

eBook

Ellen Walton

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Ellen Walton

THE VILLAIN AND HIS VICTIMS.

CHAPTER I.

Fleming's hotel.

In the year 1785, as, also, prior and subsequent to that time, there was a hotel situated in one of the less frequented streets of Pittsburg, then the largest town west of the mountains, and kept by one Fleming, whence it derived the name of "Fleming's Hotel." This house, a small one, and indifferently furnished, was a favorite resort of the Indians who visited the town on trading expeditions. Fleming had two daughters, who possessed considerable personal attractions, and that pride of a vain woman---*beauty*. History does not, to the best of our knowledge, give us the first names of the two girls; and we will distinguish them as Eliza and Sarah. Unfortunately for these young females, they had ever been surrounded by unfavorable circumstances, and exposed to the vices of bad associations; and that nice discrimination between propriety and politeness, which is a natural characteristic of the modest woman, had become somewhat obliterated, and the hold which virtue ever has by nature in the heart of the gentler sex, had been somewhat loosened. In short, the young Misses Fleming failed at all times to observe that degree of propriety which should ever characterize the pure in heart, and were, by many, accused of immorality. How far this accusation was true, we shall not attempt to say, but, doubtless, there were not wanting many tongues to spread slanderous reports.

In early years of womanhood, Eliza had given her affections to one who sought her love under the guise of a "gentleman of fortune." He proved to be what such characters usually are---a libertine, whose only motive in seeking to win her confidence and young affections was to gratify his hellish passions in the ruin of virtue and a good name. Under the most solemn assurances of deep, abiding, unalterable love for her, and the most solemn promises of marriage at an early day, which if he failed to perform, the direst maledictions of heaven, and the most awful curses, were called down upon his own head, even to the eternal consuming of his soul in the flames of perdition, he succeeded in his design. Virtue was overcome, and the jewel of purity departed from the heart of another of earth's daughters. Vain were the tears of the repentant girl to induce a performance of the promises so solemnly made; false had been and still were the vows of the profligate; but he continued to make them all the more profusely; and hope, at first unwavering, then fainter and fainter, filled the heart of his victim. Once conquered, and the victory was ever after comparatively easy; and having taken something of a fancy to this lady, he was for a long time attached to her, and, in his way, remained faithful.

Such were the mutual relations sustained by these two toward each other, when, one day, the betrayer entered the presence of the betrayed, and, in some agitation, said:

"Eliza, my dear, you have always been a kind, dear girl to me, and I have resolved to repay your constancy and devotion by making you my bride in a few days; but first I must demand of you a service, an important service. Can I depend on you?"

"You know you can; let me know how I can aid you in such a manner as will insure me your hand, and I will serve you unto death."

"Bravely spoken! Just what I expected of your devoted love! But the service I shall require will sorely try that love!"

"Then let me prove its strength."

"Eliza, do you doubt my truth? my sincerity?"

"Have I not given you stronger proof than a thousand asseverations, or the strongest oaths, that my confidence is unbounded? Without this trust, I should be wretched beyond endurance!"

"I am glad to hear you talk so. Still I fear you will not consent to serve me as I shall wish."

"Try me and see."

"Are you of a *jealous* disposition, my love?"

"Jealous? What a question for *you* to ask!"

"It may appear strange, yet I would be pleased to have you answer me truly, and without reserve. Tell me your real sentiments without reserve or disguise. Much depends thereon."

"Truly, I cannot say, never having been tried; but I can verily believe that intense hatred would arise in my heart toward one of my sex who would attempt to supplant me in your affections."

"Suppose I should disregard their efforts, what then?"

"Nothing. If sure of your attachment, I would care for nothing beside."

"Tis well! But suppose that I should tell you that I once loved another than you?"

"As you love me?"

"No; with a boyish affection, soon forgotten."

"Then I would care nothing for it."

"Not if it left an incurable wound?"

"Did it?"

"It did!"

"My God! How have I been deceived."

"Don't be alarmed, my dear, the wound was not in the heart---it was in pride."

"How?"

"I was not troubled at heart, but the girl I fancied gave me mortal offense, and I would be revenged!"

