell upon her through the boughs of the tree above her, made her seem like some exquisite picture painted by a master-hand. Her hands, white as Parian marble, were quietly folded in her lap, but her heart was in a tumult of joy, and her color came and went in fitful flushes.

She knew that she deeply loved this grand man, who had come to her mountain home in the early summer time, and she felt that earth could hold no higher happiness for her than to become his wife and go with him whithersoever he willed. But she knew, too, that her first duty lay with her father; that she must have no interests that would interfere with the care and attention which she owed to him in his failing condition.

"Virgie, you will not crush the sweet hope that has been taking root in my heart during these months that I have spent with you," Sir William pleaded, his face paling as she did not answer, and a fear smiting him that he might have been nourishing a delusion. "I have fancied that I have seen the love-light dawning in your eyes--oh, do not tell me that I have been deceiving myself. My darling, I will try to make your life very bright if you will give yourself to me."

Virgie looked up now with a steady, unwavering glance into his eager eyes, although her face was dyed with blushes.

"Mr. Heath," she faltered, "you know I cannot leave my father."

"Of course I know it," he returned, his face lighting "I do not ask it, darling; I only ask that you will give yourself into my keeping, and then we will devote ourselves to him as long as he lives. Oh, my dearest"---as he saw an answering gleam in her eyes---"you do love me!"

"Yes, I love you," Virgie breathed, with a downcast but happy face; and then she was gathered close to her lover's manly breast in a fond embrace.

"My love! my love! I would serve twice seven years, as Jacob did, in this wild region for the sake of winning that coveted confession from your dear lips. My mountain queen! and you will soon be my wife?"

But Virgie sat up suddenly at this and pushed him from her with gentle force, a frightened look in her eyes. Oh, "what have I done? I am afraid I have done wrong!" she cried.

"Wrong, dearest, in confessing that you love me!" Sir William whispered, as he tried to draw her again into his arms.

"But you do not know---I have no right to tell you; no---no, I am afraid I ought not to be your wife," she said, remembering, with a sense of shame and misery, the stigma resting upon her name.

The young man regarded her anxiously for a moment; then he understood it all.

"Virgie," he said, "you need not fear to promise all that I ask, for I know what troubles you. I asked your father's sanction to my suit before I came to you, and he told me all his sad story. But it need be no barrier to our happiness. I told him so, and he gave you to me---providing I could win you---with his blessing."

Virgie lifted her face, all radiant with a sweet new joy, a sense of exultation in her heart.

"And you were willing----" she began, wondering at the great love that could thus level what she had had feared would be an insurmountable barrier.

"Willing, love, to make myself the happiest man on earth," he interrupted, in a voice that actually trembled with joy. "What Mr. Abbot told me does not affect your worth or character, nor his either, and some time I believe the wrong will be made all right. Even were the facts more serious than they are, they need not trouble us, for I could take you far away from every breath of evil, and as my wife it could never touch you. So you will give yourself to me, Virgie?"

"Yes," she answered, with grave sweetness; "if papa thinks it is right, I cannot put my cup of happiness away untasted."

Sir William Heath bent and touched the beautiful girl's lips with his first lover's kiss.

"My beloved," he said, "life looks to me now like one long vista of happiness---may it prove so to both of us."

They sat there beneath the shadow of the great pine for more than an hour, wearing bright plans for the future, while the twilight gathered around them. But as yet Sir William had not told his betrothed who he was, nor of the title awaiting her when she should become his wife. Somehow, he felt strangely reluctant to do so.

Once he had spoken of his home, and Virgie looked up with sudden interest, and asked:

"Where is your home, Mr. Heath?"

An amused smile played about his lips at her question

"My friends---that is those who love me---call me 'Will,' there," he said, significantly; "and surely, darling you need not treat me with so much formality. Do not call me Mr. Heath any more, Virgie."

"Please tell me where our home is to be---Will," she said, looking up at him with a shy smile, and blushing as the newly spoken name left her lips.

He bent and touched them fondly with his own.

"In England, love," he returned.

"England!"

"Yes. Shall you regret leaving your own country?"

"No; I think I shall be glad," Virgie answered, with a little sigh of content and relief.

Sir William looked gratified.

"Shall I describe our home to you?" he asked, thinking that perhaps now would be as good a time as any to tell more about himself and what her future position would be.

"Yes, do, please."

"Well, then, imagine a large, old mansion, with many turrets and gables, its time-worn stones grown with ivy and moss, and set in the midst of extensive grounds, with grand, beautiful trees scattered all about. There is a great hall in the center of the house, with spacious rooms on either hand. At the end of this hall is the library, with two large bay-windows overlooking a winding river, which is the pride and glory of the place, and where we sail, and bathe, and fish during the summer months. Over the library there is a lovely suite of rooms, commanding a wide expanse of meadow and upland---a scene that is like a picture all the time---which will henceforth be devoted to the use of the future lady---of Heathdale."

"Heathdale! What a pretty name!" Virgie cried, but still unsuspecting of the title which would become hers when she should go with him as his wife to England although he had almost given utterance to it, then hesitated, and substituted those last two words.

"Yes, it is a pretty name, and, Virgie, the place is the pride of my heart. At some distance from the mansion there are the stables and kennels, where the horses and dogs abide."

"Why, Mr.----Why, Will, what an extensive establishment! You must have----"

Virgie began in a tone of surprise, then stopped in confusion.

"Well, I must have what?" he asked.

"A great deal of money to support such a place," she replied, flushing.

"And is there anything very alarming about that?" he questioned, with a quiet smile.

"No; but---I thought-----"

"You thought that I could not have very much of this world's goods since I had come here to work a mine," Sir William said, completing her sentence. "But, darling, all that was only a ruse; I have been working more for my wife than for gold."

"Will!"

"Darling, it is true; that was my only reason for becoming the purchaser of your father's interest here. I saw you; I loved you; I must have some good excuse for tarrying near you to try to win you, and now that I have attained my object, the mine will have to be disposed of, as I have no further use for it."

Virgie regarded him with astonishment. She had never suspected anything like this.

"How strange," she said, with a beautiful flush. "I have thought it almost unaccountable that a man like you should come here to remain. I have imagined that you were an author or a student, and might be investigating the formation of the mountains or studying character in order to write a book, but I never dreamed of anything like this."

Sir William laughed heartily.

"You were making me out to be quite a lofty character truly," he said; "and now you find your hero only a very human being after all---one who, for the sake of a beautiful woman, has been almost willing to barter his birthright. Have I fallen very low in your estimation, Virgie, because I am not to become a distinguished public benefactor on account of my research and investigation? Has my confession shocked you very much?"

"Your confession has made me a very, very happy woman." Virgie whispered, slipping her hand confidingly into his, her heart thrilling with a tender pride and love that this grand man should have sacrificed so much to win her.

"And I am exceedingly proud of this happy woman," returned Sir William, fondly. "I shall take the loveliest bride in the world back with me when we go home to Heathdale."

"Where you will be Lady Heath my Virgie. Ah, I am very thankful that my child will occupy so proud a position in life," said the voice of Mr. Abbot, just behind them.

He had come out to seek them, and had approached just as Sir William uttered those last words.

"Lady Heath!" exclaimed Virgie, starting up and turning a very astonished face first upon one and then the other. "What do you mean? I do not understand."

"Haven't you told her?" Mr. Abbot asked of the young man.

Sir William shook his head, with a smile.

"Told me what, papa?"

"That our friend here is Sir William Heath, of Heathdale, and an English baronet."

Virgie stood in wondering silence for a moment, her face flushed and drooping, while a hundred thoughts flashed through her mind.

Her lover a titled peer of England! This noble man, who might have chosen his wife from the nobility of his own country, had concealed his identity, had buried himself in the wilds of Nevada, and lived like a common miner simply to win her, an humble mountain maiden. He who belonged to an honored race, and possessed both title and wealth, had overlooked the fact that a heavy cloud enshrouded her own and her father's name, and was willing to lift her to the proud position of his wife and the mistress of his beautiful home. These and many other thoughts held her speechless, and made her tremble with something of fear that in the future he might regret it all, and wish that he had never seen her.

"I am afraid I am not fitted---" she at length faltered.

"In point of education, Virgie, you are fitted for the proudest position that could be offered you," her father returned, with some spirit. "All that you need is a trifle more worldly polish, which you will readily gain as Sir William takes you into society, and I am proud to give you to him. God bless you both, my children."

His voice broke.

He would have been glad to go with her to the scenes of her new life, to watch her develop in a higher atmosphere and see her happiness in her proud position. But he knew it could not be; and overcome, for the moment, with the thought of the separation which must soon come, he turned abruptly away and went feebly back to the cottage.

Chapter VIII.

Mr. Abbot Desires an Immediate Marriage.

Whether it was owing to the excitement of the previous evening, or to a feeling of relief from care and anxiety upon Virgie's account which made Mr. Abbot feel that at last he might safely lay down his burdens, it would be impossible to say, but he was alarmingly ill the morning after the betrothal, and unable to rise from his bed.

His strength seemed to have left him, and he lay weak as a child, panting with every breath, a deadly faintness and sinking sensation frequently seizing him and making him feel as if the world was rapidly slipping from his grasp.

Virgie was in an agony of fear.

She had never seen her father so ill before, and it seemed to her that he must die if he did not soon have relief.

"What shall I do?" she asked, in a helpless, appealing way, of Sir William.

He had been summoned as soon as Mr. Abbot's condition had been discovered, and he, too, feared that the end was very near, while, being wholly unaccustomed to sickness of any kind, he felt very useless and inefficient.

He bent and kissed his darling's pale, upturned face, and then went swiftly out of the house.

Presently, however, he returned with a foreign looking flask or bottle in his hand.

"Here is some brandy," he said, giving it to Virgie. "Mix some of it with two-thirds as much water, and feed your father a teaspoonful at a time every few minutes until he begins to rally, and call all your courage to your aid, dear. Meantime, I will go to the nearest telegraph station and send a message to Virginia City for a skillful physician."

Virgie looked up at him with quivering lips.

"Oh, what a comfort it is to have you to help me at this time!" she said.

He drew her into his arms and held her for a moment while she laid her lips, softly and gracefully, to his cheek, in the first voluntary caress that she had ever given him.

The act touched him, and told him how trustfully she relied upon him.

"My darling, I wish I could save you from every pang," he said, tenderly. "But I must not linger---we must have help for your father as soon as possible. Good-by, my love, for a little while, and be sure that I will come back just as quickly as I can."

He went quickly out, and Virgie stole softly into her father's chamber, to do what she could for him, and her heart began to gather something of hope and courage when a few minutes later she heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs outside, and knew that her lover was on the way for help.

Sir William did not spare his horse until he reached the station.

A telegram was sent and before long a reply was received saying that a physician would leave Virginia City upon the next train coming that way.

But several hours must elapse before he could arrive, and Sir William was brought up to the highest pitch of anxiety and impatience during the interval, while to Virgie, anxiously watching and waiting by the bedside of her father, they were the longest that she had ever known.

But she followed Sir William's directions regarding administering the brandy, and she could see that after a few potions the invalid began to rally somewhat.

Just as the sun was going down Sir William and the doctor arrived, and then the young girl felt as if a mountain had rolled from her shoulders.

They remained all night watching with the patient, insisting that Virgie should go to her rest, and worn out with her day of watching and anxiety, she crept away to bed and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

In the morning Mr. Abbot seemed considerably stronger and better, and Virgie's loving heart began to take courage again and to hope that he was not really so very ill after all.

But these feelings received a sudden shock, when, after breakfast, her lover drew her into the little parlor, his face very grave, yet full of tenderness for her.

"I have something that I wish to say to you, Virgie---something to ask you," he said; "but, remember, that you are to answer me frankly and truly. You are not to be unduly influenced by my---by any one's wishes---to consent to what might seem premature, and thus repugnant to you."

Virgie looked up at him questioningly, growing pale, and a thrill of fear shooting through her heart.

"Your father feels," Sir William went on, answering her look, "as if he would like to---to have your future settled before---his strength fails him any further."

"Oh!" cried the young girl, clinging to her lover, a wild look in her eyes, "papa is not going to---die! Do not tell me that. He is better to-day, and he will---he must grow yet stronger."

"My darling," said Sir William, holding her close to him, and speaking with sorrowful tenderness, "I am not going to deceive you. It would not be right for me to do so. But Dr. Waters thinks that he cannot stay with us much longer. He believes that he will rally for a while, but the state of his system warns him that it will be but a very little while. And, Virgie, your father wants us to be married at once. Darling, shall it be as he wishes?"

But Virgie hardly heard these latter sentences.

She threw herself upon that manly breast in a wild burst of grief.

It was a dreadful blow to be told that the die was cast, that her father's doom was very near.

In an indefinite way she had been dreading it ever since he himself had talked so plainly about it to her, but with the buoyancy of youth she had kept hoping against hope, and refusing to believe the fearful truth.

Sir William held her in her fond embrace, and allowed her to weep until her tears were spent.

He knew that it was better to let her grief have its way. She would be calmer and stronger afterward, though every sob and tear was bitter pain to his loving heart.

She grew more quiet after a time, and at length he felt that he might again speak of the subject so near his heart.

"Will you be my wife, Virgie? I would not have forced this upon you just now but for your father's desire, and because Dr. Waters, who must return to-day to his own duties, can make all necessary arrangements for us upon his arrival in Virginia City.

"A clergyman must be sent to us, and there are some other matters which I wish attended to, so we must decide now. Still, my darling, if you shrink from this step, if the thought of it shocks you, I will not urge it, I will wait until you are quite ready for it."

"Did papa propose it?" Virgie asked, hiding her flushed face from those eager, loving eyes looking down upon her.

"Yes. I should not have presumed to suggest anything of the kind at such a time," returned the young baronet, gravely. "But he thinks that his mind would be easier if he could see you my wife. He wishes to give you away irrevocably while he is able. Then, dear, I could be with you all the time to help you in your care of him, to relieve you of much that would encroach upon your strength. Tell me freely, Virgie, shall it or shall it not be?"

"Do you really wish it? or---are you only yielding to his desire?" she asked, in a low voice.

He gathered her closer to his breast until she could feel the eager throbbing of his great heart.

"The day that makes you my wife will be the most blessed of all my life; though, for your sake. I could wish our bridal to be celebrated under less sorrowful circumstances Still it must not be as I wish. You must decide the question," he said, gravely.

There was a long pause. Then Virgie said, quietly:

"I am willing."

"Is that all, love? Are you simply willing to do as your father requests? Shall you not be glad to be my wife?" Sir William questioned, with a slight accent of pain.

"Yes, Will, I shall be glad; but, oh, my father! my father!" she cried, with a fresh burst of grief, as she realized all that this hurried marriage meant.

He kissed her forehead softly, and breathed:

"Heaven bless you, my beloved, and help me to make your future as happy as you have made me to-day."

He made her lie down upon the lounge, for she was nearly exhausted with her grief. He arranged her pillow, drew down the curtains to soften the light, and then went quietly out of the room.

When he came back an hour later he found her calm, though with a saddened gravity upon her that made his heart ache.

He told her that Dr. Waters had gone back to Virginia City, but that they had arranged for a clergyman to come to them to spend the following Sabbath, when Mr. Abbot desired the marriage to take place.

Virgie was strangely thrilled by this intelligence. It was Tuesday, and in five days more she would be Sir William Heath's wife! It all seemed like a dream to her.

On Saturday afternoon an elderly and venerable-appearing gentleman made his appearance before Mr. Abbotts door.

He came in a strong mountain wagon drawn by a pair of handsome horses, and with him there was a large trunk---which Sir William ordered carried up stairs into Virgie's room---and two or three hampers, that were given to Chi Lu to be taken care of.

Virgie turned a wondering, inquiring look upon her lover at these proceedings, but he only answered by a quiet smile, and then introduced her to the Rev. Dr. Thornton.

The young bride-elect received him with the charming ease and self-possession that was natural to her, at which the stranger could not refrain from regarding her with a look of mingled wonder and admiration.

When told of the errand upon which he was to go, he had consented for the sake of the dying man; but he had expected to find a very rustic couple in this rough region, and he was wholly taken aback to meet a polished gentleman like Mr. Heath---as he was still known except to Virgie and her father---and such an interesting and lovely woman as his young hostess appeared to be.

The clergyman spent an hour with the invalid after tea, and he was no less mystified and astonished regarding him. He realized that he was in a household of more than ordinary culture and refinement, and he was sure that there must be

some strange history connected with their lives.

When Virgie went to bid her father good-night before going to her rest, he drew her down to him and looked tenderly and wistfully into her face.

"My daughter," he questioned, "you have no shrinking no misgivings regarding the step that you are about to take?"

"None, papa," she said, softly.

"And are you happy in the prospect of becoming Sir William's wife? Tell me truly, my child."

"As happy as I can be while you are so ill, papa," Virgie answered, with starting tears.

"Then I am at peace. God bless you, my darling, and may your life have much of sunshine in it. I give you without fear into Will's care, for I believe him to be one of nature's noblemen. And now," taking a package from beneath his pillow, here is your marriage dowry; it is all yours, Virgie, to do with as you will, and Sir William has promised to settle as much more upon you, which he will tell you about later. You have been a dear, good daughter to me, and I am very happy regarding your future; I could not ask or wish anything better for you."

"Oh, papa, if I could only have you well again!" Virgie whispered, hiding her tearful eyes upon his pillow.

An expression of pain flitted over the sick man's face.

"We will not think of that now," he said, gently; "and you must not give way to grief, for it will unnerve us both, and I do not wish to see a pale or sorrowful bride to-morrow. Now good-night, love, and try to get all the rest that you can."

He kissed her again, and was about to let her go, when he caught her hand, saying, with something of eagerness:

"But, by the way, Virgie, what will you wear to be married in?"

The young girl flushed, and her lips trembled.

"Oh papa, I have hardly given a thought to that, my heart has been so heavy for you," she murmured, brokenly. Then she added, after a moment of thought: "I have my pretty silk that you sent to San Francisco for in the spring, and I wondered when I should ever wear it here, you know. It will do, will it not?"

Mr. Abbot sighed.

"I suppose it will have to, since it is the best you have. I should like to have you married in something white, dear; but make yourself look as nicely as you can," he said in an unsteady voice.

Virgie dropped a light kiss upon his forehead, and then went out, her heart heavy in spite of the great love which she bore the man whose wife she was to become on the morrow, and the bright hopes which the future held for her in spite of the shadow of death which was every moment drawing nearer.

Chapter IX.

Virgie's Wedding-Day

As Virgie passed out of her father's room, Sir William captured her.

"I am not going to keep you from your rest," he said, after caressing her fondly, "but I wanted to tell you that I have been feeling a trifle jealous regarding the appearance of the future Lady Heath upon her wedding-day, and you will find everything that you will need for to-morrow in a trunk, which I have had carried up into your room."

Virgie lifted her head from his breast, and regarded him questioningly.

"I sent an order by Dr. Waters," he explained, "to the best dressmaker that he could find in Virginia City, to provide a simple yet appropriate outfit for a bride, and you will find the best that could be obtained at so short a notice, awaiting your approval up stairs."

"How kind, how thoughtful you are!" Virgie murmured gratefully, and with a flush of pleasure. "Papa will be so pleased. He was just lamenting that I was not properly provided for."

"Then it will be a gratifying surprise when he sees you to-morrow," Sir William returned.

"Indeed it will. How can I thank you? Perhaps I have been very remiss, but, truly, I had not given a thought to my dress," Virgie confessed, with some confusion.

"How could you, dear, with your heart so full of other things?" Sir William replied, tenderly; "and I want no thanks other than to see you looking like a bride," he concluded, smiling. "I did this chiefly to gratify my own pride in my love."

He led her to the foot of the stairs, and then, with a lingering clasp, let her go.

It was quite late, and Virgie thought that she would only allow herself a peep into the mysterious trunk that night; but she resolved that she would rise very early in the morning and lay out everything in readiness for the wedding.

She wondered how Sir William could have managed it all, and was somewhat anxious regarding the fit of her bridal dress; but she was set at rest upon that point when she lifted the lid of the trunk and found a waist of one of her own dresses lying upon the top of various packages, and she knew that he had sent it as a measure and guide.

Everything else was wrapped in fine packing paper, and she concluded not to open anything until morning, although her curiosity was greatly excited.

She knelt and prayed long and fervently, for she felt very solemn in view of the important event that was to occur on the morrow.

Then she retired, and was soon sleeping peacefully and restfully, as only the pure and innocent can sleep.

But when the first rays of the sun streamed in at her window in the morning, she arose, and, after putting her room in perfect order, she opened the precious trunk and began to remove and undo the packages stored therein.

First, there was a long, flat box.

Opening it, she found a misty and ample veil of finest tulle, simply hemmed with a heavy thread of silk.

Then there was another smaller but deeper box, which contained a lovely wreath of pure white heath, with bouquets of the same mingled with lilies of the valley, for the corsage of her dress.

Still another, in which there was a pair of shining white satin boots, silken hose, and kid gloves, with a dainty handkerchief, fine and sheer as a cobweb.

Last, but not least, incased in several wrappings of soft white paper was the wedding-dress.

Virgie's face paled and flushed many times while she was undoing this, for many hopes were centered in it, and tears rose unbidden to her eyes when at last it was laid out on the bed before her.

She had seen nothing one-half so lovely for years---not since she used to watch her mother dress for gay receptions and parties in the happy days so long ago.

It was of the finest India mull, very simply yet beautifully made, over an underskirt of plain white silk---an airy, gauzy thing, just suited for a youthful bride.

"How kind! how thoughtful!" the young girl breathed, as her glance ran over the different articles comprising her toilet. "He has not forgotten a single thing, and it is all so delicate and beautiful. This wreath of heath---how suggestive! and nothing could be prettier.

"Oh papa! I am glad you will have your wish, for it may be the very last one that can be gratified," she concluded, with a long sigh.

Had it not been for her father's condition, she would have been supremely happy on that bright morning. Even as it was, her heart was overflowing with love and gratitude toward her devoted lover for his kind consideration and generosity.

She went below at her usual hour to attend to her regular duties, which she performed in her customary quiet way, helping her father to rise and dress, arranging the rooms in the nicest order, and then serving breakfast to the invalid and their reverend guest.

Sir William was nowhere visible. He had spent the night with Mr. Abbot, and when morning broke he went away to his own cabin, where he remained until the hour for the ceremony.

The house was very quiet; there was no excitement, no bustle. Chi Lu alone betrayed any consciousness that an unusual event was to take place, and this only by a slight nervousness of manner and the restless flash of his dusky eyes.

After breakfast Virgie saw that her father was made comfortable in his reclining-chair in the parlor, and then giving him one last, lingering kiss, she turned to go up to her chamber to dress for her bridal.

Just then there came a knock on the outer door. Chi Lu was called to answer it, and he brought to Virgie a huge basket laden with the loveliest of mountain ferns and flowers, the dew still glistening upon them.

They were the offering of some of the miners "for Miss Abbot's wedding," the boy who brought them said.

It had become known in some way that Mr. Abbot was failing rapidly, and had requested that his daughter might be married before his death.

He was much respected in the hamlet, for he had always been the courteous gentleman, while Virgie was regarded almost in the light of a young princess, and thus these humble people were prompted to show their sympathy and good will in this delicate manner.

The young bride-elect was touched to the heart by this tribute, and with her own hands arranged the lovely flowers to furnish the room where she was to be married.

Then she went up stairs, and was seen no more until the hour set for the ceremony, which was eleven o'clock.

Meanwhile Chi Lu and an elderly woman, who had once been very kind to Virgie when she was ill, and had been asked to "come and help for the day," were very busily engaged in the small kitchen, arranging a repast which was to be served later in the day.

Sir William was determined that the occasion should be made as cheerful as circumstances would allow, and had ordered from the city every delicacy which his fertile brain could suggest, and thus a "wedding breakfast," such as had never been known in that region before, was in process of preparation.

At eleven o'clock the happy groom made his appearance and sent Margery Follet, the woman before mentioned, to Virgie's door to say that he was ready and awaiting her.

To her tap Virgie gently responded "come in," and a low cry of delight escaped the humble woman's lips as she opened the door, and then stood transfixed upon the threshold.

Virgie turned a smiling face to her. "Why, Margery, how came you here?" she asked.

"The gent sent for me to come and help."

"That was thoughtful in him, and it was kind of you to come," Virgie returned, graciously.

"It's a boon to me, miss. You look like an angel, and I shall never forget this day," said the woman, regarding her almost with reverence.

Virgie felt all the happier for being able to contribute this pleasure to one so unused to pleasure of any kind, and she increased it tenfold by asking her to assist her in fastening the last button of one of her gloves.

"Yes, I'm ready," Virgie replied, as, with a vivid, conscious flush, she turned away, after one last look in her mirror, and truly she was a vision to cheer the heart of the fondest bridegroom.

Her dress proved to be a perfect fit, and the delicate fabric fell in soft, graceful folds over the lustrous white of her silken skirt, while she was covered from head to foot by the mist-like veil.

The wreath of heath lay lightly upon her brown head, and, with the beautiful bouquet upon her breast, made a pleasing contrast with the otherwise spotless costume.

Her figure looked almost regal in her trailing robe, and she was simply perfect from crown to sole.

"Yes," she repeated, as the woman seemed unable to take her eyes from her, "you may tell Mr. Heath that I am ready," and as Margery went out, she bowed her head in prayer for a blessing on her new life.

The next moment she heard Sir William's step on the stairs, and she went out to meet him.

How his face lighted as he looked upon her! How his heart throbbed with exultation as he thought:

"This peerless girl is mine! Heathdale has never known a mistress so fair!"

He was clad, as became a gentleman, in a dress suit of simple black, fine and rich, a single diamond of purest water gleaming just beneath his white satin tie, and his hands were incased in spotless gloves.

"My darling," he whispered, as he took Virgie's right hand and laid it on his arm, "how beautiful you are!"

She could not make him any reply---the moment was too solemn for words---but she lifted her eyes to his for an instant, and they were filled with love and trust.

Then they went below.

Very quietly they took their places in the little parlor, where the clergyman awaited them, and where Mr. Abbot, after one surprised, delighted glance at his daughter, lay back in his chair, with a smile of supreme content upon his lips.