"How so? What is this? Don't love, and wish revenge! Revenge for what? And that dark frown---what means all this?"

"Be calm; you are excited; you fear my truth; and where there is no confidence, love soon departs. I can soon explain all. In my young days I fell in love with a beautiful girl of my own age; but soon learned that she was not virtuous, and with this knowledge my love changed into desire. As the least return for my love, to gain which she had recourse to all the wiles and blandishments of a coquette, I wished to possess her for a time; but she spurned me from her presence as she would a dog! From that hour I have sworn to have my revenge and gain my point. My hour has now come, and I can accomplish my oath, provided I am secure of one thing."

"And what is that?"

"Your co-operation."

"Me aid in such a scheme!"

"Why not?"

"*Why not?* Shall I turn the enemy of my own sex, and aid in the destruction of one who has never injured me?"

"She *has* injured you."

"In what way?"

"By destroying, in a good degree, my confidence in the sex. Had that confidence been unshaken, you would, long ere this time, have been my wife; but how could I trust my happiness with woman when woman had proved treacherous? I had been once deceived, and distrust had taken the place of faith, when I met you. You know the result. Now tell me, has not this girl injured you deeply?"

"It may be so; but why not let her go? What good can it do to pursue her with vengeance? Perhaps she has repented. How wicked, then, to destroy her peace of mind."

"Dream not that such as she will ever repent. But to satisfy you on this point, I can say, *I know she has not changed from what she was*; and it is this knowledge that, above all things, urges me on in my plans."

"Well, what do you wish me to do?"

"Listen. I have just learned that this girl, in company with her family, will be in town to-day, on their way to Ohio or Kentucky, and will put up at this house. Now I wish you to so place the young lady, that I can have access to her sleeping apartment; this is all."

"I cannot do it."

"You can; I will take number eighteen for the night; put her in seventeen, and it is all I ask. I am sure this is easily done."

"And thus bring about my own shame and her dishonor?"

"I tell you she is already dishonored; and instead of bringing shame upon yourself, you take it away forever."

"Do not tempt me to do wrong! Alas, I have done too much evil already! I pray God I may be forgiven!"

"Come, now, be a good girl, and do me this *one* favor; it is the last I shall require of you until I give you my name."

"I cannot. Such conduct would disgrace our house."

"It need not be known."

"It is hard to prevent such things being spread abroad."

"I will take care of that point. Your house shall not be injured one particle by the occurrence, I give you my word for it. Now do you consent?"

"Perhaps you still love this girl, and are trying to deceive me."

"I swear that I do not, that I love only you."

"Why, then, seek the society of this other?"

"I have sworn it, as I have already told you; and this oath *must* be performed. Will you aid me or not?"

"I cannot. I pray you again, do not tempt me!"

"But you *must* help me. I cannot do without you."

"For God's sake say no more! Every feeling of my heart revolts at the thought! Just think, for a moment, what it is you ask of me! Think what would be my feelings! Love is incompatible with your request. How can I see you debase yourself and me by such an act?"

"I only desire you to decide between this and a worse debasement. Which will you choose?"

"What mean you?"

"That I will only marry you on condition you will accede to my present proposition."

"Have you not told me, time and again, that you looked upon me as your wife by the highest of all laws, the laws of nature and of God? How, then, can you talk of not making me legally yours, in the sight of men?"

"I will, I tell you, if you will do as I wish in the present instance. Come, be kind, be gentle and loving, as you ever have been, and we will soon be completely happy by acknowledging our love before men, at the altar."

"This again! Oh, tempter, betray me not!"

"You have your choice. I will *never* marry you if you refuse my present offer, *never*! Whose, then, will be the shame? Which will you be, an honorable wife, or a despised offcast? Your destiny is in your own hands, make your election."

"Oh, God! I am in your power!"

"Then you consent?"

"What assurance have I that this promise will make me your wife? Have you not promised the same thing scores of times?"

"Require any form of obligation, and I will give it; as I mean what I say, make your own conditions."

"Give me a written promise."