He understood at once who had so delicately and so fittingly arranged everything for the fair bride, and it was such a comfort to him to have Virgie properly arrayed for her marriage.

Chi Lu and Margery stood one on either side of the door, just inside the room, according to Sir William's desire, for there must be witnesses, and thus the group was complete.

Rev. Dr. Thornton approached the young couple, and in an easy and impressive, yet graceful manner, performed the marriage service, and those few moments were very solemn ones to three at least of those present. But the ceremony was soon over, and the maiden was now a wife---Virgie Abbot had become Virginia, Lady Heath.

Sir William had not, however, allowed his title to be used, as he shrank from the notoriety which the knowledge of his position and wealth would create among the settlers of that region. He had come there in an unpretentious way, and he wished to leave as quietly. There would be time enough, he thought, to resume his honors when he and his bride should go out into the world.

When the benediction had been pronounced over the clasped hands of the husband and wife, Dr. Thornton offered his congratulations, and then Sir William led Virgie directly to her father.

She sank upon her knees beside his chair, and putting her arms around his neck, gave and received a tender caress.

"God bless you always, my daughter!" the sick man murmured, in trembling tones. "I believe I am guilty of no irreverence in invoking His blessing," he added, "for I have learned to feel my need of faith in Him, and, Virgie, your husband has taught me how to seek it."

The young bride could only press her lips again to his in reply. She was very grateful for this confession, for her father's previous skepticism and bitterness had often caused her much sorrow.

Chi Lu and Margery came forward to congratulate the bride and groom, and then went about their duties in the other room.

Soon after, Dr. Thornton slipped quietly away, thus leaving the invalid and his children by themselves.

"Virgie, how beautiful you are to-day! How did it happen?" Mr. Abbot asked, when he found they were alone, and glancing admiringly over her costume.

"It was all Mr.---all Will's doing," she answered, with a charming blush, and glancing shyly up into her husband's face.

"I suspected as much, and I thank you, Sir William, more than I can express, for giving me this unexpected pleasure," said the sick man, gratefully.

"It was to gratify myself as well. I could not be satisfied unless Lady Heath was arrayed as became a bride of the house," the young baronet returned, with a fond smile, as he noticed how the color came and went on Virgie's cheek at the sound of her new name. "But," he added, putting his arm around her, and raising her to her feet, while with one sweep of his hand he threw back the veil, "I have not yet had the privilege of saluting my wife. Virgie, I have the right to the first kiss from your sweet lips."

The beautiful bride lifted her face to him, flushed with a new, almost holy, happiness.

"My husband!" she whispered, as he held her close for a moment, and he felt that henceforth his life would be complete, since she loved him, and was his.

Alas, for the weary years that were to follow!

Was there no one to warn?

For a little while they fell into a quiet chat, and then Chi Lu came to bid them to the other room, where a really elegant feast awaited them, and where Sir William exerted himself to make the occasion as merry as possible, and all through the day nothing occurred to mar its peace and joy.

The next morning Dr. Thornton returned to Virginia City, carrying in his pocket a much larger fee than he was accustomed to receive; and after that, life at the mountain cottage resumed its usual quiet routine.

## Chapter X.

### A Separation and a Little Stranger.

Mr. Abbot appeared to gather new strength after the events related in the previous chapter, in spite of his own predictions and the fears of others that he was dying.

The mild September weather and the quiet happiness which pervaded his home seemed to have a beneficial effect upon him. But as the weather grew colder, as the chill October winds began to sweep over the mountains, a decided change came. Just as daylight was fading one evening, and the dull gray of a coming storm began to settle down upon the mountains, he breathed his last, peacefully, quietly and willingly, and thus all earthly sorrow was at an end for him; he had gone where all wrongs would be righted, where mystery or shame would no longer envelop him.

They buried him, as he desired, beneath the great plummy pine tree that grew near their cottage, and where Virgie's great happiness had come to her, and then Sir William felt that he had a right to take his wife away to a more congenial atmosphere.

He had disposed of his claim some time before, for since he had no longer any need of an excuse for remaining there, he had given up all pretense of business and devoted himself exclusively to the care of the invalid and to making Virgie's duties as light as possible.

The cottage and its furniture were sold; Chi Lu was presented with Sir William's own neat little cabin with all its contents, besides being otherwise handsomely remunerated for all his kindness and faithfulness and then the baronet took his bride directly to San Francisco, which they decided to make their headquarters for the winter, intending early in the spring to sail for England.

Sir William had written home long before this of his marriage. But the news had not been cordially received by the members of his household.

His stately mother had replied in a brief, dignified manner, which did not fail to convey her displeasure at the step he had taken, while his widowed sister, who, with her two children, were greatly dependent on her brother, did not hesitate to express her indignation at his rashness and inconsideration of their feelings, at least, in marrying so "out of his own element."

The young baronet, of course, kept all this to himself. He had known well enough that his marriage would be displeasing to his family, who had long had other views for him, but he trusted that, when he should present his bride to them, every objection would disappear like dew before the sun, and she would be received with open arms and be loved for her own sweet sake.

At all events he was his own master, and he was not a man to tamely submit to unreasonable prejudices; and if his mother and sister refused to receive his wife with becoming courtesy and respect, as the mistress of Heathdale, it would only be the worse for them.

He did not begin to suspect, however, the bitterness which they experienced when they received the startling information that he had married a girl from the wilds of the far West. His union had followed so closely upon his betrothal that he had no opportunity to communicate plans beforehand, and thus the news had fallen like a thunderbolt upon them.

"He has ruined his life!" cried Lady Linton, his sister, in a white rage, after reading the letter. "To think of it!--he has married a perfect savage from the wilds of America! A pretty mistress for dear old Heathdale, truly. I will never receive her, *never!*"

"You know what William is, Miriam, and it will not be wise for you to offend him. He will never tolerate any display of arrogance or discourtesy to his wife," returned the dowager Lady Heath, more quietly, yet looking the picture of despair over the *mesalliance*.

"I cannot help it; it is an abominable insult to all his friends, and never to tell us anything about it until the die was cast!"

"But he explains why he could not; the marriage was hastened on account of the father's critical condition replied Lady Heath.

"Oh, I believe it was all a cunning plan to entrap him and secure the girl a title and position," groaned Lady Linton. "How will Sadie feel; what *will* she say?"

"I do not know as she has any right to say anything," answered the dowager, with some dignity, for she loved her son and could not bear to have any one assail him, no matter how much she might blame him herself. "William has never

committed himself to her in any way; that plan has been more ours than his."

She was fully as unreconciled as her daughter; still she was capable of looking at matters as they really were.

"Oh, I cannot have it so, mamma; do not let us say anything about the affair at present," pleaded her daughter. "William says it will be some time before he returns, as he wishes to show his wife something of the world first. Doubtless," she continued, with increasing bitterness, "he desires to polish off some of the rough edges before he presents her to us; so let us suppress the fact of his marriage until the time is set for their coming; it will be hard enough even then to acknowledge the plebeian union."

Lady Heath demurred at first at this proposal, but she finally yielded the point, and nothing was said regarding the baronet's sudden marriage, and this was the beginning of a plot to ruin the life of a beautiful young wife, and to bring years of misery upon a noble man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Virgie found it very pleasant in some respects, though sad in others, to return to San Francisco, her former home.

She had left the city nearly six years ago, when she was an undeveloped girl; she returned to it in the full glory of beautiful womanhood, and owing to her many changes which had occurred there, as well as in her own personal appearance and position, no one appeared to recognize her as the daughter of the unfortunate man who had figured so conspicuously in a terrible scandal there, and then suddenly disappeared covering his tracks so successfully that no one, either friend or foe, knew whither he had gone.

The young wife was very happy in spite of her recent bereavement; her husband was kindness and nobility personified, and left nothing undone that could contribute in any degree to her pleasure, or prevent her from brooding upon her father's death.

They had a cozy and elegant suite of rooms at the Baldwin Hotel, which Sir William had engaged for the winter, and from this point they made many excursions sometimes being away several weeks at a time, traveling, then returning to rest, after which they would start afresh again.

The fond husband was determined that Virgie should see everything that was worth seeing in her own country before he took her to their home in England.

They frequented the opera and theater, attended concerts and lectures, and Sir William was both surprised and delighted to notice how readily Virgie adapted herself to the requirements of society and etiquette, notwithstanding the seclusion of the last half-dozen years.

About the middle of March they started for the East, intending to take the trip leisurely and visit points of interest along their route.

They arrived in New York early in May, and were intending to sail for England the last of the month.

But Virgie, although not really ill, was far from well when they reached the great metropolis, and her husband insisted that she must have medical advice.

He called in a skillful physician, who, upon being told what their plans were, immediately and emphatically vetoed further travel for the present.

"It will be simply impossible for Mrs. Heath to undertake a sea voyage at present," he asserted.

"But the trip occupies eight days---" Sir William began.

"If it occupied only three it would make no difference it will not be safe for her to attempt to cross the ocean under three months," Dr. Knox said, with an air of decision which admitted of no further argument.

Sir William was disappointed, yet he was too fond and careful of his beautiful wife to rebel against this verdict.

A week or two passed and Virgie appeared to be improving, when, one morning, there came a cablegram from Heathdale, announcing that the dowager Lady Heath was alarmingly ill, and imploring the baronet's immediate return if he desired to see her alive.

The message threw the young husband into a distressing state of mind.

It seemed like harshest cruelty to obey the summons and leave his wife alone in that strange city. And yet the alternative of remaining and allowing his mother to die without seeing him once more, seemed almost equally unkind.

He sought Dr. Knox again in his extremity and explained his desperate situation.

"I could not answer for the consequences if you take your wife; it will be a fearful risk for Mrs. Heath to go. She *might* endure the voyage safely, but the probabilities are that she would not," the physician gravely told him. "But," he added, kindly, "I sympathize with you---I appreciate your dilemma, and, if *you* must go, I advise you to leave her in my charge and I promise faithfully to give her every attention during your enforced absence."

This seemed the only thing to be done and Sir William finally decided to return to his home alone.

Virgie herself urged him to go, though her heart was almost breaking at the thought of the separation, for it *might* be that she would never see him again.

Still she was brave---she put aside her own feelings out of regard for the duty which he owed his mother, and there was a possibility that he could return to her in the course of two or three weeks.

"Do not feel unduly anxious for me, Will," she said to him, on the evening before he was to sail, "I know that Dr. Knox will do all for me that you can wish. I will either write or send some message to you by every steamer, and I am going to trust that everything will be well."

"But it is agony to me to leave you---oh! my darling, if your heart fails you in the least, if you say you prefer to have me stay, I will not go even now," he said, his own courage failing him and having more than half a mind to renounce his intended voyage even at that late hour.

"No, dear, I know that it is your duty to go," Virgie answered, gently. "I should never forgive myself, if your mother should die, for keeping you from her at such a time."

"But if---I should lose you, too," he was going to say, but checked himself and concluded, "but if you should be neglected and unhappy?"

"I shall not be, Will; you have provided against the former contingency most generously, and the latter I can regulate myself. I will not be unhappy, for I know that you are doing right and that you will return to me the moment that you are at liberty to do so."

"Indeed I shall," he answered, as he gathered her close to his breast and rained passionate kisses upon her lovely face.

But his heart was very heavy notwithstanding her apparent cheerfulness.

A superstitious dread seemed to have seized him, warning him that some fearful calamity would follow this separation. He was not given to such unreasonable imaginings, and he reproached himself for indulging in them; but he could not shake them off nevertheless.

Morning came and with it the hour of departure and the last farewells.

Virgie wore a brave and even smiling face through all. She had resolved that she would not unman him at the last moment.

She watched at her window until he drove away, waving her handkerchief and throwing him a kiss as he passed from sight, then the pent-up grief of her heart found vent in a wild burst of tears such as she had not shed since the hour of her father's death.

But she would not indulge it long.

She had every comfort. Her rooms were cheerful and elegant; a motherly, middle-aged woman had been engaged to remain with her as companion and nurse during her husband's absence; she had an abundance of money at her command, and Dr. Knox had promised to look in upon her every day. Surely she had nothing to complain of, save the enforced separation from her dear one, and that would not be for long, she trusted.

The ninth day after the departure of Sir William there came a cablegram, telling of his safe arrival at Liverpool, and this, at his request, she immediately responded to, telling him that all was well with her.

The next steamer, she knew, would bring her a letter and after that she would hear from him every few days.

Sir William found his mother alive, but in a very low state; "she might rally, she might not," they told him; and, with a sigh of resignation, he could only wait and try to patiently adapt himself to circumstances.

Thus four weeks went by, and then, early one June morning, a message went flying through the depths of the ocean, telling that a tiny little maiden, with eyes and hair like her father's, but bidding fair to become the counterpart of her mother in form and features had come to Virgie the morning previous, and "all was well."

The fervent "thank God!" accompanied with something very like a sob, which burst from Sir William Heath's lips as he read this message, told how intense had been his anxiety during the weeks of his absence from his darling, and how great his relief at those favorable tidings.

He returned a message of love and congratulation, and when, a little later, there came a letter to the happy young mother, it begged that their little one should be called "Virgie May," the latter name being that of a dear sister of whom Sir Will had been very fond, and who had died several years previous.

And thus the little heiress of Heathdale was christened by her mother.

Chapter XI.

"You Have Overstepped All Bounds."

Sir William Heath could hardly control his impatience to fly to his dear ones across the water.

His fond heart yearned mightily to behold his child and to clasp once more the beautiful wife who had now become dearer than ever to him.

But his mother's condition did not improve; she still lay hovering between life and death, and he knew that he must not leave her until there was some change either for the better or worse.

Her disease was partial paralysis, which, however, had not affected her brain, and her son's return and presence appeared to be of the greatest comfort to her.

Still she was liable, at any hour, to have another shock, which would doubtless prove fatal, and Sir Herbert Randal---an eminent London physician---commanded perfect quiet and freedom from all excitement, since the least anxiety or disturbance of any kind would bring the dread messenger which they all feared so much.

Thus it seemed as if the young baronet was hopelessly bound to Heathdale for the present.

Not a word had passed between him and his mother regarding his marriage. Knowing how displeased she had been at the time of it, and fearing to excite her if he recalled the event to her mind, he had thought it best to say nothing, but leave her to broach the subject whenever she should feel inclined, although he wondered that she did not make some inquiry regarding his young wife whom the family had expected he would bring with him to Heathdale.

The meeting with his sister had been somewhat cold and formal, for he could not forget how harshly she had expressed herself regarding his choice, while she could not and would not forgive him for disappointing all her ambitious hopes for him.

Like his mother, she ignored the subject of his marriage not deigning to make the slightest inquiry regarding his wife, although she had been greatly astonished at the non-appearance of Virgie, and was burning with curiosity to know why he had returned alone.

This negligence and obstinacy on her part made Sir William very indignant, and after the first excitement consequent upon his arrival had subsided, he determined to assert himself, and have it distinctly understood that his wife was henceforth to be recognized as a member of and a power in his household.

Therefore, the morning following his return he had drawn Lady Linton into the library, and after conducting her, with something of formal politeness, to a seat, remarked:

"Miriam, you have not yet done me the honor to inquire after Lady Heath."

Lady Linton bowed coldly, and lifted her fine eyebrows questioningly.

Sir William flushed angrily.

"It is evident that you are still very angry with me, and intend to annoy me upon this point," he continued, sternly, "and we may as well understand each other at the outset. I shall demand and expect that my wife when I bring her home, will be received with all the honor and courtesy which has ever been accorded to the mistress of Heathdale in the past."

Again Lady Linton bowed; but she did not deign to open her lips in response, although a spot of vivid red settled in either cheek.

"She is worthy of it in every respect," her brother resumed a gleam of fire in his eye, "and will grace the position which I have given her as well as the most noted London belle could do. I have pictures of her here---perhaps you will do me the favor to look at them."

He laid two or three fine photographs of Virgie, taken in different attitudes, before her, as he concluded, and then leaned back in his chair watching her attentively to see what effect that beautiful face would have upon her.

Her ladyship adjusted her eyeglasses with English precision, and taking up one of the pictures regarded it with all the indifference which she could muster. She was not, however, quite prepared for what she saw; and the quick, curious, half-admiring gleam which shot into her eye told that she had not failed to acknowledge the exceeding loveliness of that fair face, and the natural grace and dignity displayed in the young wife's attitude.

She took up each picture separately, and her brother could see her indifference gradually melting away, a keen and critical look taking its place.

"Who was she?" she at length condescended to ask, though somewhat curtly.

"The daughter of a California gentleman," Sir William answered, quietly.

"A California *gentleman!*" with a scornful accent upon the last word. "You speak of him as of an equal."

"Certainly," returned the baronet, a smile of amusement slightly curling his lips, "Mr. Abbot was my equal, if not my superior, in point of intellect, and all that goes to make a gentleman, while his daughter is in no wise my inferior."

"How can you make such an absurd statement, William?" demanded his sister, impatiently. "The idea of an American plebeian being the equal of a Heath of Heathdale!"

Sir William laughed outright; then he said:

"Your loyalty to your family does you credit, Miriam, but I imagine, if you should ever visit America---which I trust for your own sake, you will do some time---that you will return much wiser than you went. Your ideas regarding people and things, in that grand republic are very crude and incorrect. But how do you like the face that I have shown you?"

"The face is well enough," Lady Linton was forced to admit.

There is nothing weak about it?"

"N-o."

"It is not lacking in intelligence or character?"

"Not so far as I am able to judge from a simple picture", the woman confessed, rather reluctantly.

"And yet it does not flatter her; you do not often see a face like that even among the noble families of England, and she is as lovely in mind as in person," said Sir William, fondly, as he took up one of the photographs and gazed upon it with his heart in his eyes.

"Humph! if you are so proud of your American bride, why did you not bring her home with you?" Lady Linton inquired, in a mocking tone, and then could have bitten her tongue through for having allowed herself to betray her curiosity so far.

Sir William flushed hotly. It was evident that his sister was no more reconciled since seeing Virgie's pictures than before. Her pride of birth had received a shock which she could neither overlook nor forgive.

"Lady Heath was not able to travel. Her physician told me that if she crossed the ocean it would be at the risk of her life. Miriam, Virgie will soon become a mother, God willing."

Lady Linton started and shot a swift look of astonishment at her brother upon this unexpected announcement.

This information was disagreeable in the extreme, for it made certain plans, which her fertile brain had begun to weave as soon as she had learned that her brother had returned without his wife, all the more complicated, if not well-nigh impossible.

"It was a great trial for me to return without her," Sir William went on, with a regretful sigh, "but your summons was so very imperative that I felt obliged to do so. My darling bore it very bravely, however; she regarded it as my duty to hasten to my mother, even though she would be left alone, a stranger in a great city, and at such a critical time."

"Of course it was your duty to return to our mother," Lady Linton responded emphatically, as if the young wife away upon the other side of the Atlantic was not worthy of consideration. "And," she added, flashing a look of defiance at her companion, "I am free to confess to a feeling of relief that you had to come alone---"

"Miriam, I---"

"Hear me out, if you please," she interposed. "Mamma's heart has been nearly broken at the thought of this ill-assorted marriage, and I believe the excitement and grief would have killed her outright, if you had brought her," with a withering glance at Virgie's picture, "to Heathdale to reign as mistress."

Sir William was tried almost beyond endurance. It was more than a minute before he could control himself sufficiently to speak, after his sister's insulting remarks regarding his marriage.

"Miriam," he at length said, in a voice that made her quail in spite of her effrontery, "you will please never speak like this again; it is, both to my wife and me, an insult which I will not tolerate. Virgie is a lady in every sense of the word; even my critical mother could pick no flaw in her were she to see her, and the moment that I am at liberty to do so I shall return to the United States and bring my darling back with me. And let me here repeat what I said a while ago---I expect and demand that she be received with all proper respect by the entire household."

"The household knows nothing of your marriage."

"What!" cried the young baronet, astonished.

"No one, save mamma and I, knows anything of this---this alliance."

"By whose authority have you kept such a matter secret?" Sir William demanded, in great wrath.

"We---we thought it best," faltered his sister, shrinking beneath his anger---she had never seen him so aroused before. "Mamma was so unhappy, and I was so---so unreconciled, that we determined to wait until you wrote definitely regarding your coming."

"You have overstepped all bounds, you have presumed beyond excuse," retorted her brother, in a voice of thunder. "I know that you are my senior by fifteen years, and as a boy I was taught to look up to you, and to render you the respect due an elder. But I am a child no longer. I am a man, and you forget that I am not only my own master, but the master of Heathdale as well. I have a right to choose for myself in all matters, and you are not to consider that I am in leading strings, as I was before your marriage, when you exercised, to a certain extent, authority over me. And now if---I abhor thrifts, but I wish you to distinctly understand me---if you cannot bring yourself to regard my marriage in a proper and sensible light, and make up your mind to receive my wife as becomes a sister of the house, the doors of Heathdale will henceforth be closed to you."

Lady Linton was astounded at this outburst.

Her brother, heretofore, had always been a pattern of amiability and gentleness, and had allowed her to have her own way mostly in the house. In minor matters she had always ruled him, and she had never imagined that he could rise to such a height as this.

She saw that she had gone too far, that she must change her tactics, or forever lose all influence with him, and make an enemy of him.

She could ill afford to do this for several reasons.

She was the widow of Lord Percival Linton, who had married her chiefly for her large dowry.

He had been a fast, unprincipled man, who had run through his own property and most of hers before death put an end to his mad career.

They had one son, Percy, and a daughter, Lillian, and Lady Linton, with her two children, had been largely dependent upon the generosity of her brother ever since her husband's death, and he was even now bearing all the expense of the education of his nephew and niece.

They had made their home chiefly at Heathdale, because Lady Linton's pride could not tolerate life at Linton Grange when they had no means to keep it up in proper style, and it was very pleasant and comfortable to be in her brother's home, where there was abundance of everything, and where she had been allowed to manage the household in her own way.

It would therefore be very mortifying to have its hospitable doors closed against her, and, finding herself liable to be ignominiously checkmated if she persisted in her present course, she resolved to "right about face" with the greatest

grace possible, at least until she was obliged to yield her position to the future mistress of Heathdale.

"Fie, William, don't allow yourself to get in such a passion," she said, in a conciliatory tone. "Perhaps I have expressed myself more freely than I ought, but you ought to make allowance for our great disappointment. Remember that you are the pride of an old and honored family, and it is but natural that we should wish you to marry in your own station. But do not fear. When Lady Heath comes to take her place as mistress here she shall be received in a becoming manner."

Her ladyship arose as she ceased speaking, her eye falling as she did so upon the lovely upturned face upon the table, and she vowed in her heart that if she could prevent it, the girl should never set her foot over the threshold of Heathdale.

How she was to carry out this vow she had as yet no idea; but all the malice and enmity of her heart had been aroused against her, and it should go hard with her if she could not find some way to vent it upon her.

"Thank you, Miriam," Sir William responded, as he opened the door for his sister to pass out, but he spoke somewhat coldly.

He could not lightly forgive and overlook the scorn that had been heaped upon the darling of his heart, while the fact that his marriage had been kept a secret angered him exceedingly, and placed him in a very unpleasant position.

He resolved that as soon as his mother should be better, he would have a plain talk with her, also, and insist upon an announcement of Lady Heath's existence and her expected arrival. But until the invalid was out of danger he deemed it advisable not to create any excitement on the subject.

## Chapter XII.

"I Will Join You Heart and Hand."

Later in the day, while Sir William was engaged with the Stewart looking over accounts and inquiring into the condition of Heathdale generally, Lady Linton went quietly up to her brother's rooms to attend to the unpacking of his trunks and putting his wardrobe in order.

While thus engaged she came across a worn portfolio filled with papers of various kinds.

She knew at once that it was nothing that belonged to her brother, and surmised that its contents might contain much of interest regarding the despised girl whom he had married in the far West of America.

The key was attached by a ribbon to the portfolio, and was tucked into a fold of the leather, and no sense of either delicacy or honor prevented her making use of her opportunity for gratifying her curiosity regarding the young wife, without the necessity of asking questions.

Accordingly, she boldly and unhesitatingly unlocked the portfolio, and began examining its contents.

These proved to be mostly business papers and legal documents, with some letters directed to a name that she had never heard before. She would have liked to read them, but she feared being interrupted while doing so, and she of course had no wish to have her brother know she was prying thus into his affairs so she laid them back in their place, resolving at some future time to examine them more thoroughly. But there was one envelope among them of much fresher appearance than the others, and with no address upon it, although it contained a document of some kind.

Lady Linton slipped it out, and, unfolding it, found it to be the marriage certificate of her brother and his wife.

She was astonished to find that the ceremony had occurred in some place in Nevada, remote from any city or town---a little settlement of which she had never heard---and as she read further, her eyes grew wide with astonishment and her face dark with anger.

"He wrote us that her name was Virginia Abbot," she cried, indignantly, a crimson flush mounting to her brow, "and here it is given as Virginia---"

A step sounded outside the door in the hall just then, and her ladyship paused, affrighted, to listen, that last name unspoken on her lips.

But it proved to be only a servant passing on some duty, and she went on with her investigations.

"There is some inexplicable mystery about this thing," she murmured. "The name is the same as that on those letters, and I am sure he has deceived us shamefully. He said that she was the daughter of a once wealthy Californian, but it seems that they were not in California at all. There must have been some reason for their burying themselves in that isolated place, and---*I will yet find out what it was!*"

She returned the certificate to the envelope, and put back the papers in their proper places.

All at once her face lighted.

"Sara was going directly to San Francisco. I will write her to look this thing up. I will have that girl's secret before she is a month older, and then we will *see* whether she comes here to Heathdale to queen it over us."

She resumed her work, but there was a sullen, resolute expression on her face which told of some purpose that she was determining to carry out at all hazards.

When Sir William's trunks were at length emptied, she rang for a servant to take them to a storeroom, after which she repaired to her own apartment, where she wrote steadily and rapidly for more than an hour.

At the end of that time she folded and sealed her letter, and directed it to "Mrs. Sara Farnum, Palace Hotel, San Francisco, Cal.," and the very next post from Heathdale carried on its way the missive that was destined to help accomplish one of the greatest wrongs that had ever been perpetrated.

The reader will doubtless remember that when the dowager Lady Heath and Lady Linton were discussing Sir William's sudden marriage the name "Sadie" was mentioned in connection with the baronet.