He gave it as she dictated it:

"I hereby promise to marry Eliza Fleming within one month from this 12th day of April, 1786. This promise I most solemnly give, calling on heaven to witness it, and if I fail in its performance, may the curses of God rest upon my soul in this world and in the world to come.

"*Louis Durant.*"

"That will do," she said.

"And I may depend on you?"

"Yes; I am no longer free. But mind, all must be done quietly and kept a profound secret."

"Leave that to me; I will be responsible for the result."

Thus was a net woven for an unsuspecting victim. Who was she, and what the cause for this unrelenting and revengeful feeling on the part of Durant? Time must show.

CHAPTER II.

A villain unmasked.

In a beautiful district of the "Old Dominion," bordering on the Rappahannock, there lived, just previous to the time of the opening of our story, a planter, who had once been wealthy, but whose princely fortune had become much reduced by indiscriminate kindness. Possessed of a noble heart, a generous disposition, and the finest sympathies, he could never find it in his heart to say "no" to an application for assistance. Thousands had thus gone to pay debts of security; and, at last, he resolved to move to the West, as a means of retrieving his affairs, as well as to cut loose from the associations which were rapidly diminishing the remains of his wealth.

This planter, whom we shall call General Walton, (the last name assumed, the title one given him by common consent,) had one son, and an only daughter, the former twenty-one, the latter eighteen, at the time we wish to introduce them to the reader's notice. Both were worthy, the one as a man, the other as a woman. He was noble, intellectual, manly; she was beautiful, accomplished, intelligent; both possessed those higher and nobler qualities of mind and heart which dignify and ally it to divinity.

Ellen Walton, an heiress, jointly with her brother, in prospective, and reputed the wealthiest fair one in all the district, (the world don't always know the true situation of a man's affairs,) was not left to pine away in solitude with the dismal prospect in view of becoming that dreaded personage---*an old maid*. No, she was *beset* with admirers; some loving *her*, some her *wealth*, and some *both*. To all but one she turned a deaf ear; that one, though the least presuming of the many, and too diffident to urge his claim until impelled by the irresistible violence of his love, possessed, unknown to himself,

a magnetic power over the heart of the fair being. Many were the doubts and fears of both---natural accompaniments of true, sincere, devoted, but unacknowledged, love---but all were dispelled by the mutual exchange of thoughts, and the mutual lighting of faith. Vows once made by the pure in heart, are seldom, if ever, broken, and then by some higher duty or demand.

For a time the youthful lovers were happy---happy in themselves, and the joys of the new existence opened up to them by the magic wand of LOVE. But love has its trials, as all can testify who have tasted its potency in the heart; and so these two learned. Their engagement was a family secret, not yet to be developed. Hence, many of her admirers still offered their attentions, in the vain hope of ultimate success. Particularly was this the case with those who had an eye to the fortune rather than the heiress, taking the latter as the only means of obtaining the former; and first among this number was Louis Durant, a man of corrupt principles, and deeply depraved feelings. A sprig of a noble family of small pretensions, whose pride far exceeded their means, he was desirous of obtaining wealth; and being too indolent to enter a profession, too poor to become a merchant, and too proud to work, as a last resort, he wished to *marry* a fortune. Like most of his class, he was unscrupulous as to *means* so the *end* was attained. It was, therefore, an easy matter to conform, in outward appearance, to the society he was in. This he never failed to do. When with the Waltons, he was a pattern of generosity, and a pitying angel. When with the gambler, or the *roue*, he was equally at home---a debauchee, or a handler of cards.

With the intuitive perception of woman, Ellen saw through his character at once; and, though she treated him with civility, never gave him any encouragement. Blinded by her fortune, and construing her reserve into the bashfulness of a first passion, being too vain to acknowledge the inability of his powers of fascination to carry all before them, he gave himself up to hope, and already counted on the half of the Walton estate as his own, and spent many a shilling of his small funds on the strength of the anticipation.

When he saw that the bottom of his purse would soon be reached, he sought an opportunity, declared himself in love, and asked the hand of Miss Walton. The General to whom he had always appeared a "fine fellow," would leave his daughter to decide the matter. Thus referred, he lost no time in making Ellen the recipient of his "tale of love." All his theatrical powers were called in action; his eloquence commanded; but the impressions made were far different from those intended. Though the outward semblance was complete, Ellen saw that the passion was feigned, and a still deeper dislike took possession of her feelings. But with gentle delicacy, she told him his passion was not returned.