Sadie was a beautiful English girl of two or three-and-twenty and the youngest child and only daughter of Mrs. Sara Farnum, to whom Lady Linton had just written.

Sadie Farnum had said and thought a great deal upon learning of Sir William's union with the American maiden, for the news had been a terrible death-blow to her own hopes and ambitions.

She had long entertained the desire and intention of one day becoming the mistress of Heathdale; it had been the dearest wish of her heart, and for years she had used every art in which she was skilled to bring the man she loved to her feet, and thus accomplish her purpose.

Mrs. Farnum and Lady Linton had been intimate friends from girlhood, and it had also been a darling scheme of theirs to marry the daughter of the one to the brother of the other, thus securing a fine position and title to Sadie, and adding to the already well-filled coffers of Heathdale the handsome fortune which the young girl would bring to her husband.

But Sir William had never appeared to be particularly fond of the society of ladies, at least he was not what would be termed a ladies' man, although he went frequently into company, and did not fall in with those plans for his future happiness as readily as their projectors desired.

He liked Sadie well enough as a friend, and had been in the way of seeing a great deal of her, as Lady Linton frequently invited her to spend several weeks with her. He even promised to correspond with her when he left England to travel in America, and at the time of his first meeting with Virgie, he had in his pocket a voluminous letter indited by her.

But she had never touched his heart; she was bright, beautiful, and accomplished, yet there was something lacking in her nature which his own demanded and which he recognized at once in the lovely mountain maiden the moment that he met her that wild night when he came a stranger to her home.

But Sadie was so broken-hearted over the blighting of all her fond hopes, and grieved so sorely that her health began to suffer in consequence, and when Sir William's return began to be talked of, Mrs. Farnum decided to take her daughter traveling and thus avoid any unpleasant meeting and fresh grief when the young Lady Heath should come to take possession of her new home.

Accordingly they sailed for America, and knowing that the baronet was in New York, went directly to the Pacific coast about a fortnight previous to Sir William's return to Heathdale.

The letter which Lady Linton sent her friend was written, as we know, the morning following her brother's return, and five weeks later, upon the very day of little Virgie May Heath's birth, there came to her an exceedingly gratifying reply.

A portion of it read thus:

"Regarding the important questions which you have asked about the ----'s. I will not write the name for fear this letter might sometime chance to meet other eyes. I find that such a family resided here a number of years ago. They occupied a high position in society appeared to have unlimited means at their command and were much respected, but they were suddenly overtaken by terrible misfortunes which cut them instantly down from their high estate and they were obliged to flee from the city in disgrace. It is quite a complicated story, and I have not been able to learn all the details. I can do so, however, if you wish.

"But what is your object? What do you know about the family? Has it anything to do with that girl whom your brother so rashly married in such a romantic manner? If it has, let me know, and I will gladly search the continent over for material to make her bitterly repent for striking such a blow to my Sadie's, and indeed to all our hopes. Answer immediately and whatever instructions you may give me, I will follow most faithfully. I am ready to join you heart and hand in any vendetta against the disturber of our peace."

Lady Linton smiled curiously after reading this epistle.

"I imagined as much," she muttered, "and they presumed to aspire to an alliance with a Heath of Heathdale, when their own name was so hopelessly disgraced that they did not dare to own it or be known by it, and were forced to hide their guilty heads in that low mining district. No, sir; my Lord of Heath, your shameless bride shall never enter this sacred ancestral house if there are any means, lawful or otherwise to prevent it."

After the examination of the portfolio which she had found in her brother's trunk, Lady Linton's curiosity had been insatiable, and simulating an air of friendliness and resignation which she was far from feeling, she had encouraged him to talk of his wife, hoping thus to learn more of her history, and trap him into acknowledging something of the mystery which surrounded her.

But though Sir William was never loth to talk of his darling, and always spoke of her in the fondest terms, he would never commit himself regarding her past; that was to be a sealed book in England, and not even to his mother and sister would he ever breathe one word of that sad story, that Mr. Abbot had told him when he pleaded for his daughter's hand, or aught that would cast a shadow upon any member of her family.

"She was the daughter of a once wealthy Californian whom reverses had impoverished," he invariably told them. "She was finely educated and fitted, both by nature and culture, to shine in any circle."

"By whom were you married, William?" his mother asked, having at last deigned to show some interest in the circumstance.

"By the Rev. Dr. Thornton, an Episcopalian clergyman

"Of San Francisco?"

"No, of Virginia City;" and Sir William smiled that she was not familiar enough with the geographical location of the place to know that it was not in California at all.

"Oh, then you were not married in San Francisco?" interrupted Lady Linton, looking up eagerly, and hoping now to get something definite regarding that outlandish place in Nevada.

"No," he replied, not thinking it necessary to enter into particulars, and leaving them to infer what they chose.

Her ladyship was baffled again, not daring to press him further lest he should suspect that she had been tampering with his papers.

But she tried to console herself with the thought that she would soon know all there was to be known; then what use she might make of her knowledge remained to be seen.

Lady Heath was improving, but still far from being out of danger, and could not endure the least confusion.

Sir William was very restless, and anxious to get back to his dear ones in America; but Sir Herbert Randall was opposed to his going.

"It would be fatal, my dear sir," he asserted; "the excitement of your departure and the separation would undoubtedly bring on another shock from which her ladyship could not possibly rally, even if it did not kill her outright. Haven't you done roving enough yet?" the physician concluded, regarding the young man with some surprise.

"But I've left-----" Sir William began, when he was interrupted by a startled cry from Lady Linton, who was in the room, as she carelessly upset a vase of flowers on the table beside her.

"How awkward of me!" she exclaimed, flushing a deep crimson; "won't you please ring the bell, William for some one to come and clean up this mess?"

He went to the opposite side of the room to do her bidding, and she took the occasion to inform Sir Herbert in a low tone, that her brother had left some unfinished business in America, which he was anxious to have settled.

"I'm sorry," replied the physician, "but it will have to remain unsettled for a while longer, if he has a proper regard for his mother's health."

Of course the great doctor's verdict was decisive, and Sir William was forced to curb his impatience as best he could. He would not allow himself to do anything that would endanger his mother's life, and yet his heart was yearning for his wife and for the little one whom he had never seen.

"Have patience a little longer, my darling," he wrote Virgie that evening; I will come just as soon as it will do for me to leave home. My heart longs for you every hour in the day; life seems almost a blank without you, and I find it difficult to employ myself about anything. If you were stronger, and our little one was older, I would send some trusty messenger for you, and another eight days would find you in our beautiful home. But I fear such a proceeding would be hardly wise at present.

"Write to me often, my Virgie, and be very careful in directing your letters; I am afraid that I have missed one or two of your last. Oh, happy day when there will be no longer any need to communicate with each other in this slow way."

Sir William had indeed missed his wife's last letters and this was the only one that she ever received from him after that date.

How was it?

Ask Lady Linton, or go seek in the little brazier, which stood at night in the dressing-room of her mother for the purpose of heating the nourishment she was accustomed to take at twelve, for the ashes of the loving epistles which the fond husband and wife believed no other save themselves would peruse.

### Chapter XIII.

#### Becoming Acquainted.

Little Virginia May Heath was just six weeks old, and becoming most interesting to her fond mamma, who was getting stronger every day, and able to take a little exercise in the corridor outside her rooms, when one morning as she was pacing slowly back and forth, thinking of her absent husband, and wishing, oh, so yearningly, that he could come to her, she encountered two ladies who had just ascended the stairs, and passed on to their apartments which were just beyond hers.

One was a finely formed, majestic woman, evidently somewhat over fifty years, having the air and bearing of one accustomed to society and the ways of the world. She was tastefully and elegantly dressed, every article of her apparel denoting wealth and a careful regard for fashion.

The other was a young lady, perhaps a year or two older than Virgie, a perfect blonde, with a tall, beautifully developed form, and with a face such as poets and artists rave about. It was a pure oval, faultless in feature and coloring, and yet withal, if closely studied, there was a suspicion of shallowness and insincerity in the full, sapphire eyes, and the perfectly formed but rather weak mouth.

Still Virgie, as she lifted her own lovely eyes and beheld this young lady, thought she had never seen any one more beautiful, while she colored slightly, and wondered why the strangers should observe her so closely and with such evident interest.

It was a very warm day, and she was clad in a fine white robe, richly embroidered and garnished with pale lavender ribbon. If she had but realized it, she was exquisitely beautiful herself, with her glossy, brown hair carelessly yet gracefully coiled at the back of her head, the color beginning to tinge her cheeks, that smile of happiness upon her sweet lips, and the holy mother-light shining in her violet eyes.

"Mamma, that must be she; that must be Lady Heath," whispered the younger of the two strangers, when they had passed beyond hearing.

"Lady Heath!" was the scornful repetition, accompanied by a flash of anger from the dark eyes of the elder woman.

"Well, mamma, you know of course who I mean. She must be the girl whom Lady Linton wrote about."

"I imagine so. She answers the description that Miriam gave of her photograph. Yes, hark! she has just opened her door, and surely that was a baby's cry."

"Well, at last we have seen her," returned the girl, "and I must confess, I think she is perfectly lovely. She has such beautiful eyes, such a fair, delicate complexion, and is so peculiarly dainty every way. I do not blame Sir William for falling in love with her."

"Mercy, Sadie, how you do chatter! no one would believe, to hear you, that you had been almost heart-broken because this very girl, over whom you are so enthusiastic, had ruined your prospects," returned her mother, impatiently.

The young girl flushed crimson at this shaft.

"Thank you, mamma, for reminding me of the fact," she said, bitterly. "It is true that through her all my fondest hopes have been blighted, and I suppose I ought to bitterly hate her for it; but truly her exceeding beauty and sweetness half disarm me."

The elder woman made no reply to this, but her manner betrayed both contempt and irritation, her brow was clouded with a wrathful expression, and her lips were drawn into a straight, rigid line, denoting some cruel and inflexible purpose.

It will readily be surmised that these two ladies were none other than Mrs. Farnum and her daughter, who, as we learned in the previous chapter, were traveling in the United States, in the hope of improving the health and spirits of the latter.

Mrs. Farnum had married while very young, and was the mother of three children---two sons and one daughter.

She had herself been very attractive as a girl, and had many suitors; but with an eye to the comforts of life, she had said "no" to all the titled and impecunious lovers, and given her hand to a man of wealth, who, with his million of pounds, bade fair to add another million to them in the course of time.

Miriam Heath, on the contrary, had been rather a plain-looking girl, somewhat cold and repelling in manner, and was almost an old maid before she was married; thus she was often an inmate of her friend's palatial home, and became much interested in her children, and little Sadie Farnum had scarcely reached her teens before the two women began to plan a union between the young heir of Heathdale and the heiress to half a million pounds.

It had been the cherished dream of years, while almost from childhood Sadie had been foolishly taught to regard Heathdale as her future home, and to look upon Sir William as her promised husband; thus the disappointment had been a terrible one to them all when they learned that the baronet had married a "nobody" from the hated and disloyal country that had rebelled against its rightful sovereign.

Lady Linton might be said to have become almost a monomaniac upon this point, and so bitter was her ire at thus being balked in her plans, so keen her hatred of the innocent girl who had been the cause of it, that she abandoned herself to the wildest schemes, casting all honor and womanliness to the winds, and bending all her energies toward the destruction of the happiness of the newly wedded couple. She resolved to begin operations by making an ally of her friend, Mrs. Farnum.

Fortunately she was at that moment in California, the former home of Virgie, and could perhaps ascertain what mystery overshadowed her former life that had made it necessary to conceal her true name. This would perhaps give a clew how to proceed further, and, as we know, her letter was written at once, and brought an immediate reply. Further correspondence elicited information which only tended to strengthen Lady Linton in her evil designs, and Mrs. Farnum was advised to proceed directly to New York and take up her abode in the same hotel where Virgie was located, where she could successfully aid and abet her superior in her malicious operations.

Thus we find Mrs. Farnum and her daughter not only in the same house, but on the same floor with the young wife and her child, and only waiting for a favorable opportunity to strike a fatal blow to her happiness.

Virgie had of late experienced a good deal of anxiety regarding her husband, for his letters, which at first had come with every steamer, had suddenly ceased entirely.

For a while this had only filled her with hope, for she had told herself that doubtless he was coming for her; he might even be on the way to give her a joyful surprise. But as time went on and not a word came from him, she was haunted with a sickening dread. He might be ill, she reasoned; but surely in that case he would send some message by another, or, if he could not do that, some member of her family would certainly let her know.

She wrote faithfully, notwithstanding, giving all details regarding herself and their little one, never dreaming that her fond letters, having first been devoured by evil, greedy eyes, were ruthlessly consigned to the flames.

Every day after the arrival of Mrs. Farnum and her daughter, one or both of the ladies managed to come upon her whenever she walked in the corridor, and soon they began to nod in a friendly manner when they passed her; then a smile and a look of interest was added, until finally it came to be the regular custom to bid her a pleasant good-morning.

But Virgie was retiring by nature, and the acquaintance did not progress rapidly enough to suit Mrs. Farnum, and she was meditating a bold move, when one day Sadie came suddenly upon the nurse, who was promenading the long hall, with her little charge in her arms.

"Oh!" she cried, stopping before her, "I am sure this must be our little neighbor who serenades us once in a while. I dote on babies. May I have a look at the darling?"

"I hope, miss, she doesn't disturb you," the nurse replied respectfully, but looking greatly pleased to have the little one noticed.

"No, indeed; the house is so frightfully still that it is real music to hear its little voice once in a while. What a little beauty it is, to be sure!" Miss Farnum returned, volubly, as she pulled away the lace frill from the small face to get a

better view of the young heiress of Heathdale.

"What is its name?" she asked, after contemplating her in silence for a moment.

"Virginia May Heath," the woman replied, thinking the young lady very gracious.

"Oh, how pretty! I suppose she will be called 'May.' She looks just like a little May blossom."

"No, miss; they call her Virgie. Madam would have preferred the other name, but her husband wanted her called for his wife, of whom he is very fond."

Sadie Farnum's face clouded at this.

"I presume that delicate lady whom I see occasionally walking here in the corridor is La---is Mrs. Heath?" she said, more to make the nurse talk than because she desired information on this point.

"Yes, miss; the streets are so rough she does not care much for driving, and she must have some exercise."

Virgie herself appeared in the doorway of her parlor at this moment, and smiled as she noticed the young lady admiring her baby.

Miss Farnum colored slightly, then said boldly, with a light laugh:

"Pray do not think me very bold, Mrs. Heath, but I have been seeking an introduction to your little daughter. She is very lovely, and I am *so* fond of babies."

While she spoke her eyes had been fixed upon Virgie's face, and she thought she had never looked upon any one more beautiful than this woman who was her rival---for so she regarded her.

She wore a delicate blue lawn, trimmed profusely with filmy white lace; there was a dainty cap upon her head, while she had a few blush-roses fastened in her belt. Every day she was growing stronger and better, and her beauty seemed to increase in proportion.

She bowed to Sadie, and smiled again as she remarked that it was rather unusual for young ladies to be so fond of children of that tender age.

"Then I am an exception to the rule, Mrs. Heath," Miss Farnum answered; "but since I have made your daughter's acquaintance, allow me to introduce myself to you also. I am Sadie Farnum, and mamma and I are your nearest left-hand neighbors."

"I am very glad to know you, Miss Farnum," Virgie returned, graciously, and thinking her delightfully frank and pleasant.

She was really very glad to meet her in a less formal way than usual, and hoped they should be friends.

She had been feeling rather lonely of late, besides being depressed on account of her husband's long silence; she had no acquaintances, and saw scarcely any one save the physician and her nurse.

"I am afraid mamma will think I have committed a shocking breach of etiquette," Sadie went on; "but we are strangers in the city, and I have been longing to know you ever since our first meeting here in the corridor. May I come in to see you occasionally, and this little darling?"

She concluded with such a winning air, as she stooped and lightly kissed the tiny pink face lying upon the nurse's arm, that Virgie's heart was entirely won.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Farnum; I should be delighted to have you. I am alone most of the time, and it would be very pleasant to have some young company."

"Thank you. Then, if you do not object, I will waive all ceremony, and come to see you in a friendly way. May I bring mamma, too, and introduce her to you?"

"I shall be very glad to meet Mrs. Farnum," Virgie responded, and then instantly asked herself if she had spoken the exact truth, for she stood somewhat in awe of that aristocratic and imposing looking woman, whose curious, piercing glance, in spite of her assumption of friendliness, gave her an unpleasant sensation.

"Mamma, the ice is broken at last!" Sadie Farnum cried, rushing in upon her mother, with a glowing face, after the above interview, and she proceeded to give her a detailed account of her meeting with Virgie.

"She is as lovely as a dream, mamma," she said, "and as sweet and gracious as any lady need to be. If she were not Sir William Heath's wife I should be ready to do homage at her shrine with all my heart."

"Nonsense! Has she any education? Can she converse respectably?" demanded Mrs. Farnum, with a frown at her daughter's enthusiasm.

"She is a perfect lady, and her language is beyond criticism---she is fit to be the wife of any peer."

"Gracious! Sadie, how you annoy me!" ejaculated Mrs. Farnum, angrily. "Just think of her antecedents."

"Well, the girl is not to blame if her father was a scamp, and should not be made to suffer for his sins," responded her daughter, who was not naturally bad, and but for her mother's influence, would even now have been won to a better disposition by Virgie's sweetness.

"What rank folly you are talking!" retorted her mother. "No girl has a right to marry a respectable man with such a stain on her name."

"Perhaps she does not know anything about her father's crime."

"Pshaw! She was fifteen years old when they had to flee from San Francisco; she could not help knowing that something was wrong, and as she grew older she could not fail to understand it. From the way you talk it is evident that you yourself have fallen in love with the woman who has cheated you out of your husband."

"Perhaps I have, mamma," Sadie answered, with a spice of defiance and wickedly taking pleasure in working her mother up to a certain pitch. "She looked so pretty just now---she has the loveliest complexion, just clear red and white, with such dark blue eyes that they seem almost black when she is animated, and such pretty waving brown hair, while her features are pure and delicate Her taste, too, is exquisite---her dress was just the right shade to set off her clear skin; she had the daintiest little matron's cap on her head---real thread, too---while a handful of blush-roses in her belt made her

look too lovely for anything."

"Do hush, Sadie; you irritate me beyond endurance; one would think that you were only too ready to renounce all your hopes to this plebeian who has stolen your lover," and Mrs. Farnum turned upon her daughter as if ready to shake her for her folly.

"Mamma!" she cried, passionately, and bursting into tears, for she had been working herself up as well, "when I am away from her I hate her for having won him from me, and I am almost ready to do anything desperate; but when I am with her she disarms me; there is something about the girl that almost makes me love her. If you could have seen her this morning, she looked so proud and happy when I praised the baby."

"Sadie Farnum, I do believe you are becoming demented! Here is poor Lady Linton almost heart-broken over her brother's *mesalliance*, his mother lies at death's door on account of the excitement caused by it, while you, who ought to be the most interested party of all, are about to turn traitress and go over to the enemy just because of a foolish sentimentality for this doll-faced girl. I declare, I have no patience with you."

"I think you have said enough, mamma," replied Miss Farnum, coldly, and wiping away her tears, "but there may come a time when you will regret your present attitude---when you will be sorry that you strove to inculcate such a bitter spirit into the mind of your only daughter. Lady Linton for some strange reason wanted us to come here and see for ourselves what this girl is like; we have seen her. Let us go our way now and not revive old hopes and ambitions, which, to say the least, are not pleasant to remember under the circumstances. Yes, let us end this disagreeable business, and leave Sir William Heath's wife alone."

"I am not ready to leave New York yet, and we will stay where we are for the present," responded Mrs. Farnum, flushing a deep red, for she had never told her daughter of the plot which she was helping Lady Linton to carry out, and she saw now that it would not be wise to do so, since Sadie might flatly refuse to have anything to do with it, and in her present state of mind, might do something to upset their well-laid schemes.

#### Chapter XIV.

##### The Plot Begins to Work.

The acquaintance between the Farnums and Virgie progressed rapidly after the meeting between Sadie and the young wife. Mrs. Farnum was duly introduced, and did not prove to be nearly so formidable a personage as Virgie had imagined her to be; for although she was not drawn toward her as she had been to her daughter, yet she was so gracious and exerted herself to be so agreeable, that Virgie could but acknowledge to herself that she was a very pleasant and entertaining person.

Visits were exchanged almost every day between them; the baby was praised and admired, and Virgie was petted and made much of, until her heart and confidence were entirely won.

They insisted upon her driving with them; "the fresh air would do her good," Mrs. Farnum declared, "for she had noticed during the last week that she was losing color;" and thus she made many excursions with the two ladies, and visited many points of interest. They even proposed that they should go into the country together, as it was getting so oppressively warm in the city; but Virgie would not listen to this proposition, because of her anxiety for letters, and the hope that Sir William might be coming for her.

Poor child! she was, indeed, losing color, and was almost heart-sick with the terrible suspense, although she tried to be very brave and to conceal her trouble from every eye.

She wrote again and again to her husband, begging for one line, one word even, pleading that he would let her come to him if he was ill and needed her. She would gladly brave the dangers of the ocean alone, she told him, if he would but give her his consent to do so.

But still that terrible silence remained unbroken.

She was almost tempted to set out alone in spite of everything, and nothing but the fear of passing her husband on the way prevented her doing so.

She had learned that the Farnums were English, but upon discovering that their home was a long distance from Heathdale--Mr. Farnum owned a large estate in Bedford County--she reasoned that they could not know anything of Sir William's family; and being extremely sensitive regarding his recent apparent neglect of her, she did not once hint that she expected her own future home would also be in England.

Meantime Lady Linton's plans were ripening. Events were occurring at Heathdale which she trusted would serve her purpose well; and now Mrs. Farnum was only waiting for a favorable opportunity to commence aggressive operations.

The opportunity soon came. Sadie had been invited by some friends to spend a week or two at Coney Island, and her mother, fearing if she should be there to witness Virgie's grief when she began to work out her plot, that she might do something to upset her plans, willingly gave her consent for her to go.

On the afternoon after her departure, Mrs. Farnum with a basket of fancy work in hand, went to pay Virgie a little visit, saying she was lonely without Sadie, and had come in for a cozy chat.

The young wife had evidently been weeping, for her cheeks were flushed and her eyes heavy, but she received her guest cordially, and exerted herself to be entertaining.

Mrs. Farnum appeared unconscious of anything unusual although she watched the young wife keenly, and readily surmised what had caused her unhappiness.

She chatted socially for a while on various topics, but after a time laid down her work, and taking up a book from a table near which she was sitting, began carelessly turning over its pages.

"Jean Ingelow," she remarked, with a smile. "Are you fond of her poetry, Mrs. Heath?"

"Yes," Virgie answered, "I think some of her poems are very sweet."

Mrs. Farnum glanced absently at two or three, then turned to the fly leaf of the book, while Virgie's eyes mechanically followed her movements.

The name of William Heath was written there.

Mrs. Farnum looked up surprised, then smiled.

"Your husband's name is William?" she said, inquiringly

"Yes," Virgie returned, with a slight flush, while a pang shot through her heart at the sound of the dear name.

"You must be very lonely to be separated from him for so long a time," said the woman, in a sympathetic tone.

"Indeed I am," said the young wife, with a long-drawn sigh which did not escape her companion's notice, "but our separation is compulsory."

"Ah, he was away at the time of our arrival, was he not?"

"Yes, he was called to his home nearly three months ago by the illness of his mother."

Mrs. Farnum assumed a look of surprise.

"And could not you accompany him?" she asked, as if she thought it very strange that Virgie should not have done so.

"No, my physician would not allow me to travel; the summons came only a short time before the birth of my baby, and he said a sea voyage could not be thought of for me, so my husband was obliged to go without me."

"A sea voyage!" repeated Mrs. Farnum, with a start.

"Yes. My husband's home is in England," Virgie answered, flushing vividly.

A blank look came over Mrs. Farnum's face, then she assumed a grieved expression.

"In England! and you never told us that you were our countrywoman, Mrs. Heath!" she said, reproachfully.

"I am not. I am a native of California," Virgie explained with some confusion; but I seldom speak of myself to strangers."

"With good reason, my pert young woman!" mentally retorted Mrs. Farnum, for her companion's last words had been rather coldly uttered. Then she said aloud, in a pitying tone:

"It must have been very trying for you to let your husband go on such a journey without you?"

"Yes, indeed, it was," Virgie replied, with lips that quivered painfully; "but, of course, I could not keep him from his dying mother."

"Was her condition so critical as that?"

"Certainly, or my husband would not have consented to leave me. Mrs. Heath was suddenly stricken with paralysis."

Again Mrs. Farnum started, and bent a long, searching look upon her companion---a look that made Virgie feel very uncomfortable and wonder what it meant.

"Is---is she still living?" the woman asked, still regarding Virgie searchingly.

"Yes---at least, she was the last I heard; but her condition was still considered so critical that she could not bear the least excitement."

"Then it is some time since you have heard from her?" remarked Mrs. Farnum, pointedly.

Virgie bridled a trifle at being so closely questioned. She thought her guest was trespassing beyond the bounds of good breeding. But, after a moment, feeling as if she must share her burden with some one, she said, in an unsteady voice:

"No, I have not, and---I am afraid that my husband's letters have miscarried, and the suspense has been very trying."

"Ahem! Mrs. Heath, there is something very strange---very inexplicable about what you have told me," Mrs. Farnum said, in a grave tone.

Virgie looked up, astonished both at the words and tone.

"I do not understand you," she returned.

"You know, of course, that we are English people," began her companion.

"Yes. Miss Sadie mentioned the fact to me during the first of our acquaintance."

"Did she ever tell you that we know people in England by the name of Heath?"

"No. Do you?" Virgie cried, eagerly, her face lighting as she thought perhaps she might learn something regarding her long silent husband.

"Yes, and they are a very fine family. They belong in Hampshire, and I may as well tell you that they are a very proud and aristocratic family, laying great stress upon their unimpeachable honor and untarnished name."

Virgie flushed a painful crimson at this, which her companion noticed with a thrill of exultation, and then resumed:

"The oldest daughter, who married a peer of the realm, has been my most intimate friend for many years. Sir William, also-----"

"Sir William!" Virgie interrupted, catching her breath, face growing radiant.

"Yes, that's the name of the son and heir. I was about to remark that he is a baronet and that it is a singular coincidence that he should also have been here in America while his mother was stricken with paralysis. It is strange, too, that his first name should be the same as your husband's; but-----"

"Oh, Mrs. Farnum," cried Virgie, leaning forward and seizing the woman's hands in a transport of joy, as she believed she was about to hear some definite news regarding her loved one, "Sir William Heath is my husband---can you tell me anything about him? I have not heard a word from him for more than a month, and I am nearly distracted from anxiety and suspense."

Mrs. Farnum drew back in well-feigned astonishment.

"Child! are you mad? Sir William Heath your husband? It is simply impossible."

Virgie straightened herself, and yet it seemed as if somebody had suddenly struck her a cruel blow upon her naked heart.

Mrs. Farnum had just told her that for years she had been the most intimate friend of Lady Linton and yet to all appearances she had been literally astounded to learn that Sir William was married.

Could it be possible that her husband had never acknowledged her as his wife to his family?

The thought almost paralyzed her for a moment; then she put it indignantly away from her.

No, he had written letter after letter to his mother and sister--at least he had spoken of so doing, though she had never read them--telling of their marriage, and speaking of their return to Heathdale. Of course his friends must have been apprised of all that had occurred during his absence; still it was very strange that the "most intimate acquaintance of Lady Linton" had not been made acquainted with the fact.

All at once, however, she brightened. Mrs. Farnum had been traveling in America also, for how long she did not know, and perhaps that accounted for it. If she did not correspond with Lady Linton she had no means of knowing of the baronet's marriage.

She even smiled to think how foolish she had been to allow such thoughts to have even for a moment a place in her mind, as she looked up and said:

"No, indeed, Mrs. Farnum, I am not mad, and it is not impossible that I am Sir William Heath's wife. We were married last September, and after the death of my father, who was very ill at the time, we traveled for several months and then came to New York, intending to sail for England the last of May, but were forbidden to do so by my physician, as I have already told you."

"Still I say it is impossible. The Sir William Heath whom I mean is the master of a large estate called Heathdale in Hampshire County, England," reiterated Mrs. Farnum, decisively.

"And my husband is the master of Heathdale, in Hampshire County, England," Virgie said, a trifle proudly.

She resented the woman's incredulity, while she could not forget what she had said about the "unimpeachable honor and untarnished name" of the family. It had stung her keenly, though she did not suspect that it had been an intentional slur upon the shadow resting on her own.

Mrs. Farnum's only reply was a look of increased astonishment, mingled with something of horror.

A crimson flush dyed Virgie's face.

"May I ask, Mrs. Farnum, how long you have been in America?" she said.

"We sailed from Liverpool the sixth of May."

Virgie's heart sank a trifle.

"And had you seen your friend, Lady Linton, within a few months previous to that time?"

"Lady Linton came to London only three weeks before, to make me a farewell visit. She was with me ten days."

The young wife grew pale.

"And did she not mention the fact of her brother's marriage?" she inquired in a faint voice.

"No such event in connection with him has ever been announced," returned the woman, ruthlessly. "His friends know nothing of it. Sir William Heath is believed by his friends to be a single man. More than this-----"

Virgie stopped her with a gesture, but she was as white as new fallen snow as she arose, and going to her writing-desk, brought a letter, which she laid upon Mrs. Farnum's lap.

"There is his last letter to me," she said, but her lips were almost rigid as she spoke. "It will prove my statements."

Mrs. Farnum took it, and examined the envelope. It was directed to "Mrs. William Heath,-----Hotel, New York City, U.S.A." It was post-marked at Heathdale. The handwriting was familiar, and she knew well enough that Sir William Heath had penned it.

"Mrs. William Heath!" she said, reading the name aloud. "He does not address you as Lady Heath, which is your proper title if you are his wife."

"Oh!" cried Virgie, with a shiver of pain, for those last words, implying a doubt of her position, hurt her like a knife. "Neither of us cared to be conspicuous while we were traveling, so my husband dropped his title," she explained.

"Ahem! that was a very strange proceeding. But does---does he say anything about coming for you, in this letter?" inquired her companion, who was burning with curiosity to know what it contained.

"You may read it if you like, Mrs. Farnum. I see that you are still in doubt about my being what I represent myself," Virgie returned, with some hauteur.

Mrs. Farnum flushed at this.

"You must excuse me, my dear," she said, with hypocritical blandness, "but---but---it is simply unaccountable to me, knowing what I do about the family and their future plans for Sir William. I'm afraid-----"

She did not finish what she was going to say, but coolly drew the letter from the envelope, unfolded, and began to read it, never once stopping to consider how she was outraging the delicacy and affection of the young wife by this act, notwithstanding that she had received permission to do so---She could not doubt, as she read, that the young baronet's heart had all been given to this fair, beautiful woman, for though written in his own dignified way, the letter was full of devotion and loyalty to her. And yet not once in all those eight pages had he called her by the sacred name of "wife." There were all manner of pet names and expressions of endearment, but not a single time was written that word which would have proved so much.

The arch plotter as she read, was quick to observe this omission, and she gloated over it; it would materially help to further her designs in the future she thought, if this letter was a sample of all others which he had written her. She would have given a great deal to be able to have that pretty writing-desk at her command for an hour or two.

Her face took on a sterner and graver look than she had ever yet worn as she read on, and when at length she finished the epistle, she appeared the horrified prude to perfection.

Chapter XV.

The Lawful Wife.

"Have you a picture of your---of Sir William, madam?" Mrs. Farnum inquired, as she folded the letter and returned it to the envelope.

Virgie arose without a word, and taking a velvet album from the table, opened it to certain picture and laid it before her companion.

Mrs. Farnum uttered a cry of despair as her glance fell upon the handsome, upturned face.

"Yes, that is a picture of Sir William Heath, of Heathdale; there can be no mistake," she confessed, with a perfectly rigid face. "But, Mrs.---oh, madam---I am simply stunned!"

"What *do* you mean?" Virgie demanded, standing straight and tall before her, and meeting her eyes with a blazing look which warned Mrs. Farnum to be careful how she dealt with that spirit.

"Pray, be calm, my child," she returned, with a pitiful accent. "Sit down beside me here, and I will explain why I am so disturbed. Good heavens! we have always supposed that Sir William was a man of unblemished honor."

"Madam, be careful how you speak of my husband!" Virgie interrupted, haughtily, yet with a note of agony in her voice. "Sir William is an honorable man, and I will not allow you to say one word against him in my presence."

"Poor child! poor child! I fear you have been terribly deceived. How can I ever tell you!" murmured Mrs. Farnum, in a shuddering voice, and with every appearance of distress.

"You *shall* tell me instantly. I will not stand here and listen to such paralyzing insinuations. *If* you have any thing to tell me, say it at once, and do not keep me in this maddening suspense!" Virgie commanded grasping the woman by the wrist, and transfixing her with her blazing eyes.

If Sir William Heath could have seen her at that moment he would have been very proud of her, for she had never been so beautiful, although a terrible agony was stamped upon her white, imperious face.

"I can only repeat what I have already said. It is impossible. You will never be mistress of Heathdale!" reiterated Mrs. Farnum, in an inflexible voice, as she disengaged her wrist from Virgie's grasp, which had left the imprint of every finger upon it.

"Go on!" commanded the young wife, authoritatively "You have simply made a statement. You must confirm it."

"Because," proceeded the relentless woman, "in the first place, if you are his wife, he would long before this have acknowledged you as such to his friends."

"He has done so, I tell you. He wrote immediately after our marriage, announcing it."

"Did you see him *post* his letter?" inquired Mrs. Farnum, quietly, but in a tone that keenly stung the sensitive girl before her.

"No," she replied, a hot flush mounting to her brow; "but I know he did. He is too honorable to dissemble."

"Did you ever see any reply to his communication in which his friends recognized the fact of your marriage?"

"No. I--I never questioned him," Virgie answered, with white lips. "My father was very ill, dying, at that time, and I scarcely thought of anything else."

"But of course you have your marriage certificate. That would prove everything," observed Mrs. Farnum, insinuatingly, although she well knew that she had not.

"My husband has it."

"Ah!" and a pitiful smile wreathed the woman's lips as she uttered this interjection with significant emphasis.

"Madam, can you not see that you are driving me mad?" cried Virgie, in an agonized voice. "You have heard something; you are concealing something from me. For mercy's sake, make an end of this suspense!"

"Answer me one question more. Were there witnesses at your marriage?"

"Yes, four."

"Four! Who were they?"

Mrs. Farnum asked this question in a somewhat disappointed tone, for if the young wife could bring four witnesses to prove her marriage, Lady Linton might well tremble for the success of her plots, though Nevada was a long distance from England, and there might be some difficulty in producing them.

"My father"---a sob checked Virgie's utterance as she mentioned him, and realized how forlorn her condition would be if the horrible suspicions which were being sown in her mind should prove true---"the clergyman who performed the ceremony, a woman who lived near us, and our own servant."

"Then, since you have no tangible proof in your own hands that you are Sir William Heath's lawful wife, I advise you to communicate with those witnesses without delay, since their testimony alone will serve to establish your rights and---those of your child," Mrs. Farnum said, with a solemnity that struck a fearful chill to Virgie's heart.

"My child!"

It was a startled, anguished cry, and all the mother-love and anxiety was instantly aroused for her little one.

Was it possible that anything was threatening the honor and future happiness of her child, who, next to its father, was at once her pride and idol?

"Oh!" she cried, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, "why will you talk so in riddles? If you have anything to tell me, in pity speak out before I lose my reason!"

"Wait one moment, and I will bring you a letter which I have recently received, and when I have read it to you, you will understand why I have been so skeptical regarding what you have told me, and why I have questioned you so closely."

With these words, Mrs. Farnum arose and left the room, while Virgie, almost stunned by the fearful suspicions which had been so artfully thrust upon her, and feeling almost as if a knife had been driven through her heart, sank nerveless and

trembling into a chair to await her return.

The relentless woman was not gone long. The ice was thoroughly broken at last, and she meant to make quick work of her task now. Lady Linton had written to her that her brother was becoming very impatient at being detained so long from his wife; he was nearly ill from anxiety because he did not hear from her, and she feared he would soon brave everything and go to her; so whatever was done to separate them eventually, must be quickly done.

She soon returned, holding in her hand a letter, and a lurid light burned in her eyes as she glanced at the stricken wife saw how well her blows had told.

"This letter," she began, seating herself, and drawing some closely written pages from their perfumed envelope, "is from Lady Linton, my intimate friend, and Sir William Heath's sister, and you will perceive, as I read, that my authority for what I have told you is indisputable. Perhaps, however, you would prefer to read it yourself," she concluded, holding it out to her.

But Virgie made a gesture of dissent. She felt that she had not strength even to hold those thin sheets of paper in her trembling hands.

"Very well; then, I will read it to you; but, my young friend, you must be prepared for some startling news."

Virgie opened her lips as if to speak, but the words died on them, and Mrs. Farnum began:

"My Dear Myra:---You will be glad to learn that mamma is really better---not, of course, as far on the road to convalescence as we could desire, but comfortable enough to have had the wedding take place as appointed. It would have been too bad if it had to be postponed; so unlucky, you know. We thought once that we should have to put it off indefinitely; but, as mamma could not bear the thought, and Sir Herbert consenting, provided there should be no excitement, we decided not to disarrange the long-talked-of plans. Will and Margie both behaved beautifully, and declared they would cheerfully defer everything if mamma was likely to suffer from it; but it was very evident that their happiness was greatly augmented when told that it would not be necessary. The wedding occurred on the 28th, in the Heath chapel. It was, of course, very quiet and unassuming, though the bride was lovely in her robe of white satin, exquisitely decorated with Chantilly lace, and wreath of heath, which it has always been the custom for the brides of the house to wear. William looked as noble as ever, and our good old rector made the service very impressive not forgetting to mention in his prayer, most touchingly, her who lay ill at home and could not grace with her presence the glad occasion. There was a very quiet breakfast afterward at Mrs. Stanhope's, after which Will and Margie came over for mamma's congratulations and blessing.

"They are not going on a journey just now. They will visit London for a few days, and then return here and remain at home for the present. Will seems almost like a boy in his happiness, while Margie is sweeter and prettier than ever. Of course we are all delighted, for we have always been so pleased at the prospect of the match, though I was afraid for a little while that something might happen. I feared there had been some nonsense when William was in America for I came across the photograph of the loveliest face I ever saw, one day, while looking over and arranging his wardrobe after his return. But the old saying proves true---'All's well that ends well,' and I trust there is a brilliant future for the master of Heathdale."

There was more pertaining to family matters, which Mrs. Farnum thought best to omit after stealing a look at Virgie.

Her face was frightful to behold, and for a moment the woman was positively alarmed at the result of her work.

She sat like a statue, scarce seeming to breathe; there was not the slightest color in her face or lips, and the expression of agony about her mouth revealed something of the fearful suffering she was enduring, while there was a look in her eyes which her companion never forgot.

She did not move for several minutes after Mrs. Farnum ceased reading; it was as if she had suddenly been turned to stone, and was oblivious of everything.

Mrs. Farnum was awed by her appearance, and hardly dared to speak to her, lest, in breaking the spell, the girl should drop dead at her feet.

But all at once Virgie started; some thought seemed to have come to her---something that made her doubt that the dreadful tidings to which she had listened were true.

The letter had spoken of "Will" and "William," to be sure, and she had every reason to suppose that it had referred to the man whom she had believed to be her husband---still there might be a mistake. She grasped at the straw with the eagerness of a drowning man.

"Of whom is Lady Linton speaking in her letter, as having been---married?" she demanded, in a hollow voice, and fixing her burning eyes upon her companion's face.

"Why, of William Heath, of course," returned Mrs. Farnum, greatly relieved to hear her speak once more, "and I have known him all my life. I used to visit at Heathdale a great deal before Lady Linton's marriage, and he was always a favorite of mine. He was a bright, manly fellow, and his friends have planned great things for him. I---I can hardly credit what you have told me to-day. I did not dream he could do anything so wrong; but doubtless he will settle down now, and I shall expect to see him a member of Parliament; he has everything in his favor."

"Who is---Margie?" Virgie asked, in the same tone as before, though she had shivered at the last words of Mrs. Farnum; they were bitterly cruel.

"Why, Margaret Stanhope---one of the loveliest girls in Hampshire County. She and Will have been engaged for years. You remember that Lady Linton spoke of their always having been 'pleased with the prospect of the match.'"

"Oh!" gasped Virgie, clasping her hands over her aching heart, and for a moment everything seemed to fade from her vision, and a great darkness to envelop her.

Mrs. Farnum thought she was going to faint; but the weakness passed, and then she arose in all the majesty of her terrible agony and righteous indignation.

"Madam," she began, standing straight and proud before the astonished woman, "If what you have told me is true; if Sir William Heath has been engaged to Margaret Stanhope for years; if he has pretended to marry her since his return to England, then the greatest wrong that ever was perpetrated has been done, and he has made a dupe of her and---broken my heart. As sure as there is a just God, I am Sir William Heath's lawful wife, and He will vindicate me. My child is his daughter, and the heiress of Heathdale, and Margaret Stanhope has been shamefully betrayed. I shall never allow such a crime to prevail. I shall sail for Liverpool on the very next steamer, to expose this villainy and to assert my legal rights and my daughter's claim to her position as a Heath of Heathdale. She, at least, shall not suffer dishonor, if the lives of two women have been ruined by the villainy of one man. Did he suppose, because England is three thousand miles from America, that he could perpetrate this wrong with impunity? I tell you it shall never be! I will face him in the home of his *unimpeachable ancestors*, and see if he dares to repudiate his lawful wife!"

Chapter XVI.

"My Child Is the Heiress of Heathdale!"

Mrs. Farnum looked frightened at Virgie's startling threat, and she realized at once that she had underrated the character of the woman with whom she had to deal.

She saw that she was capable of great decision and prompt action; that beneath her gracious sweetness, and gentle, winning manner, there lay a reserve force and strength upon which she had not reckoned, and which would have to be overcome---if overcome at all---by strategy and deception.

It would never do for the young wife to set out for England, at least if there was any power to prevent it, for it would destroy all their carefully laid plans, and their hopes for the future.

It had never occurred to Mrs. Farnum that she would contemplate such a proceeding.

She knew that she was a stranger and absolutely friendless in the city; there would be no one on whom she could rely to fight her battles. She had imagined her to be weak and yielding, and that she would sink helplessly beneath the terrible blows that she had dealt her, that all life and spirit would be crushed out of her, and she would be only too willing to fly from every one whom she knew, and hide herself and her child, with their supposed shame, in some remote corner of the earth, and that would be the last of them.

Then when Sir William should search for her, as of course she knew he would do, and fail to find her, he could easily be made to believe that she had been untrue, and fled from him; a divorce could be readily obtained to set him free, and thus Sadie, if she played her cards aright, might yet become the mistress of Heathdale.

But the injured wife's project of going to face her recreant husband, and demanding to be acknowledged as the lawful mistress of Heathdale, must be defeated at any cost, and the wily woman immediately set about accomplishing her object.

"Ah, my poor child!" she began, assuming a sympathetic tone, "one cannot blame you for just indignation at having been so deeply wronged. I never would have believed Sir William capable of such dishonor. But surely you will never think of subjecting yourself to an ordeal so terrible as that you have just proposed."

"Why should I not? Why should I shrink from anything that will right this wrong? Nothing can hurt me more than I have been hurt to-day," Virgie answered, spiritedly, yet with inconceivable bitterness.

"But think of Sir William's family. They are exceedingly sensitive and proud spirited, and they would never tolerate your claim for an instant; no shadow of dishonor has ever touched them in any way, and they would not endure the scandal."

"Think of Sir William's family! Why should I consider them? Madam, it is myself of whom I have to think---myself and my innocent little one; and do you suppose I will tolerate the indignity which has been offered me? Is not my good name and that of my child as much at stake, and of as much value as the name of Heath?" Virgie cried, her proud spirit blazing forth in righteous indignation.

"But Sir William is a peer of the realm."

"A peer!"

Mrs. Farnum actually cringed beneath the scorn that rang out in the young wife's tone as she repeated these words:

"And are peers of the realm exempt from all dishonor when they violate every law, both human and divine?" she continued, with stinging sarcasm. "Does the code of your nobility provide that young and innocent girls, who are basely betrayed, shall sit tamely down and meekly bear their injuries, so that your peers of the realm can go unscathed? If so, thank heaven that your laws do not prevail in this country. You are yourself a mother---you are proud of your beautiful daughter; but think you if she stood in my place you would advise her to consider the feelings of Sir William's family, to ignore her rights, and shut her eyes to her own injuries, lest she cast a shadow of dishonor upon their proud escutcheon? And do you think that I am less of a woman than she---that I am devoid of fine sensibilities, of pride and self-respect?"

Mrs. Farnum had winced as under a lash during all this spirited speech. Its scorn and sarcasm stung her keenly, and made her very angry. She longed to revenge herself upon the proud girl who had presumed to rank herself along with her daughter, by proclaiming the secret regarding her life, which she had so cunningly learned in San Francisco.

But she feared to arouse her further. She realized that she must seek to conciliate her, and try to persuade her not to take the mad journey to England which she seemed so bent upon.

"Oh, no, my poor child," she began, soothingly; "you do not realize what you are saying. Of course, I know it is all very wrong to deceive a girl in any such way, be she high or low, rich or poor. But just consider how you are situated. You say that your hus---that Sir William has your marriage certificate, and you have nothing to prove your statements with, even if you should present yourself at Heathdale. How do you suppose you would be received there if you should burst in upon them claiming to be Sir William's wife and the mistress of Heathdale if you could not substantiate your statements? My dear, it would be the blindest folly."

"But I have his letters!" cried Virgie, eagerly.

"True, you have his letters, and no doubt his handwriting would be instantly recognized by his family, But they could not prove your position, especially if they are all written after the style of the one which you allowed me to read this afternoon, for in all those pages not once does he speak of you as his wife. You must have something more tangible and conclusive than those," Mrs. Farnum asserted, confidently.

All the light died out of Virgie's face as she began to see that there were terrible difficulties in the way of proving that she was a lawfully wedded wife.

"I have my ring," she said, weakly, and holding up the white, delicate hand on which the heavy circlet gleamed, guarded by a brilliant diamond, but which trembled like a reed shaken by the wind.

"Is it marked with the date of your marriage?" inquired Mrs. Farnum, an anxious gleam in her eye as it rested upon that symbol of wifehood.

"N-o; it was thoughtlessly neglected at the time, because there were so many other things to be attended to, and---and I could not bear to have it taken off to rectify the oversight, after it was once put upon my hand," Virgie confessed, growing white again even to her lips.

"That was unwise, not to say foolish of you," said Mrs. Farnum, deprecatingly, but with a throb of exultation.

"But," added Virgie, after thinking a moment, "he brought me here as his wife. The proprietor of this hotel will tell you so. Dr. Knox, my physician, will tell you so also, as I was introduced to him by my husband as Mrs. Heath; and there are other people in the house who know it."

Mrs. Farnum smiled pitifully.

"My dear," she said, gravely, "how many of these people do you think would be willing to swear that you are Sir William Heath's wife, if you should ask them to do so? How many would put their names to a paper certifying their honest conviction that you are, if told the title and position he occupies in his own country and *your history* in this?"

Virgie started at these words, and would have asked the woman what she knew of her history, but she went on as if she had not remarked her emotion:

"If Sir William had brought you here as *Lady Heath*, registered himself in his own proper character, and taken you into society thus, there would have been no room for doubt. But instead, what *has* he done? It is very strange that your own suspicions have not been aroused by his actions. He has registered everywhere as plain 'William Heath and lady.' Instead of going to the public table, as most of the guests are in the habit of doing, he has paid extra rates to have your meals served in your own rooms, and kept you secluded from almost every one. What construction do you suppose would be put upon these facts, if they were submitted to people generally, if----"

"But, Mrs. Farnum, all this was done out of regard for my feelings. I told you that we did not wish to be conspicuous while traveling, so my husband dropped his title. I could not go into society here, and I did not like to go to the public table where I should be---obliged to meet so many strangers," Virgie interrupted, a hot flush rising to her brow, while there was a weary, hunted look, in her eyes as the cunning woman continued to weave her tangled web about her.

"Of course, *I* can understand all that," replied Mrs. Farnum, indulgently, "but how would it appear as evidence if brought up in connection with your efforts to prove yourself a lawful wife?"

Virgie's heart sank.

Turned which way she would, everything, as argued and distorted by her companion, appeared against her, and for a moment it seemed as if her spirit was crushed within her.

But at that instant a little cry from the adjoining room fell upon her ears, and immediately all her natural pride and energy returned to her aid.

She straightened herself and lifted her head proudly a look of firm resolve settling upon her face and gleaming in her eyes.

"There are proofs," she said, in a low, firm tone, "even though I have not my marriage certificate and though some people may doubt the truth of what I assert, and---I will yet have them. My father, who would have been my strongest helper, is dead, but there are three other witnesses living who can swear that I am a lawful wife. There must be records also, and, madam, I will move heaven and earth to establish my rightful position in life."

Mrs. Farnum trembled before this indomitable resolution.

"And would you be willing to occupy it, even if you could establish it?" she asked, with a covert sneer, "would you force yourself into a position which, appearances go to prove, was never intended to be given to you? Would you force

yourself upon a man who had subjected you to the indignity of repudiating you as a wife and put another in your place?"

Virgie's head reeled beneath the force of these cruel questions, and she swayed dizzily, as if about to fall, for a moment.

Then again with a mighty effort she recovered herself.

"No," she cried, her beautiful lips curling with scorn, every pulse in her body throbbing with contempt "the chosen mistress of Heathdale may keep her position after I have proven my right to it, if she prizes it enough to pay the price of her own dishonor; but my child is also the lawful child of Sir William Heath---she is the heiress to all his possessions and she shall yet occupy the place in the world that rightfully belongs to her, no matter who else may stand in her path. It may take time to accomplish all this, but, mark me, Mrs. Farnum, and tell your 'proud, unimpeachable family' at Heathdale so, if you choose, it shall be accomplished."

"Then of course you will not be able to sail immediately for England as you at first proposed to do," returned Mrs. Farnum, her heart leaping with joy as Virgie's words told her that she had changed her mind regarding her first threat.

"No, I can see, now I come to consider the matter, that it would be folly for me to attempt to gain my rights without being armed with positive proof of what I assert. It exists, however, though it will necessitate much trouble and expense to secure it. Three months hence, however, I shall hope to have it in my hands, then, let your 'peer of the realm' and his 'honored family' take warning, for a righteous judgment will surely overtake them for the wrong which I suffer to-day. Now go---leave me if you please; you may have meant well in telling me what you have, but, oh! you have ruined my life and all my hopes," Virgie concluded, with a moan and gesture full of despair.

Her strength was failing her; the bitterness of death was upon her and she longed to be alone, for she could not endure that any one should witness her cruel humiliation.

Her last words had galled Mrs. Farnum almost beyond endurance; no doubt because she realized that there was so much truth in them, while her threat regarding a righteous judgment overtaking the family at Heathdale caused her heart to sink with a sudden dread of disgraceful punishment for herself if ever her complicity in this foul plot should be discovered.

She arose, cold and stern.

"I ruin your life, indeed!" she answered, haughtily. "I think you have no one to thank for that but yourself, for having lent a too willing ear to the flattering tongue of a strange young man."

She swept from the room with a firm step and uplifted head, while Virgie sank prostrate upon the floor, feeling as if her heart had been ruthlessly trampled upon and all the life and hope crushed out of it.

## Chapter XVII.

### The Last Drop in a Bitter Cup.

"The girl has more spirit than I gave her credit for," Mrs. Farnum muttered to herself, as she entered her own rooms after leaving Virgie. "If she persists in her purpose of securing proofs and going to Heathdale to claim her position, of course it will upset everything. However, she will not be able to do that at present; she must first take a long journey, and meantime Miriam will, no doubt, think of some way to prevent a *denouement*. Doubtless the girl will write once more and charge Sir William with his perfidy---she is not one to bear tamely such a wrong; but Miriam will be on the watch, and if the little upstart gets no reply, her pride will probably assert itself, and we shall have no more trouble with her, for

a while at least. Meantime Sir William may be prevailed upon to get a divorce, and then the way will be clear once more for Sadie.