"Then," said he, "let me win your love. I am sure your heart will yield when you are convinced of the depth of the devotedness of my affection."

"Do not flatter yourself with a vain hope. I feel that I shall never be able to love you; and it is in kindness that I tell you so at once."

"Ah, adorable, angelic being! One so kind, so considerate, so good, is too pure, too near akin to heaven, for man to possess. I only ask to be your friend."

"As such, you shall ever be welcome."

"Thanks! thanks! May I but prove worthy of your friendship!"

Thus terminated his first attempt to win Ellen. His fall from the lover to a friend was the first step in a plot already matured. As a friend, he could ever have access to the heiress, and be received more familiarly than in any other capacity, save as an acknowledged lover. This familiarity would give him the opportunity of ingratiating himself into her affections, of which, finally, he felt certain.

He became a constant and frequent visitor at the mansion of the Waltons, and was ever received with cordiality. He let no opportunity pass unimproved to carry out his design. Goodness, benevolence, charity, were counterfeited most adroitly, until even Ellen began to think she had done him injustice by her suspicions. This is a favorable moment for a lover. Prove that you have been dealt with unjustly, and a woman's heart is opened by sympathy to let you in. It was well for Ellen that her heart was already occupied, or this might possibly have been her fate. As it was, she became, insensibly and unintentionally, kind to Durant. He did not fail to notice the change, and his heart exulted in the prospect of complete success.

When he thought the proper time had arrived, he prepared the way, and again declared himself a lover, with more eloquence than before. Again his suit was gently declined; but this time he persevered until his importunities became unbearable, and with them, all Ellen's old prejudices returned, strengthened ten-fold. If he could and would force himself for weeks and months upon an unwilling victim of his importunities, and attempt by such means to force her to accept his hand, he was depraved enough for any other wickedness. So she plainly told him she could not and would not submit longer to his unreasonable conduct; that he must consider himself as finally, fully and unrecalably dismissed.

"And give up all hope---the hope that has sustained and given me life so long? Oh, think, Ellen, think of my misery, of the untold wretchedness into which you plunge me, and let your heart, your kind, generous heart, relent!"

"Mr. Durant, I have told you often and often that it was impossible for me to love you, and that it was kindness to tell you so. If you have disregarded my oft repeated declaration, the truth of which you must long ere this have been convinced, the fault is yours, not mine."

"I know you have so spoken often, but still I have dared to hope. I loved too fervently for the passion ever to die before you denied me hope. Think of all these things, and then recall your words."

"You have repeated them so frequently, that I could not well avoid thinking of them whether I chose to or not. Let me now say, once for all, that importunities are utterly useless, and can prove of no avail."

"Then I am to understand you as casting me off from your presence; and this being the *end* of your kindness, may I ask what was the *object* of that kindness?"

"I always endeavor to do unto others as I would have them do to me. If you think such a course wrong, I cannot help it."

"Then you would wish some person, who had the power, to show you all manner of good will, until your affections were won, and so firmly fixed as to be unalterable, and then cast you off?"

"No, I should be far from desiring such conduct on the part of any one."

"And yet that is your way of 'doing as you would be done by!'"

"I am not aware of ever having done so; if I have been the unwitting instrument of such acts, I am truly sorry for it."

"Then let your sorrow work repentance."

"Tell me how, and I will try to do so."

"You cannot be ignorant of my meaning."

"I am totally at a loss to know how your remarks can apply to me, in any way."

"Then I will speak plainly. Your actions for the last few months have been such as to bid me hope for a return of my love, and allured by that hope, founded on those actions, I have placed my affections so strongly, that I fear it will be death to tear them away. As you have caused me to love, is it demanding more than justice that I should ask you to at least *try* to love me in return?"

"Mr. Durant, you know that your accusations are untrue. Did you not just tell me that you loved before you ever spoke to me on the subject? and have you not repeatedly, aye, a hundred times, told me I was cold toward you, ever evincing a want of cordiality? How, then, can you have the face to ask a return of love on this score? Since you have been at such pains to make out so contradictory a case, I will say that you but lessen yourself in my esteem by the attempt!"