"How fortunate," she added, going on with her soliloquy, "that Will Heath and Margie were married just at this time!--she swallowed that story whole. Well, I must confess it was calculated to stagger any one, though I was almost afraid she had heard something before about the facts; but it seems she had not."

\* \* \* \* \*

The truth regarding the news that Mrs. Farnum had received from Lady Linton, and which the latter had so cunningly utilized to further her scheme to separate her brother and his wife, was this:

Sir William Heath had a cousin who bore the same name as himself, though without the title, of course.

He was three years older than the young baronet, and had been named for his uncle, with the hope that he would be received as the heir in case no son was born to the elder Sir William. But this was not to be.

From childhood the boy had been attached to his little, neighbor and playmate, Margaret Stanhope, and they had been engaged for years, as Mrs. Farnum told Virgie.

But being the son of a younger son, he had had to struggle somewhat for his education and position in life, and it was only a few months previous to Sir William's return from America that he had succeeded in securing a situation as private secretary to a nobleman, and thus felt that at last he had a right to marry the sweet girl whom he had so long and so fondly loved, and make a home for himself.

The marriage had been set for the 28th of June, but Lady Heath's sudden and alarming illness, it was feared, would necessitate a postponement. But when she began to improve, and the question being submitted to her, she, having a great fondness for both her nephew and his betrothed, had insisted that the marriage should proceed. It accordingly took place in the chapel at Heathdale, Sir William himself giving away the bride, as her father was not living. So it will readily be seen that there was a semblance of truth in nearly all that Lady Linton had written to Mrs. Farnum.

She had not been quite sure that she would succeed in this part of her scheme, for it might be that Sir William had mentioned the fact of his having a cousin by the same name; so she had written her letter in a way to do no harm in case it did not help her plan. If Virgie did *not* know, however, she would readily take it for granted that it was her husband who had been married on the 28th, while the fact that a long engagement had existed would seem to prove that he had wilfully deceived her from the first, and tend to make her believe that her own marriage had been simply a farce.

Knowing that the certificate was in Sir William's possession, that Mr. Abbot was dead, and surmising, from their signatures, that two of the witnesses at least were very ignorant, she hoped, even if Virgie should have sufficient spirit to assert herself that it would be very difficult for her to collect proofs of a legal marriage. She knew that she could bring plenty of evidence to prove the fact that they had lived and traveled together for several months under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Heath, but she did not believe that that would count for very much; it would not be the first time that such a thing had occurred---young men would sow wild oats occasionally, and though it might wound her pride terribly to have any scandal arise regarding the matter, yet she could bear that with a far better grace than to have an ignorant plebeian from the wilds of America become the mistress of Heathdale.

Her aim was to estrange and keep the couple separated long enough to secure a divorce and compromise Sir William with Sadie Farnum, and then she would be ready to snap her fingers at all danger for the future.

Mrs. Farnum wrote immediately to Lady Linton, giving her a full account of her interview with her despised sister-in-law, while Virgie, as soon as she could recover sufficient strength and composure to make the effort, also wrote a long letter to Sir William.

She told him everything, just as if she had not written to him before---how his letters had suddenly ceased, and how she had waited and hoped to hear from him until she had grown weary and heart-sick from his long silence.

She told of her meeting with the Farnums, and of the wretched story she had just learned from the elder lady. She begged him for but one word of contradiction, and she would believe in him and wait patiently for his own time for coming to her. But if the terrible tale was true---if he had deceived her from the first, and had cheated her and her father into believing that he was making her really his wife, when it had been only a farce, to tell her plainly, and she would never trouble him again.

When the letter was finished she went out and posted it herself, to insure its going by the first steamer, and then she tried to school herself to wait patiently for a reply.

But in a day or two she became conscious of a change in the inmates of the house toward her. Ladies whom she knew met and passed her with a cold nod, and a bold stare, which brought a scarlet flush to her cheeks. Some, indeed, did not deign to recognize her at all. The servants were less attentive, almost rude, the clerk and proprietor distant and reserved.

Too well she understood what it all meant, and there was but one way to account for the sudden change in the atmosphere which surrounded her.

Mrs. Farnum, the only one in the house who could possibly know anything regarding her history, must have given some hint of her apparently questionable position.

But there was no redress, for she would not humiliate herself enough to ask an explanation; so she could only submit in silence, and bear it with what fortitude she could summon to her aid, while she was waiting to hear from her husband.

But she endured agonies during the time, and the days dragged, oh, so heavily by.

She remained closely in her own rooms, seeing no one save the servants and her own nurse, and devoting herself to the care of her little one.

At last the day that she had set for a letter to come arrived, and she grew feverish, almost hysterical while waiting for the mail to be delivered.

She heard the clerk going his rounds; he stopped at Mrs. Farnum's door to leave something, and then came on toward her door. Her heart stood still as he approached. He passed by---there was nothing for her, and her heart was almost broken.

She sent the nurse down to the office to ask if there was not some mistake---if Mrs. Heath's mail had not been overlooked.

"No, there are no letters for *Mrs. Heath*," the man answered, with a peculiar emphasis on the name, and an insolent laugh, that made the woman very angry.

When she related the circumstance to Virgie, she threw up her arms, with a gesture of despair, and cried out:

"Oh! what shall I do?"

She appeared stunned, crushed, and the kind-hearted creature who served her, and who, of course, had known that something was wrong, was extremely anxious about her.

She begged that she might be allowed to send for Dr. Knox; but Virgie refused, with a shudder. She could not bear the thought of the good physician learning the story of her desertion and shame, for such, she began to feel, must be the true construction to be put upon Sir William's long absence and silence.

A little later there came a tap upon her door. She sent the nurse to answer it, and heard some one say:

"Mrs. Farnum's compliments, and she would like Mrs. Heath to read these, and then return them to her."

The nurse shut the door, and then came to Virgie, with a letter and paper in her hand.

For an instant she thought it might be a letter for her, and she seized it with an eager cry.

But no; it was addressed to Mrs. Farnum, though it bore the Heathdale postmark, and was in the handwriting of Lady Linton.

Virgie grew deathly white, and clutched at her throat, for it seemed as if she were suffocating.

Then she mastered her emotion, and crept away to her chamber to read the letter, for she felt that it contained some fatal news, and she wished no one to witness her suffering as she read it.

With it convulsively clasped in her hands, she fell upon her knees and sobbed:

"Oh, Heaven, spare me deeper sorrow! oh, do not confirm my shame!"

It was some time before she could compose herself enough to read that fatal missive, but at length she unfolded it and began to peruse it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dear Myra," the letter began, "you may be surprised by the contents of this, but I cannot bring myself to address that person by the name which she claims, and so feel compelled to ask you to oblige me by giving her a message, or, perhaps what would be better, allow her to read this letter for herself. My brother is away from home just now, and, as my custom is in his absence, I open all letters of a private nature, and act as I judge best regarding them. The wildest epistle imaginable came to him yesterday and I was thankful that he was away, for he is so very happy that it must have shocked him exceedingly and I shall need to communicate its contents very delicately to him.

"That girl of whom you wrote me in your last actually claims to be his lawful wife---believes it, I suppose, poor child---and cannot understand how utterly impossible it would be for any one belonging to an old and honorable family like ours to ally himself with one so low in the social scale. I am shocked that my brother should have been guilty of anything so out of character as she represents while he was abroad. I am sincerely sorry for the wrong which it appears he has done her, if what she says is true, and shall insist that he provide comfortably for her for the future; but, of course, the idea that she has a right to come here as mistress is preposterous, and I trust that you will make it appear so to her. Advise her to renounce at once all claim to the name, and settle quietly in some place where she is not known, and

perhaps she may be able to bring up her child in a respectable way, so that its prospects will not be hampered in the future by its mother's mistake.

"Will and Margie returned while I was writing to you, and both look so well and happy that it does my heart good to see them. Of course I had to stop for awhile, but now I will try and finish my letter. I have had a serious talk with my brother, and he appears to feel very much troubled over his American escapade, confessed that he had done wrong, and gave me this hundred pound note, which I inclose for the benefit of the girl; and I sincerely trust she will do nothing more to disturb a happy household, and one which will be very much annoyed by any useless scandal."

There followed a little more pertaining in an indifferent way to the above household, but Virgie had read enough, and the letter fell from her nerveless fingers, while she sat staring vacantly before her, her brain almost turned by the heartless words she had just read, her heart broken with its weight of woe, while a feeling of utter wretchedness and desolation made her long for death to steep her senses in oblivion.

She forgot all about the paper which had been given her with the letter, while the hundred-pound note, which had been inclosed with it, had fluttered out unheeded as she drew it from the envelope, and now lay upon the floor at her feet.

Later she examined the paper, and found a notice of the marriage of William Heath and Margaret Stanhope. Whether Lady Linton had been the cause of it to further her schemes, or whether some strange fatality had occasioned the mistake, it would be difficult to say, but the paragraph read:

"Married:---On the 28th instant, in the Heath Chapel, Sir William Heath, of Heathdale, to Miss Margaret Stanhope, only daughter of the late Sidney Stanhope."

Thus was added the last drop to the cup of bitterness which Virgie had to drink.

There had been a strange mixture of truth and falsehood in the letter which Lady Linton wrote to Mrs. Farnum.

Her brother was away for a day or two on a matter of business when Virgie's imploring epistle arrived---a circumstance for which his sister was most thankful, for it was no trifling matter for her to be always on the alert to intercept the letters that passed, through the bag at Heathdale. But she had succeeded in accomplishing this by having had an extra key made for the lock and always accompanying the carriage when it went for the mail.

This drive she called her "constitutional," and as the carriage was a closed one, she could readily unlock the bag and abstract the letters she wanted without being seen, and consequently was never suspected of having anything to do with the interrupted correspondence of Sir William and Virgie.

She had also been interrupted while writing to Mrs. Farnum by the return of her brother and the entrance of her cousin's new wife. Afterward she had had a talk with Sir William, in which he confessed to feeling greatly "troubled" regarding Virgie and her long, unaccountable silence. He said he felt that he had "done wrong" to have left her so long, for, as it had proved, his mother was gradually though slowly improving, and he might have gone and returned without affecting her health; he should see Sir Herbert Randal when he came again, and make arrangements to sail immediately for America. But Lady Linton cunningly provided against this calamity by privately informing the physician that her mother was worrying over this threatened departure, and he succeeded in prevailing upon the baronet to wait a week or two longer.

Sir William had, indeed, given his sister a hundred-pound note, but it was for the benefit of a poor girl who had been crippled by a railway accident; and thus all these circumstances being artfully woven into her letter had something of

truth in them, and helped to serve the scheming woman's purpose.

## Chapter XVIII.

### "I Will Prove It."

It was very fortunate for Virgie that she had a little one at this time, else she would have deemed life scarcely worth the living, so stunned and crushed was she by the terrible blow that had fallen upon her.

For two long hours, after reading that letter from Lady Linton, and the paper containing that paragraph of William Heath's marriage, she lay as if paralyzed upon her bed. One would hardly believe that she lived at all, but for that look of unutterable woe in her eyes and the expression of agony about her mouth.

But she was aroused at last to a sense of her duties and responsibilities as a mother, by the crying of little Virgie in the outer room; and yet that cry was like another dagger plunged into her heart, for it reminded her that, if the dreadful things which she had been told were true, her whole future was dishonored---that she was a betrayed and deserted woman and her child nameless.

"Oh, Heaven! it cannot be!" she cried, lifting her arms with a gesture of despair and locking her fingers in a convulsive clasp above her head, while her mind went back over the past and reviewed every event that had occurred since the beginning of her acquaintance with Sir William Heath.

She had believed in him so thoroughly, he had seemed so noble and true, so entirely above all deception and double dealing. He had appeared to love her so devotedly, had been so proud of her as the future mistress of his beautiful home, and so supremely happy in the anticipation of the coming of their little one. He had hoped for a son and heir, and yet he had expressed no disappointment upon learning that their child was a daughter; he had welcomed the little stranger most tenderly in his letter and fondly named her, to please himself, for her mother.

He had seemed so impatient and regretful at the thought of leaving her so long alone, and had promised to come to her the moment that he could safely leave his mother.

All this made it very difficult for Virgie to believe in his apparent perfidy and treachery, and yet the evidence against him seemed so overwhelming that she was convinced in spite of herself.

She did not dream of a plot against her, for she could not conceive of any motive for one; but his letters had suddenly ceased and she could not believe accident had caused it, when she had written again and again telling him of it and pleading for but a word from him.

Then she had heard that story of the engagement to Margaret Stanhope, then the account of the marriage at Heathdale, by Lady Linton, who appeared entirely ignorant of her existence even; and taking all this into consideration, together with the notice which had appeared in the paper sent to Mrs. Farnum she felt obliged to accept the fact of Sir William's intentional treachery and desertion.

Yet in the face of everything she clung to the conviction that she was a lawful wife---that her child was the heiress of Heathdale; but the difficulty was to prove it.

"Prove it? *I will prove it,*" she cried, and at once all that was resolute in Virginia Heath's character began to struggle to assert itself, and she went forth from her chamber, at that cry from little Virgie, with an unflinching purpose written upon

her heart.

The nurse cried out in alarm as she saw her white face and sunken eyes.

"You are ill, madam," she exclaimed. "Go back to bed---the baby will do well enough with me."

"No, I am not ill," Virgie answered, as she took her little one, but she spoke in a strained, unnatural tone, adding, "I would like you to go to Mrs. Farnum's door and say that I desire a 'few moments' interview with her."

The woman went to do her bidding, but muttered with a troubled look:

"These English people seem to bring nothing but sorrow and mischief to the poor thing, in spite of their sweet ways and honeyed speeches; I wish they'd clear out---and whatever her husband can mean to leave her here alone so long and not a line to tell her why is more'n I can make out."

Mrs. Farnum obeyed Virgie's request with some misgivings; but she saw at once upon entering the room that the young wife believed the very worst, and she was half frightened at the result of her work.

Virgie arose as she entered, her baby clasped close in her arms, and handed her the letter which she had sent her to read.

"Here is your letter, Mrs. Farnum," she said, with a cold dignity that awed her visitor, "and you will find the note inclosed with it. Please be particular to have it returned to the one who sent it."

"But, my dear, will you not need it yourself?" interrupted the woman with assumed kindness.

Virgie's lips curled.

"It was an unpardonable insult to offer it to me," she said, with spirit. "I cannot understand how they dared to send it to me in any such way; indeed, I cannot understand a good many things that have come to me through you. If Sir William Heath has wilfully done me this irreparable injury he might at least have been man enough to strike the blow himself, rather than employ women to be his emissaries."

Mrs. Farnum winced.

"Ah! but you forget---"

"I forget nothing; do you suppose that I could?" cried Virgie, sharply, "but I might at least have been spared this last indignity---to offer me a paltry hundred pounds when he has a fortune in his hands belonging to me."

"A fortune! I did not suppose---I did not know that you had any money," stammered Mrs. Farnum, looking blank.

"My father left me a good many thousands of dollars when he died; it was all settled upon me at the time of my marriage, but Sir William Heath took charge of it and has it now. He deposited five thousand dollars in a bank here for my use, while he should be away, and the most of that remains; but there is much more that rightly belongs to me," Virgie explained.

"Then this hundred pounds surely is your due," Mrs. Farnum said, as she drew it from the envelope and held it out to the young wife.

Virgie drew back haughtily.

"Do you suppose that I would accept as charity a paltry sum like that?---for Lady Linton sent it as such, and as a sort of remuneration for what I suffer. It is an outrage which I cannot brook, and I am amazed at the audacity that prompted it."

So was Mrs. Farnum amazed, and she saw at once that Lady Linton had unwittingly committed a great blunder. She had never dreamed that Virgie had had money at the time of her marriage, and she imagined that Lady Linton was also ignorant that her brother had taken back to England a fortune belonging to the girl whom they were thus seeking to wrong.

Matters were getting complicated, and she almost wished that she had never allowed herself to become involved in them.

"You should have kept your marriage certificate," she faltered, "every wife should do that---then you could have proved your claim."

"I shall prove it yet," Virgie declared, in a clear, decisive voice. "Do you imagine I am going to sit tamely down and allow a stigma to rest upon this innocent child if there is any power on earth to prevent it? In spite of all that you have told me, or all that your friends have written, I *know* that I am Sir William Heath's lawful wife. If he committed a rash and impulsive act, and one which he regrets now, while he was in America and while he was bound by other ties in England *he* must suffer the consequences. I cannot understand how he has *dared* to perpetrate such a farce, were he a thousand times engaged to Miss Stanhope; how he has dared to so wrong and compromise one of his own countrywomen, for, just so sure as we both live, it will all be exposed sooner or later. All this I will do for the sake of my child; then----"

"Then?" repeated Mrs. Farnum, leaning eagerly toward the resolute girl.

"Then *I* will repudiate *him*. I will never look upon his face again. I will give him his freedom---will divorce myself from him; and then, if the woman who now believes herself to be his wife wishes it, or will accept it, he can make the tie between them legal."

"You will obtain a divorce?" said her companion, with an exultant thrill.

This was something she had never thought of before. She and Lady Linton had both hoped to estrange this fond couple, then make Sir William believe in his wife's infidelity, and work upon his feelings and pride until he should be willing to seek a divorce; but they had never imagined that Virgie would be the one to suggest such a measure. Such a proceeding on her part would wonderfully facilitate matters, and Mrs. Farnum, who a few minutes previous began to be disheartened, was greatly encouraged.

"Exactly," Virgie replied. "Do you imagine that I desire to hold Sir William Heath unwillingly bound to me? Do you think that I would ever have consented to become his wife if I had known that any one had a prior claim upon him? But, are you sure that he was engaged to Miss Stanhope before he came to America?" the young wife asked, as doubt again arose in her mind.

"Yes; Will and Margie have been betrothed for years---ten, at least, I should say. Did you not read it for yourself in Lady Linton's letter?" Mrs. Farnum returned; but there was a vivid flush on her cheek as she told the wretched lie, even while she was literally speaking the truth.

A convulsion of pain passed over Virgie's face.

"True; but it is all so strange," she said, wearily. "And I suppose---she loves him?"

"I believe her life would be ruined if anything should happen to part them," said the woman, ruthlessly.

Any icy shiver ran over Virgie from head to foot, and a low moan escaped her lips.

No one cared for *her* ruined life; it was nothing that *she* was parted forever from the man she adored.

"I will not part them," she said, in a hollow tone; "*but---*"

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Farnum, with a painful thrill, as she paused on the word, with a threatening intonation.

"A day of reckoning will surely come for him," Virgie answered, firmly; "for, if this child lives, she will one day make her appearance at Heathdale and claim her heritage. There may be other children, but she will have the first right there. Tell your Lady Linton this---tell her that 'that girl,' of whom she wrote so slightly and heartlessly, will live to educate her child for her position as the mistress of her 'proud ancestral home;' tell her to warn her brother that the day of retribution will not fail to overtake him."

Virgie was regally beautiful as she stood there before her enemy and pronounced this stern prophecy. There was not an atom of color in her face, but her figure was drawn proudly erect, a sort of majesty in every graceful curve, while there was a resolute, inflexible purpose in every line of her beautiful features, and her eyes burned with a steady, relentless fire which told that, if she lived, she would accomplish her vow, let the cost be what it would.

Mrs. Farnum, woman of the world though she was, felt cowed and abashed before her, and when, without waiting for a reply, the wronged wife turned from her and walked, with a firm, unflinching step, into her chamber, shutting the door after her, she slunk away to her own room, feeling like the guilty thing she was, and trembling for the future if it should ever be discovered what part she had played in the plot to ruin Virginia Heath's happiness.

She was dismayed by the young mother's last words. At first she felt triumphant when she had spoken of her intention of obtaining a divorce, for such a measure would simplify matters greatly; it would relieve Lady Linton from the disagreeable task of trying to persuade her brother to adopt such a course, and thus he would be free, without any effort of his own, to wed whom he chose, and she had reckoned upon Sadie being the favored one.

But she had not taken into consideration the fact that Virgie's child would have a claim upon Heathdale; no divorce would affect her right there, if the legality of Sir William's marriage to Virgie could be proved, and thus endless trouble, to say nothing of the scandal the story would create, might ensue.

Still, there were a hundred "ifs" and possibilities in the way. Virgie might not be able to get satisfactory proofs; the child might not live; she might not live herself to accomplish her object; and she finally resolved to try to be satisfied with the success of her plot thus far, and not trouble herself about future developments. But that pale, beautiful face, with that resolute yet heart-broken look upon it, haunted her for years afterward. She was deeply thankful that Sadie was not there to see it, and she was resolved that they should not meet again.

That evening Virgie was waited upon by the proprietor of the house, who, with much stammering and many apologies, informed her that he was obliged to request her to vacate the rooms that she was occupying.

She understood instantly, but her proud spirit rebelled against this last indignity, and she arose and stood before him in all the majesty of her insulted womanhood.

"Sir! Mr. Eldridge! you will please explain this very extraordinary request," she said, meeting his eyes with a steady glance.

Mr. Eldridge hemmed, looked embarrassed, and remarked with all the blandness he could assume:

"Really, Mrs. ----, madam, I regret to pain you, and it might be as well to avoid explanations."

"No, sir; that is impossible; my husband left me here with the understanding that I should remain here until he came for me, and there must therefore be some very urgent reason for such a strange proceeding on your part."

"Yes, madam," said the man, driven to the wall. "---I---I have been informed that---that you are not Mrs. Heath at all; that the gentleman who brought you here was not what he represented himself to be."

"What authority have you for making such a statement Virgie demanded, haughtily:

"This," answered the hotel keeper, producing the paper containing the notice of the marriage at Heathdale which Mrs. Farnum had slyly laid upon his desk, with the marked paragraph uppermost. She was very careful, however, not to appear in the matter to commit herself.

She had determined to get Virgie away before Sadie's return from Coney Island, while she feared, too, the coming of Sir William to investigate the cause of his wife's long silence.

One glance was sufficient to tell Virgie what paper it was, and she flushed to her brow.

"I see," she said, scornfully, "those who have professed to be my friends are leagued against me."

"But---pardon me---have you no doubts yourself regarding your position?" questioned the landlord, feeling a deep pity for the beautiful woman, in spite of his anxiety regarding the reputation of his house.

"None," but the word came hoarsely from the now hueless lips.

"But you have had no letters for a long time; the gentleman has for years been engaged to an English lady; this paper gives a notice of his recent marriage to her, and everything goes to prove that you have been grossly deceived. It is very unfortunate, but I have received notice from several of my guests that they will leave to-morrow morning unless I insist upon this change, and thus it becomes my painful duty to request these rooms to be vacated."

This was a bitter blow to add to all the rest, but Virgie, conscious of her own purity, bore it with Spartan-like heroism.

She cast one look of scorn upon the man before her, then said, with a calmness that was born of despair:

"Sir, I still assert, in the face of all that you have just said, that I am the wife of Mr.---yes, of Sir William Heath, of Heathdale, Hampshire County, England and some day it will be in my power to prove to you the truth of my words; but I have no wish to occasion you either trouble or loss, so I will go away; to-morrow morning."

The landlord looked greatly relieved at this assurance and yet he was impressed both by her manner and her words.

He assured her of his sympathy, and kindly offered to assist her in obtaining other rooms and establishing herself in them.

Virgie quietly declined this offer, however, and, thanking her for her speedy compliance with his request Mr. Eldridge took his leave, though, to his credit be it said, with considerable shamefacedness and embarrassment.

The next morning Virgie sent to Dr. Knox for his bill, paid it, dismissed her nurse, notwithstanding her urgent plea to be retained even at reduced wages, and then she quietly disappeared from the place, leaving no trace behind her to point to her destination or future plans, and, after the gossip consequent upon such a choice bit of scandal had died away, she was, for the time at least, forgotten.

## Chapter XIX.

### Sir William Heath Returns To America.

"I cannot understand it, Miriam. It is the strangest thing in the world, and I shall sail for America on the very next steamer."

It was Sir William Heath who spoke thus, and there was no mistaking the decision in his voice.

He was sitting at the breakfast-table in the large, sunny dining-room at Heathdale, while the open and empty mail-bag lay upon the table beside him.

There were several letters scattered around his plate, but these were unheeded, while the anxious, perplexed look on the baronet's fine face told that he was deeply troubled about something.

Lady Linton sat opposite him, and she had been furtively watching him during his examination of the bag. There were two very bright spots upon her cheeks, which *might* have been caused by her morning drive to the post-office; or they might have been produced by a guilty conscience and anxiety regarding her brother's announcement.

"Then there is no letter for you this morning?" she remarked, trying to appear unconcerned.

"No; and I am nearly wild with anxiety. I *must* go to Virgie at once," Sir William responded, moodily.

"I do not know how mamma will bear the thought of your going," Lady Linton said, looking grave.

"It cannot harm her. Sir Herbert says she is doing very well, and I might have gone last week but for the severe cold which she took. I must go, Miriam. My wife is more to me than all the world, and this unaccountable silence and suspense is unbearable. I am afraid something dreadful has happened to her, for, just think, I have not heard one word from her since she wrote me after the birth of our little one."

"Why don't you cable, then? I am going in town this morning, and I will send a message for you, if you wish," craftily suggested his sister, who felt very uncomfortable at the thought of his starting off so suddenly: for he might meet his wife just at the very moment when success was about to crown her plans.

She had heard from Mrs. Farnum only once since her *coup d'etat*, when she had given an account of that last interview with the heart-broken wife. The letter had been posted that same day, for the woman had not hoped that Virgie would leave the house so quickly, even though she knew she was going to be asked to do so; and as she knew her friend would be anxious to learn the result of her last measure, and as a steamer was to sail the next morning, she had written immediately.

"I suppose you might cable and get a reply before a steamer sails," murmured Sir William, thoughtfully. "It does not seem as if I could wait even the time it would take for me to get to her."

"I suppose you *are* very anxious. It is natural that you should be," responded Lady Linton, as she broke an egg into her cup and busied herself seasoning it, although she did not even taste it after it was prepared. Excitement and anxiety had destroyed her appetite.

Two or three times every week, of late, there had been just such a scene as this when the mail came in after the arrival of a steamer.