"I see, alas, you are a heartless coquette!"

"Because I will not place the half of my father's wealth in your possession. I have read your motive from the beginning, sir, and have only refrained from telling you my mind, because I make it a rule to have the good will of a dog, in preference to his ill will, when I can. But as your conduct to-day has removed the last thin screen from your real character, and revealed your naked depravity of heart, I care not even for your friendship. You know, you *feel*, that you are a degraded wretch, and that you are unworthy of the society of the virtuous."

"Madam, those words just spoken have sealed your fate! Dog as I am, I have the power to work your ruin, and *I will do it!* I go from your presence a bitter and unrelenting foe! The love you have rejected has turned into bitterness, and the dregs of that bitterness you shall drink till your soul sickens unto death! I will never lose sight of you! Go where you may, I will follow you! Hide in what corner of the world you may, I will find you! When you meet me, remember I am an implacable enemy, seeking revenge!"

"Go, vile miscreant, from my presence! Think not to intimidate me. Better an 'open enemy than a secret foe.' I am glad you have unmasked yourself so fully. Now I know that I have escaped the worst fate on earth."

"Not the worst! To be the wife of even a villain is better than to be his victim!"

"Leave my presence, sir, or I will call a slave to put you out! Infamous wretch! The curse of God be upon you!"

He went, quailing under the flash of her indignant eye, which made his guilty soul cower in abasement.

When he was fairly gone, her high strung energies relaxed, and the reaction prostrated her strength. She sunk upon a lounge, and, giving way to her feelings, exclaimed:

"That man may yet work the ruin of my happiness! Oh, God, pity me, and let not the wicked triumph! In Thee I put my trust. Let thy watchful eye be over me, and thy power protect me. Oh, let me not fall into the hands of my enemy; but preserve me by thy right hand, and keep me lifted up!"

Prayer gave her strength, and renewed her courage. Relying, with firm faith, on the goodness and watchful care of her Father in heaven, she became cheerful and composed.

She very seldom saw or heard anything of Durant, but when she did, it always awakened fear. For a year she heard nothing of him, and, at last, the old dread had passed from her heart, when her father prepared to go to the West.

As for Durant, he went from her presence muttering curses and threatening vengeance, among which was distinguished by a slave, grated out between his clenched teeth, "I'll make her repent this day's work in 'sack-cloth and ashes!' aye, if all h---ll oppose!"

CHAPTER III.

THE VILLAIN AND HIS VICTIM.

The reader has, doubtless, arrived at the conclusion that Durant was planning the destruction of Ellen Walton when he so earnestly desired the assistance of Miss Fleming; and it will now be perceived how false were his statements in relation to the *character* of the expected guest. Though unseen himself, he had taken every precaution to make certain of the party at the Fleming Hotel; and just at the close of day he had the satisfaction of seeing his efforts crowned with success. General Walton, influenced by the tales his daughter's foe had whispered to him in confidence, passed by the more elegant houses, which, but for defaming reports, he would have preferred making his abode during his short stay in the place, and took lodgings at the "Fleming."

Eliza Fleming made the acquaintance of her young female guest, and every fresh insight into Miss Walton's character made her regret the hard necessity she was under of doing her an injury. She had a hard struggle in her mind, but at length her determination was fixed. To procure the ruin of the innocent guest, (for she had thoroughly satisfied herself that Miss Walton *was* innocent and virtuous,) whom every obligation of hospitality required her to protect, was indeed damnable; but to forfeit the hand of Durant under the circumstances was impossible, and not to be thought of. Poor Ellen! Heaven shield thee!

Durant was not seen by any of the Waltons, as it was his object to keep them in entire ignorance of his proximity until such time as he chose to reveal himself. Miss Fleming knew where to find him; and, according to agreement, met him during the evening, to arrange some matters connected with the plot.

"Louis, you have required too much at my hands in this affair. I fear I shall not be able to comply with the terms of agreement."