No letters came from Virgie. At least, *he* received none; for they were all cunningly abstracted before the bag came into the house, and Sir William did not dream that any one possessed a key to it save himself, and so, of course was unsuspecting of any plot.

It was simply unaccountable to him, and he was, as he said, almost wild from anxiety on account of his dear ones.

He could not touch his food this morning, his disappointment was so great, and he nervously unfolded his paper and began to look for an announcement of the sailing of some steamer.

"The Cephalaria will sail on Saturday," he remarked, at length. "This is Wednesday. I shall leave on Friday for Liverpool. You can break the news to my mother, and I am sure you will do very well without me until my return. She must strive to be reasonable, for I cannot live like this another week."

"Very well; I will do my best to keep her cheerful while you are gone," returned Lady Linton, trying to appear at ease, although she was quaking in mortal fear lest all her plotting should come to naught.

She sometimes regretted having written that last letter and sent that hundred pounds to Virgie. She began to fear that she might have overreached herself by so doing, for, if her brother and his wife should meet, Virgie would of course tell her husband everything, and he would at once understand that his sister had been guilty of all the mischief---intercepted letters, and all. She knew that he would never forgive her; she would be ignominiously banished from Heathdale, and be obliged to hide herself at Linton Grange, where she would lead a life of poverty and seclusion; so it is not strange that she trembled at the thought of Sir William sailing for America.

"Shall you return at once?" she asked, as they arose from the table.

"Just as soon as I can possibly arrange to do so; and, Miriam, I want no pains spared to make the home-coming of my wife an agreeable one."

"You shall be obeyed," Lady Linton replied, with downcast eyes and a heavily throbbing heart; "but of course you will let me know when to expect you."

"Certainly; and the suite of rooms over the library are to be put in order for Virgie."

"Very well; I will speak to the housekeeper about it."

"You will mention, too, for *whom* they are being prepared," Sir William said, glancing sharply at his sister. "It must be known at once that I have a wife and child. I have made a great mistake in allowing you to persuade me to keep silence upon the subject so long."

"But it was for mamma's sake, you know; while she was so ill it was better not to have it talked about," apologized Lady Linton; but she mentally resolved that she should be in no hurry to tell the secret, even if he had ordered her to do so, at least until she was sure her brother would find his wife.

Something might prevent his bringing Virgie home, and in that case a scandal would be avoided if she kept silence. She would wait, at least, until he notified her of the date of his return.

"It was a mistake, I tell you," Sir William repeated, with a clouded brow. "It has been a mark of disloyalty to my wife which I will tolerate no longer. So please do as I request."

Lady Linton bowed.

"Shall I cable for you?" she asked, after a moment of silence. "I shall be in London most of the day, and perhaps I may be able to get a reply to bring you on my return."

"No, thanks; I, too, shall go in town to-day, to engage my passage, and I will attend to the matter myself," Sir William replied, and the heart of the schemer sank within her.

She had intended to cable to Mrs. Farnum, and, if Virgie was still at the hotel, authorize her to use any strategy to get her away before her brother should arrive, and then send her a dispatch to suit the emergency.

But, if he cabled himself, and received an answer from his wife, she had the very worst to fear for herself.

They went up to London on the same train, and Lady Linton suffered agonies during that ride, and all day long, while she was shopping, her suspense was terrible to her.

But when she entered the station, late in the afternoon, to return to Heathdale, she was both startled and relieved to find her brother already there, and pacing back and forth outside the waiting-room in great excitement.

"Have you news, William?" she faltered, her heart beating almost to suffocation.

"Yes," he answered, in a strained unnatural tone. "Here, read this!" and he thrust a cablegram into her trembling hands.

She had hardly strength to unfold the paper, but her pulses bounded with exultation as she read:

New York, Aug. 10, 18--.

"To Sir William Heath, London:

"Lady Heath left the ----- House on the 2d instant. Do not know her address.

Eldred Edlbridge."

Mr. Eldridge, as we know, was the proprietor of the hotel where Virgie had been boarding during her husband's absence, and we can imagine something of his consternation when he received Sir William's cable dispatch inquiring for his wife, and realized, all too late, the enormity of the insult he had offered to that lady.

Lady Linton, however, had hard work to conceal her joy over the contents of the message.

Virgie had been gone for more than a week, leaving no clew to her whereabouts, which was evidence enough that she believed the very worst of her husband, imagined herself a dishonored and deserted woman, and had doubtless buried herself in some remote corner where no one would be likely to discover her.

Lady Linton's plot had worked thus far beyond her most sanguine expectations and she accepted her success as an omen of good for the future.

But she hid all this under a mask of well-assumed surprise.

"What can it mean? Why should she leave the hotel where you left her?" she inquired of her brother.

"Oh, I do not know. There is something wrong---very mysterious---about it. Oh, why is there not a steamer ready to sail this instant? I believe I shall go mad with this delay!" cried the baronet, in an agony of fear and suspense.

But he had to wait until Saturday in spite of his suffering though he had not even gone from Heathdale two hours when Lady Linton received a letter bearing the United States postmark.

Of course it was from Mrs. Farnum, who gave a detailed account of all that had transpired regarding Virgie's sudden departure, and assuring her that no one in the hotel suspected her agency in the matter, or had any idea that she knew anything regarding the girl previous to her coming there. They did not even know that she was from England; she confided that fact to Virgie alone, simply to further her schemes regarding her.

Lady Linton uttered a sigh of relief over this letter. Her brother would not find his wife in New York, and his journey would be all in vain, she told herself, and yet she would not feel at ease until she had him safely at home again.

Sir William thought the voyage across the Atlantic would never end, and yet it was a very quick and prosperous passage. When the steamer touched her pier in New York he was the first of all the eager passengers to spring ashore, and rushing for a carriage, without even stopping to attend to his baggage, he gave orders to be driven directly to the hotel where he had left Virgie.

Mr. Eldridge quaked visibly and grew deadly pale when Sir William suddenly presented himself in his office and demanded of him the reason of his wife leaving his house.

The polite hotel-keeper's blandness all failed him for once, and, with much stammering and confusion, with many apologies and excuses, he confessed that there had arisen a rumor---how he could not say---to the effect that the lady was not Mrs. Heath at all, that her supposed husband was an English nobleman who had deceived her; that his patrons had insisted upon her leaving, or they would; and thus, after a hint from him as to how matters stood, she had quietly gone away.

Sir William was furious at this, and the landlord was actually frightened at the tempest his story had aroused.

"And you allowed such a malicious slander to drive a delicate and unprotected woman and her child homeless into the street?" cried the baronet, with sublime scorn.

"Ah, sir, I was helpless. The honor of my house must be sustained, and there was so much evidence to make the story appear true," said the man deprecatingly.

"Evidence! What do you mean?" demanded the angry husband.

"You had registered as 'Mr. Heath and lady.' I learned that you were an English baronet."

"Yes, but what of that? I simply wished to escape being conspicuous, and I had a right to register as I chose."

"Then there was a story that you had taken another wife in England, shortly after leaving America."

"And were you idiot enough to believe such a contemptible slander, when I brought her here and established her as my honored wife? Did I ever treat her with anything but reverence and respect?" thundered Sir William, growing more and more indignant.

"No, sir," confessed the unhappy proprietor, as he drew a paper from his desk; "but when you read a notice that I have here you may not wonder so much at the credulity of people; besides, there were no letters coming from you to the lady."

"No letters!" cried the baronet, in a startled tone.

"No, sir, although madam wrote to you with every steamer, and seemed sad and depressed to get nothing in return."

The baronet was astounded.

It all looked as if there was some treachery at work to ruin their happiness; but Sir William racked his brain in vain to solve the riddle.

He had received no letters from his wife; she had had none from him; and, with that dreadful scandal and rumor to crush her, to say nothing of having been driven from the shelter with which he had provided her, what must she not have suffered?

"Will you read this notice, sir?" Mr. Eldridge asked, pushing the paper nearer to the baronet, and desiring to intrench himself behind as many bulwarks as possible.

Sir William bent forward and read it, and he did not wonder then, that Virgie had felt herself the most wronged of women.

He knew that it had been intended as the announcement of his cousin's marriage with Margaret Stanhope, but a grave mistake had been made in prefixing the young man's name with a title, thus making it appear that it was the baronet who had been married.

Virgie did not know that he had a relative by the same name, so, of course, taking everything else into consideration, she must have believed that he had been false to all honor, to his manhood, and to her.

He groaned aloud.

"Oh, what must she have thought of me!" he cried, in despair. Then, turning to the proprietor of the hotel, he asked, "Where did you get this paper?"

It was the Hampshire County *Journal*, and he wondered how it could have got to New York to accomplish so much mischief.

"I cannot say, sir. I found it in my office here among other papers, and---and you must confess that such a notice as that was sufficient to stagger me when I read it."

"Yes," Sir William admitted, white to his lips, "and yet it was heartless to send her away. It was my cousin---a gentleman bearing the same name---who was married; but some one made a mistake and added my title. Did *she* see that notice?"

"She appeared to know about it, sir."

"It seems as if an enemy had done this to ruin our happiness; but who?" groaned the miserable husband.

Chapter XX.

Sir William Finds A Trace Of Virgie.

Sir William asked, a little later, when he had succeeded in somewhat recovering his composure:

"And have you no idea whither my wife went after leaving here?"

"No," Mr. Eldridge said. "I offered to find some nice, quiet place for her, but she simply thanked me and declined my offer. She then ordered a carriage and drove away, without giving any definite directions regarding her destination---at least, in my hearing."

The proprietor was careful not to state that he had been so relieved by the departure of his then questionable guest that he had taken no pains to ascertain her plans, being only too glad to be quit of her upon any terms, and to thus preserve the honor of his house and retain the patronage of its other occupants.

Sir William then repaired to the office of Dr. Knox, the physician in whose care he had left his wife, hoping to glean something from him. But that gentleman knew nothing whatever of what had occurred, and appeared greatly surprised by what the young husband told him.

He simply stated what we already knew---that Mrs. Heath had sent him a note saying that she was about leaving the city and wished to settle her bill, and requested him to call for the amount. He had done so, and she had paid him in full.

He said that his time was limited, and he had only remained a few moments. He thought she was looking rather pale and worn; but she said she was well, and, being calm and self-possessed, he did not imagine that she was in any trouble.

It was evident that from this source Sir William could gain nothing to aid him in his search for his wife.

He then tried to discover the nurse who had been with her, but she was not to be found at her usual address, and no one could tell him anything about her.

He went to the bank where he had deposited money for Virgie's use, but disappointment awaited him here also. He was told that she had sent word one morning that on a certain day she would need the whole amount due her. She had called according to her appointment, receiving her money, and that was all that was known there regarding her movements.

Sir William was in despair. Failure met him on every hand, and he feared the worst for his loved ones.

He remained in New York for more than a month, searching the city from end to end, employing detectives advertising in the papers, and using every means he could think of to gain some clew to Virgie's hiding-place; but all to no purpose; and he finally came to the conclusion that she must have left the metropolis. But whither had she gone? He knew that she had not a friend on this side of the Rocky Mountains; it was all a strange country to her.

Would she be likely to remain East and hide herself and her supposed shame in some obscure place, or would she wander back to the Pacific coast, where everything would be more familiar and home-like to her?

These questions agitated his mind continually, and for a while he knew not which way to turn, while he was growing both weary and heart-sick with his fruitless search.

Finally he decided that he would go again to her old home among the mountains of Nevada. He might possibly learn something of her there.

He reached the place just a year from the day of his departure with Virgie, and a feeling of utter desolation, almost of despair, took possession of him as he wandered here and there over the familiar ground visiting the grave of Mr. Abbot, and peering in at the cottage where he had first met his love, but where only strange faces now met his gaze.

Everything looked the same as when he left, but evidently no one knew anything about his wife; he learned that from the eager inquiries, which met him on every side, for the beautiful girl whom he had taken away with him.

He answered and evaded them as well as he could, without betraying that he was in any trouble, but he was deeply disappointed to find that Chi Lu had left the place.

He was told that he had left very suddenly, but came back after a time, when he disposed of his cabin that Sir William had given him, and then disappeared altogether.

The baronet sought out Margery Follet, and was impressed the moment that he saw her that she had something on her mind.

She eyed him with suspicion, seemed averse to holding any conversation with him, and never once inquired regarding his wife.

This alone made the young baronet hope that she knew something of Virgie, for, having been at her wedding, and afterward assisted her in many ways during Mr. Abbott's last illness, it would have been but natural for her to wish to know something about her.

By adroitly questioning her he became convinced of the truth of his suspicion, and finally he charged her outright with having recently seen his wife.

The woman stammered, blushed, and finally assumed a defiant attitude, and Sir William was sure.

He then told her something of his trouble, enjoining her to secrecy, and finally she confessed that one day Chi Lu had come to her and persuaded her to go with him before the county magistrate to sign a paper stating that she had been a witness to the marriage of Miss Abbot with Mr. Heath. Chi Lu had given her a handsome sum for her trouble and to keep silent about the matter afterward.

This confession gave Sir William great hope. It told him that Virgie had been in that vicinity; that she was gathering what proofs she could toward establishing the legality of her marriage, with a view to claiming her rights as a lawful wife.

He was very much elated over the discovery, and at once repaired to the county town, to seek out the magistrate and learn what he could from him.

That gentleman confirmed what he had already learned. He said that several weeks previous a young woman had come there to obtain a copy of the record of a certain marriage, and that afterward a Chinaman and an elderly woman had signed a paper in his presence, testifying to having been witnesses of the ceremony.

Sir William reasoned that, since Virgie was seeking all these proofs, she would doubtless apply to the clergyman who had married them; so to Virginia City he straightway hastened, to seek the Rev. Dr. Thornton.

He found him readily enough. The clergyman appeared to be in feeble health, and received him with coldness and evident displeasure.

"I suppose you are somewhat at a loss how to account for my visit, Dr. Thornton," he remarked, in his genial way, and ignoring the frigidness of his host's greeting; "but I have come to make some important inquiries of you."

The reverend gentleman simply bowed, and then waited for his guest to proceed.

"You will be surprised that I have lost my wife and am searching for her," the baronet continued, thinking it best to come to the point at once.

"Which one?" demanded the divine, with an accent of scorn in his usually mild tones.

"Sir!"

"For which wife are you searching?"

"I have but one wife---the lady to whom you married me only a little more than a year ago!" Sir William replied in a voice of thunder, his handsome face flaming with righteous anger, though his heart bounded with new hope at the question.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the clergyman replied, seeing at once that there was some mystery, and there must have been some fearful mistake to cause the separation of these two young people in whom he had been so deeply interested.

"You will understand my untimely sarcasm, perhaps," he went on, "when I tell you that I have been led to believe that you had done that beautiful woman the greatest possible wrong."

He then proceeded to explain all that he knew of the matter.

Mrs. Heath, he said, had come to him, about a month previous, to secure a written statement from him to the effect that he had performed the marriage ceremony in a legal and authorized manner between herself and Sir William Heath, of Heathdale, Hampshire County, England. She was looking very sad and ill, and she confided to him that she had been deserted by her husband in New York; he having been called to his home by a cablegram, ostensibly because of his mother's illness, but that she had learned of his marriage with another lady in England, and she feared that his union with

her might have been a farce. She had, however, learned to the contrary, and she was determined to gather all the proofs possible, for the purpose of securing the future rights and position of her child.

Sir William Heath listened in painful silence to this recital, and then in turn related all that he knew regarding the terrible misunderstanding and the mystery attending it.

"It looks to me very much as if there was a conspiracy in the matter, and a desire on the part of some one to separate you and your wife," Dr. Thornton remarked thoughtfully, when the young husband concluded.

"A conspiracy!" repeated Sir William.

"Yes; the fact that all letters, on both sides, have been intercepted, seems to point to such a suspicion. Have you any enemies who, from interested motives, would try to create trouble between you and your wife?"

"Not that I am aware of," the young man replied, but looking deeply perplexed. "My family, to be sure, were not very well pleased with the idea of my marrying an American; but I can think of no one person who could have accomplished anything like what has occurred. It seems to me that in order to intercept our letters there would need to be conspirators on both sides of the Atlantic who were interested in the project."

"Not necessarily. Any one determined to separate you might have robbed the mail of all letters at either end of the route. It is certainly very mysterious, and, mark my words, you will some day learn that an enemy has been at work. But, Sir William," the clergyman continued smiling genially, "you have relieved my mind and established my faith in you by this explanation. I confess I had set you down as a miserable scamp, and I have suffered a good deal on that beautiful young woman's account."

"I cannot blame you for thinking the very worst of me," returned Sir William, with emotion; "but I have loved--I do love my wife with a love that can never die."

"I do not doubt it now. Of course I gave her the paper she desired, and also a copy of the certificate which I presented you on your marriage day, and told her to command me at any time and I should be at her service to testify to the legality of her claims upon you."

"Thank you, sir. I am truly grateful to you for your kindness to my poor darling," said the baronet, tears springing to his eyes. "But can you give me any idea regarding her plans or movements?"

"No, I cannot, I am sorry to say," returned Doctor Thornton. "I asked her what course she intended to pursue, and she said, in the saddest voice I ever heard, 'I do not exactly know yet; I simply desire to establish the rightful claim of my daughter as the heiress of Heathdale.'"

"That looks as if she meant to go immediately to England!" cried Sir William, starting excitedly to his feet. "If she should do that, all would be well---everything will be explained, and we shall be happy once more."

"I cannot say that such was her plan," returned the clergyman, thoughtfully. "She looked scarcely able to endure such a journey. Still, it may be that such was her intention."

"Oh, if I only knew! Just think, sir, I have never even seen my child!" cried Sir William, greatly agitated.

"It is certainly very sad. It is greatly to be regretted that you were recalled to England as you were," said Doctor Thornton.

"Indeed it is. Why *did* I ever leave her? It was wrong! I fear I was negligent of my duty toward her in so doing. I do not know what to do now. If she has gone to England, we have passed each other, and I would desire to retrace my steps thither at once. If she is still here on this continent, I should be in despair to go home, and only find it out on the other side of the ocean."

Doctor Thornton pitied the young husband sincerely.

"You are in a very trying position, I must acknowledge, and I do not like to advise you either to go or stay. You might wait here a while, and notify your friends to cable you in case Lady Heath should go direct to England; then it would be comparatively easy to join her there."

Sir William determined to act upon these suggestions. He would cable Heathdale to be notified if Virgie should make her appearance there; meantime he would do his utmost to find her here.

He thanked the clergyman for his kindness, and bade him farewell, feeling much relieved regarding his wife, yet still very sad at heart at the mystery surrounding her.

He determined to search for Chi Lu, believing that he alone, who had always been so devoted to her, could tell him something definite as to her movements. He had an idea that he might be even now in her service.

Chapter XXI.

Nothing but Death Shall Break the Tie.

Sir William went directly back to New York, fired with something of hope by Doctor Thornton's suggestions. He determined to search the passenger lists of the different steamer lines, hoping to find Virgie's name among them.

He half believed that, armed with the strong proofs she had secured to substantiate the legality of her marriage, she would go directly to England to assert her position there as his wife.

He realized that underneath her habitual quiet and sweetness there lay a dignity and strength of character that would stop at nothing legitimate to remove the stigma she believed was resting on her fair name.

But while he gave her ample credit for resolution and energy, he did not make allowance for the sensitive pride which had been crushed to the earth by the cruel blow which had been dealt her. He did not stop to consider that it would never allow her to force herself upon him as an unloved and rejected wife when she believed a more fortunate rival stood in her way.

But he found nothing in any of the booking offices of the different steamers to tell him that Virgie had sailed, or was intending to sail, even though he haunted them daily for three or four weeks.

Almost discouraged at the end of that time, he cabled to his sister the following message:

"I have missed my wife---perhaps crossed her path.  
If she arrives at Heathdale, let me know at once."

Lady Linton was somewhat startled upon receiving this message, for it told her that her brother had some reason for thinking that Virgie might be on her way to Heathdale, and, remembering Mrs. Farnum's account of her threats to claim her position, she began to fear that she had underrated the girl's spirit, and that she might make her appearance at any moment and demand to be received as the mistress of the house.

This, of course, would make matters rather complicated and awkward; but, as long as her brother was not at home, she trusted to her own craft to deal with her and make her only too glad to give Heathdale a wide berth should she show herself there.

After cabling, Sir William went again to the Pacific coast, in the hope of finding Chi Lu. He spent several weeks in San Francisco, thinking perhaps those he sought might hope to lose themselves there among the multitude.

He thought right for once, had he but known it, and had he possessed a little more patience, been a trifle less restless and feverish in his search, he might have succeeded in his quest.

But he was so wretched; so worn and discouraged with his constant and fruitless seeking, that he could not remain in one place long at a time, and so wandered here and there, until, months having elapsed, he had been in nearly every State in the Union, reaping only disappointment and anguish of spirit.

Then there came again a summons for him to go home---his mother had been stricken with another shock, and, with a heavy heart, a feeling as if all the world were against him and his whole life ruined, he went back to his desolate home and the sick one there.

Lady Heath only lived a few days after the second return of her son. He reached Heathdale just in season to see the sands of her life run out and to close her eyes in their last long sleep; then they laid her in the family vault, and Sir William felt as if he had nothing now to bind him to his home.

"I cannot stay here---I must go away again he said one day, in despair, to his sister, and her heart sank at his words.

"Well, I hope you are not going to America again, whatever you do," she remarked, with some unpatience.

"If going to America would result in finding my wife, I would go a thousand times over," Sir William responded, sternly, and then added, with a note of agony in his voice: "Oh, where can my darling have hidden herself? Miriam," turning suddenly upon his sister, "can you suggest any reason for this terrible misunderstanding?---who could have intercepted all of our letters?---who could have conspired, for it seems like a conspiracy, to separate us?"

For a moment Lady Linton turned faint and sick with the fear that he had discovered something to arouse his suspicions against her; but second thought told her that such could not be the case.

"What could I suggest?" she demanded, assuming an expression of surprise. "You forget that I know nothing of this woman who lured your heart from us, save what I have been told. She may have had a rustic lover who is seeking his revenge by trying to separate you---a lover who has poisoned her mind against you, and perhaps won her allegiance back to himself."

"What utter nonsense you are talking, Miriam!" the baronet interrupted, indignantly. "How little you appreciate the refinement of the girl whom I have married! True, you have never seen her; but one look at the face that I have shown you ought to have told you that she could have been won by no rustic."

Lady Linton shrugged her shoulders expressively.

"As for your letters," she said, flashing a swift, keen glance at him, "if you think they have been tampered with on this side of the Atlantic, I advise you to question Robert, since he has the exclusive charge of your mail-bag."

"Robert, indeed! I would as soon question my own honesty as his; besides, no one has a key to it but myself," Sir William asserted, confidently.

Lady Linton breathed freely now, for it was evident that he had no suspicion of her.

"True; and Robert has been faithful too many years to be lightly suspected," she remarked, appreciatively.

"But this suspense is insupportable! It is killing me!" cried her brother, rising, and excitedly pacing the floor.

"No doubt it is trying," his sister replied, coldly.

"Trying!" he repeated, bitterly; "you are very sympathetic, Miriam; you are as cold as ice."

"Well, William, you know well enough that I never approved of your marriage. It was a great blow to both mamma and me that you should marry so out of your element; and therefore you cannot expect me to be so heart-broken over the mysterious disappearance of your wife as I might have been if you married---Sadie, for instance."

"I wish you wouldn't throw Sadie Farnum at me upon every occasion; I never had any intention of marrying her," retorted Sir William, with an angry flush.

"More is the pity; I could have loved her dearly as a sister," responded Lady Linton, in an injured tone. "But," she added, after a thoughtful pause, "it seems you were mistaken in thinking that your wife was collecting proofs of her marriage with the intention of coming here to claim her position. If that had been her plan, doubtless she would have been here long ago."

"Yes---oh! I cannot understand it; but, if I ever discover *who* has been at the bottom of this mischief, it will be a sad day for that individual!" cried the baronet, with stern emphasis.

Lady Linton suddenly stooped to brush a thread from her black dress, and when she sat upright again there was considerable more color than usual in her face.

"I am troubled to see you so unhappy, William," she said, more kindly than she had yet spoken, "and perhaps, after all, a change will be the best thing for you. What are your plans?"

"I have none. I simply wish to get away from myself, if that is possible; to steep my troubled thoughts in some excitement. I believe I will go to the Far East---Egypt, Palestine---anywhere to escape this feeling of utter desolation," he answered, dejectedly.

"When will you go?"

"At once---before the week is out, if I can arrange to do so."

"Have you any special commands for me to attend to during your absence?"

"None, save that you are to remain here as usual, if you like, and in case any word comes from my loved ones, send for me at once."

"Very well. Have you any idea how long you will be away?"

"No. I may not be gone a month; I may stay ten years; it will depend upon how well I can kill time," returned Sir William, moodily.

"Oh, William, I wish you would try and rise above this trouble," said his sister, out of all patience with him at heart, but speaking in a soothing tone. "I do not like to pain you, but, truly, it looks to me as if your wife had been guilty of willful desertion in thus hiding herself from you, and I believe there would be a great deal of happiness yet for you if you could be freed from her entirely, and then bring some good, gentle woman here to make your home pleasant for you."

It was the first time that she had ever been able to gather courage sufficient to make this proposition; but she was wholly unprepared for the storm of wrath which the suggestion brought upon her head.

Sir William came and stood, tall and stern, before her, his face almost convulsed with mingled pain and wrath, his eyes blazing dangerously:

"Miriam Linton," he began, in a suppressed tone, "never dare to open your lips on such a subject to me again. I married my darling for better or worse, until death should part us, and only my death or hers will ever break the tie---at least with my consent---that binds us."

He turned abruptly and left the room as he ceased speaking, more angry with her than he had ever been before.

Lady Linton was thoroughly startled by what he had said, and she knew she would never dare suggest such a measure again to him; but she still had a secret hope, from what Mrs. Farnum had written her, that the injured wife would seek a legal separation from him.

She imagined that this might be the reason of Virgie keeping so quiet just at present, and she was all the more willing and glad to have her brother go away from home, as he proposed doing, because she knew that he would have to be notified whenever any such proceedings should be instituted, and she feared if he were there to receive them he would at once post off to America again, and upset all her plans by bringing about a reconciliation at the last moment.