"Then return my written promise of marriage, and live to be despised and a by-word among men! I thought the matter was definitely settled, and that you had resolved to save your own honor and name at every hazard."

"But is this my only hope?"

"Yes, as true as there is a God in heaven, it is. I will forsake you forever unless you comply with my wishes in this affair."

"Then I must name some conditions, to which I shall demand the strictest compliance on your part."

"Name them."

"In the first place, then, to avoid the possibility of noise or mishap, I will give the lady a potion, which will stupefy her faculties, and cause a deep sleep to lock up all her senses for the space of three or four hours. I will so arrange it, that these hours shall be from eleven to three o'clock, and what is done must be accomplished between those periods of time. You shall, therefore, not enter number seventeen until after eleven o'clock, and you must positively leave it before three; and you shall not let your victim know what transpires at this house until after the Waltons have left the city. Do you consent to these terms?"

"I suppose I must."

"Then the matter is settled. Remember the hours; I shall know if my injunctions are disregarded, and you will fare the worse for it."

"Fear not. Come to reflect, I like your plan better than my own, as there is less danger in it every way."

"Enough. Good night."

"Hold a moment. Is there any fastening on the door between the rooms, on the side in number seventeen?"

"There is; but I will take care of that; and you know no one, unless well acquainted with the spot, could tell there was a door there."

"True, true---I had forgotten that fact."

"Oh, I forgot one prohibition. You must in no case let a ray of light into seventeen. It might render all our precautions abortive, and defeat their object."

"Very well. I will be careful."

"Do so, and all will be well. Of course, no noise, even as loud as a whisper, must be heard in the lady's room."

"I will be discreet; trust me for that. I am glad you have come to the rescue; I find there is nothing like a woman's wit."

"Take care, then, that you are never *outwitted* by them!"

"Not much fear of that while I have such an ingenious ally!"

"Take good care to keep her an ally; as an enemy, she might be equally ingenious."

And so they parted. As she left the room, she mentally exclaimed:

"Come to the rescue! Yes, I am truly glad I have!"

The guests retired to their beds, and all was still as the solemn silence of midnight. The old clock in the corner tolled the hour of eleven, and half an hour afterward, a stealthy tread might have been heard along the partition dividing the two rooms already named. Soon a door slowly opened on its rusty hinges, and in the rayless darkness Durant entered the number containing his victim. He reached the couch, and paused to assure himself that all was as he desired. His ear was saluted with a heavy breathing, as of one in deep sleep.

"All right!" he muttered within himself. "My hour has come. The vengeance of the '*dog*' shall be complete! Oh, but how I will glory in *my* triumph, and the proud one's disgrace! I'll make her *feel* what it is to insult a nobleman by blood! Gods, how the memory burns my brain of that indignity! An unknown girl to scorn and cast contumely upon one of England's line of lords! This night be the stain wiped out!"

Lost! lost! *lost!* demon! from thy presence we turn away! Villain and victim, there is a God above!

* * * * *

The morning dawned, and the sun rose as cloudless as though no deeds of crime, needing the darkness to cover them, had been perpetrated on the earth. The Waltons left with the company they expected to join at Pittsburg on the succeeding day, not knowing that Durant had slept under the same roof with them. No, not so fast. One of their number *did* know the fact--Ellen. Was it that knowledge that caused the paleness on her cheek, that aroused the anxious solicitude of her tender and watchful parents?

"Are you sick, my daughter?" was the mother's affectionate inquiry. But she was cheered by the assurance that there was no serious cause of alarm; and that Ellen was only a little unwell. Without any mishap, they reached their new home in Kentucky.

Two weeks had passed, and Eliza Fleming was still unmarried. During that time, she had seen Durant but twice, and he appeared desirous of avoiding a private interview. She was not slow to perceive this, and it filled her mind with misgivings of his truth, or the sincerity of his protestations. She demanded an interview; the demand was acceded to; and she said:

"Why do you not make arrangements for our approaching marriage? It is surely time you were about it."

"Oh, no hurry yet," he replied. "There is plenty of time."

"Plenty of time! Yes, if all that need be done, is to call the minister, and have the ceremony performed! But it strikes me this is *not* all. However, what day have you fixed upon as your choice for the wedding occasion?"

"I can't say as I have thought upon any day in particular; in fact, the subject had so far escaped my mind, that I had nearly forgotten it entirely."

"A devoted lover, truly! What am I to think of such unmerited coldness?" and she burst into tears.

"Come, Eliza, let us understand each other, and be friends."

"Friends! Is that all?"

"Lovers, then."

"Husband and wife, you mean."

"Lovers only; as we have been."

"Am I to understand you as saying you will not fulfill your written promise of making me your lawful wife?"

"You might be farther from the truth."

"Is this the reward of my devotion? the fruits of my sacrifice? Oh, God, who shall measure the depths of wickedness of a depraved heart? Sir, I shall enforce my rights."

"You dare not do it."

"Why not?"

"The very attempt will ruin yourself, and your father's business by bringing disgrace upon his house."

"I see it, sir; but what if I still proceed?"

"You cannot."

"I can."

"On what plan?"

"On your own written promise."

"You have no such promise."

"Do you deny giving it?"

"I do."

"Then your own hand-writing will condemn you."

"Be certain of that before you proceed."

"You know I *have* such a document."

"I know you have *not*."

"Then I will prove it."

And she went in search of the paper, where she had carefully placed it away. But no paper was to be found! What could have become of it? She returned.

"Well, let me see your 'document,' as you term it," he said, in a taunting manner.

"It has been misplaced by some means, but I will find it in time to answer my purpose."

"Perhaps."

"Durant, you *know* I have such a paper, and what is the use of denying it?"

"Again, I repeat, I know no such thing." Then after a pause, he continued: "We might as well understand each other at once."

He produced a paper, and went on: "Here, I suppose, is the article you speak of. I see it is in my hand-writing, and lest by any chance it should again fall into your hands, I will destroy it."

And holding it in the candle, it was soon reduced to ashes. The outwitted girl sat dumb with astonishment, surprise and dismay, and, for several seconds, was speechless. When utterance came, she inquired:

"How, in the name of reason, did you get that paper in your possession?"

"I will be frank: I watched you putting it away, and the next day I went and took it."

"And this is my reward for the signal service you demanded as the price of that written promise?"

"My continued love will be your reward."

"*Your* love! Think you, vile miscreant, I would have the base semblance of affection from such a polluted thing as you? No, sir! Now that I see your depravity, worlds would not tempt me to wed you, degraded as I am! How I have remained blinded so long is a mystery I cannot solve, in the overwhelming light of this hour. Thank God, I am even with you!--Yes, thank Him from the bottom of my heart! You have deceived me, but in this instance I am not behind you. Ellen Walton left this house as pure as she entered it! Think you I had no object in all my restrictions of time, of secrecy and darkness? I had. One hour in the society of Miss Walton, convinced me of her unsullied purity, and another of your baseness. I resolved to save her at all hazards; and I did. My only regret *now* is, that I made myself the victim instead of her!"

"H---ll and furies!"

"Even, am I not?"

"May the devil take you!"

"Better take care of the old fellow yourself; and of woman's wit, too!"

"I'll have my revenge yet. I'll swear that I did stay the night with Ellen, despite your treachery."

"It will do you no good. My sister gave the young lady an attested certificate, stating that she passed the whole time with her, the two together, that the door to their room was locked, and that they were undisturbed during the night.---Nothing like a 'woman's wit!'"

[Illustration: "And drawing a pistol, which some freak had caused her to conceal in her dress, she made it ready, and, with her finger on the trigger, aimed it at his heart."---See page 29.]

"I curse you! Vile, treacherous---"

"Spare your epithets, inhuman monster! or, by the heavens above us, you leave not this spot alive!"

And drawing a pistol, which some freak had caused her to conceal in her dress, she made it ready, and, with her finger on the trigger, aimed it at his heart. Like all villains of his caste, he was a coward, and trembled with quaking fear before the flashing eye and resolute look of the excited girl.