So in less than a week Sir William left England for, Egypt and the Holy Land, and Lady Linton experienced a feeling of intense relief at his departure. Time, she reasoned, was a great healer, and she hoped much from this season of travel and change.

It was rather lonely for her at Heathdale during the winter, but she was grateful to be released from the anxiety she had suffered on his account for the last year.

Spring came, summer passed; a year had come and gone since the disappearance of her brother's young wife, when one day there came an official-looking document addressed to the baronet, and bearing the California postmark.

Lady Linton quivered in every nerve as she saw it, for her heart told her instantly what it contained.

Still, she could not be satisfied until she knew beyond a doubt, and she skillfully opened it for examination before forwarding it to her brother.

It was even as she had hoped.

Virgie had kept her word; she was about to repudiate her husband for his supposed faithlessness to her, and Lady Linton's lips curled in a smile of exultation as she read the paper notifying her brother that proceedings for a divorce were about to be instituted in the courts of San Francisco by Lady Virginia Heath against Sir William Heath, of Heathsdale, England.

"Everything is working beautifully," she murmured, triumphantly; "his pride will never let him seek her after this takes effect; it will be conclusive evidence to him that she, at least, desires to have the tie that binds them broken. Let me see! he is notified to appear on the ninth of next month--in a little more than four weeks. Ha, ha! he was in Alexandria when he last wrote, and this could not possibly reach him in season to admit of his obeying the summons in time. Matters will have reached a crisis before he gets it--the *injured and beautiful little savage* will have secured her divorce, and my brother will be free, long before he will know what has been done. However, I will do my duty, and forward it to him instantly."

With a lighter heart than she had known for months, the crafty woman carefully resealed the document in a way to defy suspicion that it had been tampered with, inclosed it in another envelope, directed and marked it "important," and dispatched it by the very next mail to her brother.

Three months passed and she had heard nothing from him. She began to feel anxious as to how he had received the news of what Virgie was doing, when there came another similar-looking document, bearing the same postmark as before.

"The deed is done!" she cried, joyfully, the moment her eyes rested upon it. "I do not even need to open this to be assured of the nature of its contents."

She was filled with triumph over the success of all her plans thus far, and yet she could not forget Virgie's threat that a day of retribution would surely overtake their proud family.

But she determined not to worry, for the child might not live long enough for her to carry her threat into execution. Virgie, herself, might die, and a hundred other things might happen to prevent.

Her brother might never consent to marry again--she feared he would not--and poor Sadie Farnum's reviving hopes would again be crushed; but, if he did, she felt very sure that her son, Percy--and a noble young fellow he was, too--would be very likely to inherit Heathsdale, while Lillian would doubtless receive a handsome dowry when she came to marry.

"I do not believe I will send this to William," she muttered, as she turned that precious document over and over in her hands, and feasted her eyes upon it. "I will at least wait until I hear something from him regarding the other; these priceless papers might be lost on the way, and then----"

Her musings were suddenly cut short by a violent ring at the hall bell.

She started, and sat erect to listen, her face growing pale and anxious, for there seemed to be something ominous in that vigorous jangle which went echoing through the house with such an imperious sound.

The night was raw and stormy; darkness had settled down over the country earlier than usual; there had been a disagreeable chill in the air all day, and a dismal sense of loneliness pervaded the mansion.

She heard the butler go to the door; then there was a sudden exclamation of surprise, followed by a few indistinct sentences, a step, strangely familiar, outside the library door, and the next moment Sir William, gaunt, haggard, and wretched, staggered into the room where his sister was sitting.

## Chapter XXII.

### Virgie Makes a Home for Herself.

"William," cried Lady Linton, springing excitedly to her feet, the document which had caused her so much joy but a moment before dropping unheeded on the table beside her. "What brings you home in this unceremonious manner? Are you ill? Has anything happened?"

"Am I ill? Yes, by heart is broken--dying within me. Has anything happened? My wife is lost to me forever!" he cried, in a hollow tone, as he sank weakly into a chair and groaned aloud.

"What can I do for you? Let me call John to remove your boots and bring you dry clothing," his sister said, thoroughly alarmed by his appearance; and suiting the action to her words, she rang for the butler.

John came, and attended to his master's wants with alacrity. Wood was piled upon the already cheerful fire, something hot was provided the traveler to drink, and Lady Linton soon had the satisfaction of seeing something like warmth and life stealing into her brother's haggard face.

She understood at once that he must have been nearly crushed upon receiving the document which she had sent him, and that he had immediately started for home. He must have been taken ill on the way and been detained else he would have been there before, and she could imagine how he would chafe over the delay, and how heart-sick he had grown over the fact of being too late to stay the proceedings for the divorce.

She dreaded to have him know that the die was irrevocably cast, although his own words had told her that he apprehended it; but she absolutely feared the first passionate outbreak when she should give him those other papers that had but just arrived.

When he began to grow more calm, and to realize the comfort of being once more before his own hearthstone Lady Linton stole softly away to confer with the housekeeper about preparing him something specially tempting for his supper.

She was absent perhaps fifteen minutes, and was about to return to him, when she was startled by a heavy fall on the floor above her.

Her heart told her what had caused it, and she hurried up stairs with all the speed that fear could lend to her feet, and burst into the library, to find her brother stretched lifeless upon the floor, an open paper clutched tightly in his hand, while John, the faithful butler, was bending over him in an agony of terror.

"Send for Sir Herbert Randal at once, then come back to me," commanded her ladyship, as she stooped to lift her brother's head to place a cushion under it and loosen his necktie.

John sped to do her bidding, and during his absence Lady Linton succeeded in removing that tell-tale document from Sir William's hand, and locking it away from all inquisitive eyes; for her first thought was that there must be no scandal over the affair.

Few knew of his marriage. She had persisted in keeping still about it, in spite of all his orders to the contrary, and after his return from his fruitless search for Virgie, he had been far too sensitive upon the subject to talk of it himself, and thus almost everybody believed him to be still a single man. Hence Lady Linton's anxiety that nothing should be known regarding the divorce.

When John returned to her she summoned other servants and had Sir William carried to his own rooms, where she and the housekeeper applied all remedies that were at hand to revive him.

When the physician arrived he had recovered from his swoon, but was in a raging fever, and wild with delirium.

Sir Herbert pronounced his illness to be brain fever of a serious type, and Lady Linton knew, from the grave look on the wise man's face, that he had but very little hope of his recovery.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Virgie left the hotel on the morning after Mr. Eldridge requested her to vacate her rooms, she drove to a quiet street, where she engaged lodgings for a few days, until she could arrange her plans for the future. She then gave notice at the bank where her money was deposited that she should draw it all on a certain date. As soon as she received it she purchased a ticket for San Francisco, and a week from the time of receiving Lady Linton's cruel letter she was rolling over the Central Pacific Railroad toward her former home, intent upon only one purpose---that of gaining indisputable proof of her lawful marriage, in order to shield her child from wrong and shame.

She reached a small town only a few miles from her old home among the mountains, and then sent a messenger for Chi Lu to come to her.

He came at once, glad to do anything for the "young missee" whom he had served for years, and learned to regard with great affection.

Virgie felt sure that she could safely confide in him, so she told him something of her trouble, and asked him to help her gather the proofs of her marriage.

He proved himself very efficient in this respect, and was only too eager to secure justice for her.

After all was done, and she had the precious papers in her own hands, she would have paid him handsomely and sent him back to the mountains again. But he threw at her feet the money she offered him, and begged to be allowed to go with her wherever she went---to let him work for her and the "little missee," as he used to in the old days before she went away. "He did not want any money---only let him have a little rice and curry, and a mat to sleep on, and he would serve her as long as she needed him."

Virgie was moved to tears by this evidence of his faithfulness, and, though she had not thought of such a thing before, it suddenly occurred to her that it might be a wise proceeding on her part to grant his request.

She knew that he was entirely trustworthy; he was very capable in many ways, and she was sure she should feel a sense of security and protection with him that she could not experience to go alone into a strange place, and have to depend entirely upon herself.

"I should like to have you, Chi," she said, thoughtfully, "but I am afraid it would be hardly fair to you, for I haven't a great deal of money, and I shall have to be very economical."

Chi Lu's little round black eyes flashed at this. "*He* takee monee too?" he demanded, with contemptuous emphasis on the pronoun.

Virgie flushed. She could not bear, from another, the slightest reference to the wrong she had suffered.

"How much monee?" the man hastened to add, as he saw that she was troubled.

"I have a little over four thousand dollars," Virgie replied, thinking it best to fully confide in him.

Her bills had been heavy in New York, and it had taken the most of one thousand dollars out of the five thousand that Sir William had deposited for her, to settle them.

Chi Lu gave a grunt of delight at the information.

"Good! missee live long. Chi Lu know how; he fix 'em," he said, with an air of confidence that was reassuring and Virgie believed that he would indeed make a better steward of her limited means than she could possibly be with her inexperience, so she resolved to trust him, and told him that he should go with her if he wished.

The next question to settle was regarding a place of residence, and she finally decided, after talking the matter over with her servant, that she would be less conspicuous in some large city, and as there was no place she knew so well as San Francisco, she resolved to once more make her home in that city.

These matters decided, Chi Lu went back to the mountains to dispose of his cabin and settle up his affairs, and when he rejoined his young mistress, they proceeded directly to San Francisco, where the Chinaman soon succeeded in securing three very comfortable rooms in a quiet and good locality.

Virgie furnished these simply, though prettily, and, when all was completed, really felt quite at home, and as if she had at last found a haven of safety.

There was a small parlor and bedroom for her own use, a tiny kitchen, with a good-sized closet opening out of it, which was allotted exclusively to Chi Lu.

Virgie soon found that she had indeed done wisely to take her old servant again into her employ, for he managed everything in a most economical and comfortable way, while she realized that if she had been obliged to depend wholly upon herself and have the care of her little one besides, her strength and courage would have both failed her in a little while.

The younger Lady of Heathdale demanded a great deal of attention during that first year of her life, and, being wholly unaccustomed to children, Virgie found the care a great tax upon her.

They had been in San Francisco some three months, when Chi Lu proposed to Virgie to go into business for himself.

He told her that he had not half enough to do to keep busy; there was a large unoccupied room adjoining the building they were in, which he could secure for a moderate rent, and he desired to set up the laundry business.

He wanted to employ two or three of his countrymen to do the work, while he simply had charge of it, which he could easily do and attend to his duties with her at the same time.

Virgie willingly consented to this arrangement, never once suspecting that it was a plan on the part of Chi Lu to obtain funds to contribute toward her support when her own resources should fail. She knew that the little which he consented to receive from her was but a small compensation for the services he rendered her, and she was very glad to have him make something for himself.

Thus in the course of time the faithful Chinaman established quite a thrifty business, while his face would light up and his small eyes gleam with satisfaction as he gathered in the dollars day by day, and he might have been heard from time to time to mutter, with a gleeful chuckle:

"Good! Muche monee for missee and little missee by'm-by!"

But, as Virgie's baby grew older and capable of amusing herself somewhat, time began to hang heavily on the young mother's hands.

Her sorrow was one that could not be easily out-grown and sometimes life seemed a burden almost too heavy to be borne. Day after day her heart cried out in rebellion against her lonely bitter lot; night after night her pillow was wet with scalding tears, as for hours she lay weeping for the love that she had lost.

She began to realize at last that her health was suffering from such constant grieving, and that she must find something to occupy her time more fully and take her thoughts from herself, or she would soon break down beneath such severe mental strain.

It was after a day of unusual depression and sadness that she took up the evening paper and began carelessly to glance over the columns.

Suddenly her eyes lighted upon an advertisement.

It stated that a well-known publishing house of that city offered a prize of three hundred dollars for the most unique and tasteful design for a Christmas souvenir. It described what was required, mentioned the conditions of its acceptance, and the time when the designs of all competitors must be delivered.

Virgie was interested at once.

"Why, cannot I do something of that kind?" she murmured "Papa used to say that I was remarkably skillful in making pen-and-ink sketches, and why should I not turn, my talent to some account? If I should succeed it would not only give me something with which to occupy my time, but perhaps enable me to earn for the future; my money is not going to last so very long, in spite of all Chi Lu's economy."

The idea pleased her, and she set about putting it into practice at once.

During the next three months she applied herself diligently and as she worked she became deeply interested in her occupation. Almost immediately there was a change for the better in her health and general appearance Her eye brightened, the lassitude that pervaded her movements disappeared and something of her old energy returned to her.

She wasted no more time in useless brooding and pining; less tears were shed at night, for, wearied with her close application to her work during the day, sleep stole her senses and wrapped her in healthful rest.

At the time appointed for all competitors to send in their designs, Virgie was ready to subject her work to criticism.

She had made three designs, each differing in style and character from the others, but all so attractive that she felt almost sure they would bring her some return, even if she was not the fortunate winner of the prize.

Besides these, she had been hard at work upon an idea of her own, which she intended to show the publisher, hoping to win his approbation and assistance in bringing it before the public.

Dressing herself plainly, but with taste, she started out one morning with her treasures, and presenting herself at the publishing house referred to, asked to see the proprietor.

The gentlemanly clerk led her to a private office, where she found a pleasant-looking, elderly gentleman who regarded her a trifle curiously, but greeted her courteously, and then politely asked her business with him.

"Some time ago I saw an advertisement in your name, relating to Christmas souvenirs," Virgie began, "and as this is the date on which they were required to be delivered I have brought my contribution for your inspection."

The gentleman bowed, but hesitated a moment before replying.

Virgie's manner and language told him that she was a lady, and he did not like to say anything to wound her; but the advertisement to which she referred had distinctly stated that competitors were, under no consideration to expect a personal interview regarding their contributions. They were either to be sent by mail or left at the office until an examination by the proprietor should decide who the fortunate winner of the prize might be.

"Ah!" he began, "I understand you desire to leave the specimens of your work with me."

Virgie flushed, for his tone was rather frigid. Then she recovered herself, and her face lighted with her rare, beautiful smile, which went directly to the publisher's heart.

"Yes, sir," she answered, laying a package upon his desk. "Of course I understand that I am not to expect a private examination of my work. I had no intention of annoying you with the matter. I am willing to take my chance with others. But there is another matter upon which I would like to consult with you if you can spare me a little time."

She now drew forth a more bulky package from her bag.

"Some manuscript, perhaps, which you would like examined?" responded the gentleman, glancing at it, but speaking indifferently.

"No, not manuscript according to the common acceptance of the term; and yet, in reality, I suppose it is."

"Can you not leave it with me? I will look at it with pleasure later;" but his tone was not very encouraging.

"I should prefer not to do so, because there is not very much time between now and Christmas, and if you do not approve of it I shall like to take it elsewhere," Virgie replied, untying the dainty ribbon which bound her package, and, removing the wrapper, she laid before him a little book about eight inches square and comprising some twenty or thirty pages.

It was composed of half sheets of the heaviest and nicest of unruled paper, tied together in three places with beautiful little cords and tassels of pale-blue silk.

On the cover, in a lovely design composed of mountain ferns, most exquisitely executed, there was written, in a dainty hand, the title---"Gleanings from the Heights."

The gentleman uttered a low exclamation of pleasure as his eye fell upon this.

His attention was riveted; there was no indifference in his manner now.

Chapter XXIII.

A Mysterious Stranger.

"Did you do this?" Mr. Knight, the publisher, asked, looking up after a close examination of the dainty cover.

"Yes, sir," Virgie answered, with a quiet smile, and, seeing that she had gained her point, that he would not leave it until he had seen the whole, she sat down near him to await his verdict.

Page after page was turned and on each there was a lovely group of mountain foliage, flowers, or ferns, all beautifully executed in pen and ink, while underneath the design, or cunningly woven around it, was written, in a dainty hand, some appropriate verse or couplet, quotations from various authors, with now and then a bit of real heart rhyme that had been the outgrowth of Virgie's own sad experiences.

Everything, as the title indicated, had been taken from the mountains---from those heights where she had spent the last few years of her life.

It had been her custom, after gathering the wild, beautiful things, to carefully arrange them and then copy them upon paper.

This amusement had served to pass away many an otherwise tedious hour, and she had a portfolio full of these charming designs, which were likely to prove of great value to her in the future, as we shall see.

Mr. Knight took ample time for his examination of her work, so much, indeed, that Virgie began to grow weary and anxious to get back to her little one.

But at last the gentleman leaned back in his chair, took off his spectacles, and turned his keen, searching glance full upon his visitor's face.

"Madam," he said, "it is not my custom to speak extravagantly upon any subject; but I am bound to admit that this is the finest thing of its kind that it has ever been my privilege to examine."

A beautiful color sprang into Virgie's cheeks at this high praise. She had known that her work was well done, but she had not expected to be told of it quite so frankly or emphatically.

She bowed, and murmured her thanks for his appreciation

"What do you want to do with it?" Mr. Knight asked.

"Get it published as a holiday souvenir, and make it pay me a handsome sum for my trouble," Virgie responded, in a business-like tone, and then was half-frightened at her own boldness.

The publisher's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"What would you consider a handsome sum?" he inquired.

Virgie thought a moment; then she replied:

"You have offered one, two, and three hundred dollars as prizes for the simple souvenirs described in your advertisement, and surely a work like this must be worth much more."

"Very true; but will you name some price for it? I confess that I should like to take it, if you do not value it *too* highly."

Virgie was astonished at this.

She had not expected to be allowed to name her own price. She had supposed, if her work was approved at all, to receive some moderate offer, which she could accept or decline as she saw fit.

But she shrank from setting a value upon her work. It was her first effort, and she had no more idea of its worth, as a work of art, than a child.

"Sir," she returned, "I will tell you frankly that I never did anything of the kind before; that is, I have never attempted to *dispose* of any of my work and I do not know what it ought to bring me. I have been suddenly thrown upon my own resources, and it occurred to me that I might turn my one talent to some account."

"Your 'one talent' will prove a very valuable one, if rightly employed," interposed the publisher, smiling.

"Thank you," returned Virgie, flushing again. "And now, since my little book pleases you, will you kindly make me an offer?"

"Well, Miss ---- What shall I call you, please? I like to know the names of people with whom I am dealing," Mr. Knight observed, with a business-like air.

A sudden shock went over Virgie, making her tingle to her finger-tips at this question.

It was the first time that she had been asked to give her name since coming to San Francisco.

She had lived so like a recluse that there had been no occasion, and she had never decided what she would be called. She could not use her husband's name.

If she had more time to think she might have answered the publisher differently; but, as it was, she said, hastily, and not without some confusion:

"My name is Mrs.---Alexander."

Mr. Knight started slightly, and threw a searching glance at her.

"Alexander! Ah, I used to know---But, pardon me; I was about to make you an offer, I believe."

He seemed to consider a moment, then continued:

"I will give you five hundred dollars for this little work, just as it stands, and if it proves to be a success after it is published, I will add ten per cent, of the sales to that amount."

Virgie could scarcely credit her hearing at this generous offer.

She had never dreamed of anything like it, and bright visions of future prosperity for herself and her child, attained through her own efforts, alone, flitted through her mind.

But she did not lose her self-possession or betray her excessive delight at the unexpected proposal.

"What am I to understand by your words, 'if it proves a success?'" she asked.

Again the publisher's eyes twinkled.

He knew that she was a novice in dealing with business men, but he saw that she was shrewd and practical, and, finding her talent valuable, meant to make the most of it.

He meant, however, to do so well by her that she would be satisfied to give her services exclusively to him.

"Well," he replied, "if the sales reach a thousand copies I shall consider the book a success."

He knew well enough, if he could get it out in season, he could easily sell three times that number for it was a wonderfully unique and attractive affair.

"More than that," he continued, "if you are pleased to accept my offer, I should like to engage you to prepare two or three designs of a similar character for the Easter trade."

Virgie was not proof against all this good fortune. Her lips trembled, and she was very near breaking down.

It seemed almost as if heaven had suddenly opened and sent her a kind friend in the midst of her darkness and trouble.

"You are very kind, sir; I feel that you have made me a most liberal offer, and I accept it most gratefully," she said.

Something in her tone---a sort of hopeless cadence mingling with the gratitude, as if with all this good fortune there were a lurking despair in her heart---touched the gentleman deeply.

He was becoming greatly interested in this beautiful woman, who, with that look of heart-broken sadness in her violet eyes, and that grieved droop about her sweet mouth, he believed must have some thrilling history connected with her young life.

"Then, Mrs. Alexander, do your best, and give me something especially nice for Easter," he returned, brightly, and appearing not to notice her emotion.

He arose as he spoke, and took leave of her with a cordial handshake, saying that she would hear from him again soon regarding her other designs, and Virgie went on her homeward way with more of hope and courage than she had known since her great trouble came upon her.

She had nearly reached the street where she lived, when something occurred to give her a fearful start.

In turning a corner she suddenly came face to face with a man who was wrapped in a heavy circular cape, its collar turned up close about his face and concealing the whole lower portion of it. He wore a wide-brimmed hat that was drawn down over his brow, so that, with the collar and hat together, scarcely anything of his countenance was visible save a pair of piercing black eyes, and a long, sharp nose.

As Virgie met those eyes, which were fixed upon her with an eager, questioning look, she had difficulty in repressing a scream of fear and surprise.

The next moment, however, she recovered herself, and passed him as if he had been an utter stranger; but, though outwardly calm and indifferent, she was trembling in every limb, while a sense of weakness caused by the shock she had received, made it seem as if she could not go on her way.

But she knew it would not do for her to stop, for a sidelong glance over her shoulder and the sound of a step behind her told her that the muffled figure was following her, evidently with the intention of accosting her.

"How dare he come back here? It cannot be that he knows me after all these years," she said to herself as she quickened her pace and sped on toward her home.

Then a sudden thought smote her.

"He must not know where I live, if it *is* he, and I am sure I cannot be mistaken, for those eyes are like no others in the world. What shall I do?"

She was rapidly nearing her own door, but a sudden purpose impelled her to keep on and go straight by, without even a pause or a look that way.

A block or two beyond she came to a store where she sometimes went to purchase articles that she needed. She entered, and going to a counter, called for the first thing she could think of, but kept her eye on the door to see if the man had followed her.

Yes, there could be no doubt that her steps were dogged, for the man passed even as she looked.

His keen glance searched her out immediately; then he paused, turned, and walked slowly back.

The store was on a corner, and there were two entrances to it---one on the front, one at the side.

Virgie paid for her purchase, then worked her way around, going from counter to counter, until she reached the side entrance, when she went slyly out, waited until she saw a car approaching, hailed it, and in another moment went rolling down the street, believing that she had eluded the keen eyes that were on the watch for her.

Not so, however; for the man, having heard the car stop, darted around the corner, and espied her in it just as it was about turning into another street.

He could not overtake it, and with a muttered expression of annoyance, he was obliged to wait for the next one. But he saw no more of Virgie that day, for she took a transfer, and when about a mile from her home changed cars and at length reached her own door, confident that she had escaped her pursuer for that time.

A day or two afterward she saw a personal in one of the daily papers that both puzzled and alarmed her.

F.V.A., whom I met on the corner of W. and C. streets, will communicate with M.A., Lock Box 95, she will learn something to her advantage.

This was the advertisement, and Virgie knew at once that she had been recognized by that man muffled in the cloak.

"That means me," she said, growing deadly white, "and I was not mistaken. *He* has come back. How dare he? What can he want of me? But I will never see him. I will have nothing to say to him. I will hide myself from him. It is evident he has not discovered where I live, else he would have been here before this, and I will take care that he does not find me out."

After that she was very careful about going out, always closely veiling her face, and wearing a long circular to conceal her form, when she was obliged to do so, which was not often, as, with rare exceptions, her business with Mr. Knight could be mostly transacted by correspondence.

Thus several months passed without her seeing or hearing anything more of the person who had so disturbed her, until at last she believed he must have left the city, and she gave herself no further concern about him.

Chapter XXIV.

The Tie Is Broken.

There was no lack of employment now for Virgie. She had plenty to occupy heart, and brain, and hands, and of such a congenial nature that she reaped great benefit from it both mentally and physically.

Of course nothing could ever blot out from her memory the terrible trouble and suffering that she had had to endure, but her work brought its own enjoyment so that she no longer spent such wretched days and nights as formerly. Her baby was every day growing interesting and a source of great comfort to her, while her life generally was tending to bring out the latent qualities of her character, the energy and self-reliance, the skill and talent which otherwise might never have developed into activity.

More than a year went by, while every month she was earning a handsome sum, having been permanently engaged by Mr. Knight to keep him supplied with those novelties which she was so skillful in originating.

Her "Gleanings from the Heights" proved a great success, selling faster than the firm could issue them. Besides this she had been awarded the first prize on the other souvenirs, so that, pecuniarily, she had nothing to fear for the future.

And now she set about another undertaking which she had long contemplated; that of obtaining a divorce from her husband.

She did not take this step because she had any desire to break the tie that bound her to him, and she would never have moved in the matter at all but for the fact that others had assailed her fair name and assumed that her child was dishonored.

Her chief aim, in collecting the proofs of the legality of her marriage, had been to secure to little Virgie the right to the name she bore, and an indisputable title to her inheritance by and by when she should be of a suitable age to claim and enjoy it.

She meant to give her every advantage as she grew older, and do everything possible to fit her for a high position in life; and when, at length, she should reach her majority, she would claim her rights and take care that she secured them in spite of all opposition.

This was all the revenge that Virgie ever intended to take for the wrong that she believed herself to have suffered at her husband's hands. She would scorn to accept anything for herself, but the lawful position of her daughter must and *should* be recognized.

Her residence of a year in San Francisco had given her the right to apply to the court to have her marriage bonds annulled, and she put her case into the hands of a competent lawyer, recommended by Mr. Knight, to whom she had confided something of her history, and solicited his advice regarding the matter.

He had advised her not to take any legal proceedings until she had tried to confer with Sir William again.

"There is some mistake, I feel sure," he said, "some misunderstanding which might be explained if proper measures were adopted."

"A mistake!" repeated Virgie, scornfully, her eyes blazing with indignation. "I imagine that the only mistake about the whole matter is that I allowed myself to become the dupe of an unprincipled man."

"It can at least do no harm to write him what your intentions are," suggested Mr. Knight, mildly.

"I wrote him letter after letter while I was in New York. Mrs. Farnum, of whom I have told you, knew the whole family, and wrote of me to Lady Linton, but they appeared to be in total ignorance of even my existence, while Mrs. Farnum asserted that Sir William had been engaged for years to Miss Stanhope, and I have already told you of his subsequent marriage with her."

"Still I cannot comprehend how he should dare to commit such a wrong," persisted Mr. Knight. "He must have known that his marriage with you was legal, according to the laws of the State in which it occurred, and the mere fact of his leaving the country could not annul it. If he had assumed a name while he was here, it would not seem so inexplicable, but all the papers which you hold go to show that he married you under his own name and title; while your description of the character of the man makes it seem utterly impossible that he should be guilty of such conduct."

"True. When I think of that, I am heart-broken," said Virgie, breaking down for a moment. "He seemed so true and noble in every respect, and he was particular to have his title appear in the certificate, although he did not adopt it while traveling because he found he was less conspicuous as plain Mr. Heath."

"It almost seems to me as if some plot had been laid to separate you," said Mr. Knight, thoughtfully.

"Impossible! How could such a thing be?" queried Virgie, skeptically. "Who would plot against us?"

"Your letters on both sides may have been intercepted by some enemy with that end in view."

"He has no enemy that I am aware of; neither have I. I did not know a single individual when I went to New York, so there was no one there who would be likely to meddle with our correspondence. More than this, if he did not hear from me, and was true to me, or had possessed an atom of affection for his child, it is but natural to suppose that he would have taken prompt measures to ascertain what the trouble was. No; the more I dwell upon it, the more I am convinced that what he has done was a scheme to secure my property, and then leave me to my fate. I can think of no other object

that he could have had."

Alas! Virgie realized long after how she had wronged a noble man with these dreadful suspicions, and even while she was giving utterance to them, her heart was heavy with a sense of injustice done the man whom, even then, she loved most fondly.

Mr. Knight shook his head in a doubtful manner at her last words, and yet he looked perplexed.

"You think I am too hard," Virgie continued, bitterly "but does not even the provision which he made for me before leaving New York look as if he did not intend to return to me?"

"You refer to the five thousand dollars which he deposited for you; it was a very generous amount, truly."

Of course I could not begin to use such a sum in the few weeks that he pretended he should be away; while the additional five hundred dollars which he sent me through his sister goes to prove that he had no intention of ever coming back to me, yet did not wish me to suffer for lack of means."

"I do not like the aspect of that transaction at all," responded Mr. Knight, emphatically. "It looks to me as if his sister had had more to do with the matter than rightly belonged to her. Who knows but what she may have been opposed to her brother's marriage and has been at the bottom of all the trouble?" he concluded, reasoning with a shrewdness which he did not realize.

But Virgie could not be convinced.

"I do not believe that," she said, with a sigh; "it looks to me as if he was ashamed---conscience-smitten---and did not have the moral courage to communicate with me himself."

Yet, even as she said it, she knew that such a course was utterly at variance with his character, as she had known it.

"Well, Mrs. Alexander---or Mrs. Heath, I suppose I ought to call you---I will not say more to dissuade you from your purpose; but let me advise you, as a sincere friend, to go to England and ascertain for yourself just how matters are, before you proceed any further."

Virgie started to her feet, with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Go to England!---to Heathdale! to find another woman queening it there in *my* place!---to be brow-beaten and insulted by that proud family!---to be disowned by the man who has already wronged me beyond all forgiveness! Never, sir!"

"You could at least demand your own---the money that your father left you."

"And do you suppose I should get it? I have no proof that my father ever left me a dollar. Sir William has every paper in his own possession. I have not a scrap even that would enable me to wrest so much as a pound from him as my right."

Mr. Knight looked grave. Certainly matters were not very promising for the injured wife.

"Well, it is the most incomprehensible affair that I ever heard of," he said. "I still think, though, that a personal interview would be the wiser course before proceeding further. However, a proper notice will have to be served upon the man, and if there has been any misunderstanding, or he has any desire to contest your appeal for a divorce, he will probably make

it apparent when the right time comes. And now, regarding the best counsel for you, I think my friend, Templeton would work well for you, and secure a bill with as little notoriety as any one."

Virgie shivered at this business-like talk of "a bill." It was almost like severing soul from body to break the sacred tie that bound her to the man she so fondly loved, and nothing save the belief that another was occupying the place that rightly belonged to her could have induced her to take such a step.

She applied to Mr. Templeton, as Mr. Knight advised He, too, counseled further intercourse with the baronet, for, to his keen mind, also, the whole affair appeared more like a conspiracy on the part of enemies than a willful wrong perpetrated by the husband.

But Virgie utterly refused to hold any communication with Sir William.

"He will have to be notified regarding the proceedings about to be instituted against him," she said, "and if he is guiltless of wrong he will surely hasten to make it apparent."

In spite of her obstinate refusal to make further overtures, something of hope had been revived in her heart by the united opinions of Mr. Knight and her lawyer that some enemy had plotted to separate her from her husband. She remembered what Mrs. Farnum had told her about the pride of his family, and it might be there was some foundation for the belief of the two gentlemen. She could understand how that might possibly be the case as far as intercepting their letters was concerned, but those other facts of the long engagement and the marriage with Miss Stanhope were things which she could not explain by any reasoning.

Still she kept hoping for some word during the time that intervened between the notification and the day set for the hearing of the case. Day after day she waited and watched for some tidings from her husband starting at every unusual sound, growing almost faint at the opening and shutting of a door, and even imagining she saw a familiar form as she sat at her window and eagerly scanned every passer-by.

She grew thin and pale with this dreadful suspense; she seemed to be consuming with fever, and was so restless and nervous that her friend, Mr. Knight, feared that her mind might suffer from such tension.

She hoped until the last moment, although she tried to conceal it, but when the dreaded day arrived, when her case was presented and there was no one to contest it; when the judge rendered his decision, declaring that her marriage was null and void, that henceforth in the eyes of the law and the world she was free from the man to whom she had solemnly promised to cling until death should part them, her courage and strength forsook her, and she was carried lifeless from the court-room, while for three weeks afterward she lay weak and ill, and almost indifferent to life.

The only grain of comfort in this time of woe was derived from the fact that the child had been given to her, and she had no fear of ever having it taken from her, even if Sir William should ever be moved to a desire to have her.

For a time she seemed wholly unlike herself; but the kind-hearted publisher knew that the best antidote for all kinds of trouble is work, and he kept her crowded with orders, until she felt obliged to rally her failing energies and to take up the burdens of life once more.

Thus the winter passed; but, when summer came again, little Virgie began to droop in the noisome atmosphere of the city, and the physician said she must be taken where she could have purer air and country living; so Virgie went to a quiet little place a few miles out of the city, where she remained the entire season, not returning to San Francisco until late in October, and thus a cruel fate again seemed to mock her, for during her absence Sir William Heath had come to

seek her again, and not finding her, he, too, had grown heart-sick with despair and hope deferred.

## Chapter XXV.

### Sir William Becomes Guardian.

Very distressing were the thoughts of the young baronet, who had so suddenly returned to his home and been stricken with illness.

He had been sick at Alexandria when he received the document notifying him that Virgie was seeking a divorce.

He was absolutely paralyzed as he read it, and saw by the date that it would be utterly impossible for him to reach America in time to stay the proceedings.

He could not even reach England in season to cable for that purpose, and he was so overcome by the knowledge and his own helplessness, as to render him unable to travel for a couple of weeks longer.

One thing gave him some satisfaction. He at least knew that Virgie was in San Francisco, and that she must have been residing in the State for some time to allow her the right to apply for the divorce there. She must have been there even while he was there searching for her, and it seemed terribly cruel to him that he should have missed her.

But he resolved that he would find her yet, if she lived. Poor darling! what a bitter lot had been hers during this last year, believing what she must of him. It should not go on, however; he would seek her and vindicate himself; he would prove to her that he had never wavered in his truth to her in spite of all the evidence against him. He would prove his love for her, and he would win her again, even though the dread decree had been pronounced, bring her back with him to Heathdale, and they would be happy yet.

And his child---the precious little one whom he had never seen---his heart cried out for her with an uncontrollable yearning---his baby! his miniature Virgie!

Thus, as we already know, he went directly to Heathdale where he arrived on the very evening that Lady Linton had received the papers announcing that his wife had secured a decree of divorce.

He was very wretched in spite of his sister's hearty welcome and efforts to render him comfortable; and during her absence from the room to see that something unusually nice should be prepared for him, anxious, bitter thoughts crowded his mind, and he rebelled against the arbitrary weariness and lassitude that bound him, as with chains of iron, and compelled him to rest.

Gradually, however, his glance began to wander over the familiar room, lingering now upon some picture, now upon some rare article of vertu, each endeared by peculiar associations, until at length it rested upon the table and that document, which his sister had dropped and forgotten in her surprise at his appearance.

Its likeness to the one he had previously received startled him.

He arose and went forward to examine it. Its postmark told him at once whence it had come.

A deathly paleness overspread his face; a horrible numbness fell upon his heart.

With trembling hands he tore it open, and one glance was sufficient to tell him the nature of its contents.

It was the one bitter blow too much, even though he had half-expected it, and, with a despairing cry that would have melted the hardest heart, "Lost! lost! Virgie, my love! my love!" he fell prone upon the floor, clutching that fatal paper in his grasp.

Long weeks of watching and anxiety followed---weeks during which Lady Linton began to fear that she was paying dearly for her plotting and treachery, even though her son might become the master of Heathdale in the event of her brother's death.

But he did not die. His constitution was naturally rugged, and by the end of winter, after many alternations of hope and fear, he slowly began to rally.

As soon as he was able to be dressed and sit up he began to talk of going again to America.

Of course Sir Herbert Randal vetoed such a proposition at once.

"You are not to stir outside the grounds of Heathdale for three months at least," he said, decidedly.

"But I must, Sir Herbert. You have no idea how much is at stake," the sick man pleaded.

"You must not. I cannot help how much there is at stake," returned the physician, firmly. "I have had hard work to get you up, even so far, from this nervous prostration and the least excitement or imprudence will cause a dangerous relapse."

And so, with despair at his heart, Sir William was obliged to submit.

He tried to write to Virgie, intending to send the letter to her through the lawyer whom she had employed and whose name had appeared in connection with the papers he had received, but he could not; he found that his brain was too weak to permit of the framing of even a sentence, and he knew that he could never plead his cause successfully in such a state.

He shrank from asking any one else to write for him; his sister he knew was not in sympathy with him, and he would not confide in her.

When his mind had become strong enough to realize what was going on about him, he had one day asked Lady Linton to bring him both documents that had come to him from America.

She obeyed him, making no comment, though her manner betrayed that she knew well enough their character.

He told her to lock them in a certain drawer which no one was ever allowed to open save himself.

She did so in his presence, and earnestly hoped, as the key clicked upon them, that that episode in her brother's life was buried for all time.

But she was not long in finding that she was to be disappointed

As summer advanced Sir William gained more rapidly and by August he was pronounced comparatively well, although he was still but the ghost of his former self.

Then he announced his determination of again crossing the Atlantic, and Lady Linton's heart failed her. Would he never relinquish his chase after that miserable girl?

She earnestly pleaded that he would not leave home again.

"I must," he replied, sternly. "I must find my wife."

"Your wife!" she retorted, losing all patience; "you have no wife."

"Be still, Miriam," he commanded, growing frightfully pale. "I see that you know what has occurred, and though the law may have succeeded in breaking the tie between us, yet in my heart I claim Virgie as my wife just as truly to-day as she ever was. I will search the world over for her; if I find her the law will give her to me again, for I believe that she is still true to me, whatever she may think of me; if I do *not* find her, I shall live and die cherishing her image alone."

Lady Linton knew that he meant what he said.

"That will be bad for Sadie's hopes," she thought; "but doubtless Percy will be the gainer, unless he succeeds in finding that girl. I never believed his pride would let him go chasing after her like this."

The last of August found him again on the ocean.

The voyage proved beneficial, and he was in much better health and strength when he landed in New York than when he left England.

He proceeded directly to San Francisco as fast as steam and wheels could take him, determined to seek out Mr. Templeton, Virgie's lawyer, who, he believed, would tell him where she could be found.

But a terrible disappointment awaited him there.

Mr. Templeton had retired from business at the beginning of summer, and, with his family, had gone abroad for an indefinite period.

He could not even obtain his address, and was thus prevented from communicating with him by letter.

Then he began another wearisome search. Day after day he haunted the streets of the city. He inquired, he advertised, and used every method he could think of to ascertain where his darling was, but without avail, for, as we know, she had gone into the country on little Virgie's account, while Mr. Knight was away on a trip to British Columbia, or he might have seen Sir William's advertisements, and helped him in the matter so near, his heart.

About the middle of October he decided to go once more to her old home among the mountains of Nevada, hoping to learn something of her there.

But, of course, he did not, and he finally came to the conclusion that she must have left California after obtaining her divorce. At least he thought she would leave San Francisco, for he knew that there were unpleasant associations connected with her past life there, and he did not believe she would like to make her home in that city, where disagreeable rumors might still exist. But, still resolving to find her at any cost, he turned his face in another direction, and began anew his wanderings up and down the land.

Three weary years he spent thus, following every clue, but all to no purpose. Then, saddened and disheartened he was compelled to give up the chase and return to Heathdale, for his estate demanded his personal attention.

Mrs. Farnum and her daughter were full of hope, after learning that the decree of divorce had been granted, that the beauty and belle would at last succeed in securing the prize she had so long coveted.

Every art was made use of to captivate the wealthy baronet, but it was evident that his heart was irrevocably fixed--that he had no intention of ever marrying again. Finally the disappointed girl gave her hand to a rich, but aged and feeble lord, and tried to satisfy her heart and ambition with the golden husks thus achieved.

Mrs. Farnum lost her husband soon after her return from America, and afterward made her home mostly with her daughter. But she was far from being a happy woman, even though she had everything which unlimited wealth could purchase. Her conscience never ceased to trouble her for the part she had played in helping to ruin the life of that beautiful wife and mother whom she had met in New York. She was ever haunted by that sad, sweet face. She had been half-tempted, many times, to confess everything to Sir William, hoping thus to atone in part for what she had done, and because, after she found that Sadie's cause was hopeless, she began to pity that poor, injured girl; but her fear of Lady Linton, and also of Sir William's righteous anger, prevented her doing so.

Thus five years passed.

It was now ten years since Sir William Heath's marriage with Virgie, but he was still true to the one love of his youth. He continued to cherish her image in his heart, even as he had vowed to do, and though he had come to believe her lost to him forever, he had determined that no other should occupy the place he had once given to her.

But about this time something occurred to create a pleasant change in his saddened life.

A dear friend of his youth died, leaving to his care his fine, manly little son, now in his twelfth year, who had been the pride of his father's heart, the comfort of widowed, lonely years.

Major Hamilton had been in Her Majesty's service for many years, and at the time of his death was serving on an important appointment abroad.

During this service he had acquired many honors and great wealth. His wife was the second daughter of Lord Shaftonsberry, but she had lived only one short month after the birth of their only son, Rupert, who was now to become the ward of Sir William Heath.

He was a noble little fellow, and it was not long before the baronet became fondly attached to him, and believed that perhaps he had at last found, in rearing this child of promise to manhood, something that would add interest and zest to his dreary and monotonous life.

Lady Linton, who was still at Heathdale, and nominally its mistress, received the orphaned stranger with great kindness.

He was heir presumptive to the title and estates of Shaftonsberry, if death should remove the present incumbent who as yet had no children of his own, and this circumstance, in addition to the great wealth which young Rupert inherited from his father, made him a person of considerable consequence.

Her ladyship's mind, with its habitual cunning, leaped forward eight or ten years, and planned a union of the houses of Linton and Shaftonsberry, by the marriage of her daughter, Lillian, now eleven years of age, with her brother's ward.

She argued that everything was in her favor for accomplishing this, for the children would be reared beneath the same roof, and it would be comparatively easy to educate them to consider themselves destined for each other.

Of course this arch plotter kept all this to herself, for she well knew that her brother would sternly oppose all match-making of this sort; but it became a dearly cherished plan with her, and she bent all her energies toward its accomplishment.

Chapter XXVI.

"I Shall Never Marry Again."

Virgie returned to San Francisco about two weeks after Sir William quitted the city.

Her little girl, now more than two years old, was much improved, and had grown to be a remarkably interesting child, while she was of the greatest comfort to her mother whose every hope was now centered in her.

Virgie entered upon her work with renewed interest, although she had not been idle during the summer by any means. With her pen she had copied nature in every possible phase, and had brought home, for her winter's campaign, rich treasures of beauty and art.

She had for some time been engaged upon quite an extensive work, which was to be elegantly bound, and which promised to be something very rare and unique.

She threw herself into this with such energy, after her return, and worked at it so steadily and with so much enthusiasm, that Mr. Knight really began to fear that she would overtax her strength.

From the first he had been deeply interested in the beautiful and talented woman who bore her sorrows so bravely and battled so courageously with the adverse fate that had well-nigh ruined her life. He had pitied her friendlessness, and tried to throw around her a sort of fatherly care and protection; but as he came to know her better, to realize her strength of mind and character, and beauty of disposition, a warmer feeling began to take the place of pity and compassion, until, as she grew to confide in and rely upon him more and more, the hope that he might perhaps win her to share and brighten his lonely home during the declining years of his life, gradually dawned upon him, and he finally resolved to ask her to become his wife.

"I could save her from all this toil, and all uncertainty about the future. I would ask no greater happiness than to see her mistress of my home during the remainder of my life, and then, when I am gone, she will have all my wealth to smooth her own future."

Thus he mused while considering the propriety of putting his fate to the test.

One day Virgie came into his office to consult with him regarding some point connected with her book, and he thought she appeared weary and looked paler than usual.

"You are working too hard, Mrs. Alexander," he said. "Do not apply yourself so closely---there is no need."

"No need?" returned Virgie; "there is every need. I am very mercenary, Mr. Knight," she added, smiling "I am determined to make all the money I can, so that my dear little girl may have every advantage by and by."

"But if you tax your strength too severely you may break down, and that would be far worse than not to make money quite so rapidly."

"I do not think I am going beyond my strength," Virgie replied, gravely. "Besides, I am much more content when I am very busy; it keeps me from---thinking."

"You ought to be far more than simply 'content,'" answered Mr. Knight, regarding the fair face wistfully, "for you are not only making plenty of money, but winning fame for yourself also. The name of Alexander bids fair to become renowned."

Virgie started violently at this, and glanced sharply at her companion. Then a burning blush suffused her face, and she said, in a low, pained tone:

"Oh, I hope not! I---I do not wish to be known. I am afraid I have done wrong in using the name at all. I did it hastily, impulsively-----"

She stopped, covered with confusion, a look of distress on her lovely face for having allowed herself to say so much.

Mr. Knight looked astonished for a moment, while he earnestly studied her countenance. Then light seemed to dawn upon him suddenly.

"Pardon me," he said, leaning eagerly toward her, "but what you have said has enlightened me regarding something that has puzzled me since the day I first met you. You are the daughter of Abbot Alexander who disappeared so mysteriously from this city several years ago."

"Yes, it is true," Virgie confessed, with bowed head and burning cheeks. "But, oh, Mr. Knight, pray do not allow any one else to suspect my identity if you can avoid it. Put some other name to my books, or put no name at all to them. For my father's sake, I shrink from attracting public attention to his name."

"My dear young friend, I fear you are morbidly sensitive I used to know your father, and I always esteemed him as a noble man---one whose honor was unimpeachable."

"Ah! Then you do not know---"

"Yes, I do know all about that financial earthquake which wrought his ruin and that of many others; but I am sure *he* was blameless."

"You judge him, then, more kindly than others," Virgie returned, almost weeping to hear her father so warmly defended. "There are few, I fear, who do not believe the very worst of him even now."

"Doubtless that is true," Mr. Knight answered, with a sigh; "but I have always been convinced that that rascally cashier was at the bottom of the wrong. You must pardon me for speaking so plainly. I know that he was a relative, though unworthy the name he bore."

"But all the papers stated that the president and cashier were in league," said Virgie.

"I know it; and at first the affair did have that appearance---at least, such a construction was but natural under the circumstances."

"But papa gave up every dollar he possessed to right the wrong."

"I know he did, but the amount was so small, compared with that which had been stolen, that people were skeptical regarding his motives, and when he also disappeared, they were only too ready to believe that he had gone to share the plunder with the guilty cashier. But I would as soon suspect myself of a crime as Abbot Alexander. I *know* that he was an honorable man."

"Oh, it is such a comfort to hear you say this," Virgie murmured, her voice husky with emotion, her eyes filled with tears. "Poor papa! his last years were embittered with the thought that every one believed him a defaulter---that he had not one friend in all the world, save his daughter, who had faith in him."

"He made a great mistake in leaving San Francisco as he did," Mr. Knight remarked. "If he had remained here and quietly lived down the scandal, he might in time have recovered the confidence of the people."

"Oh! if the stain could be removed from his name and memory!" sighed Virgie.

"I do not like to pain you, my dear," replied Mr. Knight, sympathetically; "but that would be very difficult to accomplish, unless that cashier should come forward and make a full confession."

Virgie looked up, startled, her face growing very white.

"I saw him here in the city last year," she said.

"Impossible!" exclaimed her friend.

"I am very sure I was not mistaken," Virgie affirmed and then she told the publisher the circumstances of her being followed by that muffled figure and of the advertisement which appeared in the papers a day or two following, desiring communication with her.

"I am afraid that *you* have made a mistake this time," said Mr. Knight, thoughtfully. "You ought to have communicated with the man."

"But I had such a horror of him; I could not believe that he would be able to tell me of anything to my advantage."

"At least he could have done you no harm, and he might have told you something worth knowing. Promise me, if anything of the same nature occurs again, you will let me know. If he could be arrested he might be forced to a confession of the truth."

Virgie was greatly disturbed by this view of the matter, and regretted that she had not had more wisdom at the time. She readily promised to do as Mr. Knight wished, though she feared she might never again have the opportunity.

"Now that the ice has been broken, and I know who you are, tell me something of your life among the mountains," said her friend. "I fear it must have been a very dreary and monotonous one."

"It was a very quiet and peaceful one," Virgie answered with a sigh, as she thought of the storms she had buffeted since. "Papa's claim proved to be an excellent one, and he made a good deal of money from it; and after we became somewhat used to the change in our life, it was not so bad."

"But all his earnings there had to be sacrificed also. My poor child; what a hard lot has been yours! I almost wonder at your having any faith whatever in human nature," said Mr. Knight, feelingly.

"I am sure that *you* have proved to me that there is at least one noble man in the world," Virgie returned, gratefully. "I shall never forget your kindness to me, Mr. Knight; you have been a true friend to me."

The publisher leaned eagerly forward, and gathered her hands in his; her words had inspired him with hope.

"Let me be more than a friend to you, dear," he pleaded. "Let me take care of you and your little one in the future. I know that I am much older than you---old enough almost to be your father; but my home is lonely. I lost my wife ten years ago. I have no children, and my heart is hungry for some one to love. Dear child, you have been growing very dear to me ever since you first came to me, and if you can trust me, if you can give yourself to me, I will not ask too much, or even expect that you can feel a great deal of affection for me, for I know how sorely you have been tried and deceived in that respect; but let me persuade you to come to my home as my honored wife, and I will surround you with tenderest care. Life shall be made as pleasant as possible for you, and there will be no need of your toiling any more."

Virgie sat as one stunned after this unexpected proposal.

She had never thought of anything like this during all her intercourse with the kind-hearted publisher. She had learned to esteem him very highly for his goodness to her, and to look up to him almost as to a father, but the thought of ever being any man's wife again had never occurred to her.

She grew very pale at his words, and instinctively shrank a little from him.

That act told him far more than words could have done, and he knew at once that his cause was hopeless.

He gently released her hands, sighing regretfully, while a look of pain settled upon his fine face.

"Oh! my friend," Virgie began, as soon as she could find her voice, "why have you said this to me? I have not had the remotest suspicion of---of your regard and what you have asked can never, never be."

"Then forget that I have said anything about it, my dear. I would not wound you for the world," said the old gentleman, with exceeding gentleness, but with a still pained, white face.

"Oh, please do not think me ungrateful for all your kindness," Virgie cried, the tears dropping thick and fast from her eyes; "but, believe me, I can never marry again. I feel, morally speaking, that I am just as truly Sir William Heath's wife to-day as I ever was, even though the law has rent the bond that existed between us. I do not feel that a marriage can be broken except by death."

"Then why did you appeal for a divorce?" interrupted Mr. Knight, with surprise.

"Simply that he might be free in the eyes of the world to make that other woman a legal wife---so that she need not suffer such a wrong through me."

"But she has already suffered it, if what you have heard is true."

"That may be, but he now has it in his power to do her justice, if he chooses. At all events, *I* can never feel free to change my condition in life. My whole future must be devoted to the preparation of my child for the position which she

will occupy by and by, for I am determined that she shall be acknowledged the rightful heir to Heathdale," Virgie concluded, firmly.

"How about the wrong which this other woman and her children will suffer in that case?" asked the publisher.

"That is something which I cannot help---for which I am in no way responsible. If others suffer, that must be Sir William Heath's punishment for the wrong which he has done me and my child."

Virgie was very pale, showing that she felt strongly on the subject, but she spoke decidedly, as if her purpose was unalterable.

"I can but own the justice of what you have said," responded Mr. Knight, adding: "But of course it will have to be as you say regarding the matter of which I spoke. I should have been very happy in providing for your future, and I had built many hopes upon having your presence in my home. However, I will never pain you by mentioning the subject again, and you must consider me the same friend as before. Come to me with all your plans, your hopes, and your troubles, and believe that I shall always feel the same interest in them as ever."

He arose and held out his hand to her as he spoke, and Virgie could see that it shook with the emotion which he was bravely trying to conceal.

Her heart was almost broken for him, for she knew, that his home was very silent and lonely. There was no one in it save his sister, a maiden lady of uncertain age, to make it pleasant for him.

"Forgive me!" she said, hardly able to speak, and with an impulsive movement she bent forward and touched her lips to the hand extended to her; then turning quickly, she glided from his presence before he could interpose a word to prevent her.

What happened to Virgie, and the final outcome of all her troubles is told in the sequel to this story entitled "Threads Gathered Up," which is published in a handsome cloth binding uniform with this volume.

The End.