"Now, vile, degraded, polluted *thing!* you go from my presence never to return. Hold! not just yet, I have a parting word to say before you leave. I confess, with self-abasement, that I once loved you, and with deep humiliation, amounting to agony, that that love was the cause of my ruin. The veil is now torn from my eyes, and I behold you as you are, a

corrupted, debased, unfeeling demon, in the human form; and I would not even touch you with my finger's end, so deep is my detestation and abhorrence of your depravity! Aye, sir, even for *me* your very touch is defiling! But if ever you whisper a word concerning the relation you once sustained toward *me*, be it but so loud as your breath, I will as surely destroy you as I now stand before you! Remember and beware! for I call God, and angels, and earth to witness this my vow! One so lost as *you*, shall not couple *my* name with his!"

She paused a moment, as if to collect her energies for a last effort, and then continued:

"Into the darkness of this moonless, starless, sky-beclouded night, you shall soon be driven. May it faintly prefigure the unending blackness of that eternal night you have chosen as your future portion. As you have willfully, voluntarily, and most wickedly called it down upon your own head, may the 'curse of God rest upon you in this world and the world to come!' May evils betide you in this life, every cherished hope be blasted; every plot of villainy thwarted, and you become a reproach among men, an outcast and a vagabond on the face of the earth! And when, at last, your sinful race is run, and your guilty soul has been ushered into that dreaded eternity you have plucked upon it, may your polluted carcass become the prey of the carrion-crow and the buzzard, and the wild beasts of the desert wilderness howl a requiem over your bones! Go now, and meet your doom! Go with the curse of wretched innocence ever abiding upon you! Go with the canker-worm of festering corruption ever hanging, like an incubus, upon your prostituted heart, and may its fangs, charged with burning poison, pierce the very vitals of existence, till life itself shall become a burden and a curse! Go!"

And he went, with the awful curse ever burning as a flaming fire on the tablet of his memory.

* * * * *

The reader must bear with us for being compelled to introduce in our pages some exceptional characters. Had we consulted our own taste, or painted the characters ourself, it would not have been so. In this particular, we had no choice, as the actors were furnished to our hand in the light we have represented them, as we shall presently show by authenticated history. For the present, however, we pass to other scenes.--AUTHOR.

CHAPTER IV.

MORE VILLAINY.

From the presence of Miss Fleming, Durant went to an obscure old cabin near the river, where he met an accomplice in villainy, a tool of his, by the name of Ramsey, whom he often employed to do hazardous and dirty work, he himself was too cowardly or too *aristocratic* to perform. The object of the present interview was to learn on what boat the Waltons had taken passage. He was scheming again.

"Ramsey," said he, "what boats have left in the last two weeks to go down the river?"

"Only three, sir."

"Three! Did you see them all?"

"I did."

"Did you know any of the passengers?"

"I did. Colonel Thomas Marshall commanded one of the boats, with whom there were a number of Virginians, several of them personally known to me."

"Was there a family by the name of Walton among them?"

"Walton---Walton? I don't know them."

"A father, mother and daughter; the girl eighteen, and uncommonly good looking---present a much richer appearance than is usual with emigrants."

"I remember them; they went in another boat."

"Do you think they have reached Maysville yet?"

"If unusually lucky, they have; but most probably not."

"Then there is a possibility of their being overtaken, you think?"

"There *may* be; particularly if any bad luck has attended them."

"Quick, then, quick! away!---Have the boat decoyed to the shore, and captured by the Indians! You understand, *captured*: the girl must on no account be killed."

"You don't mean that I shall start out to-night in this storm and darkness?"

"Yes, and without a moment's delay. Set the red dogs on the scent---capture the girl, and you shall be rewarded on your own terms. Go, or it will be too late!"

With some hesitation Ramsey obeyed, and when once in for the business, pushed it forward with all the energy he could master. This fellow was on friendly terms with the Indians, a band of whom---kind of renegades---whenever he could come across them, would follow his orders, or do his bidding. With a dispatch that would have done credit to the swiftest courier in the days of chivalry, he pushed forward through the wilderness to the usual place of rendezvous of this band, hoping to find and enlist them in the enterprise on hand; but they were absent on some expedition of their own. Not to be discouraged by one disappointment, Ramsey paused only long enough to determine that his expected coadjutors were not to be found in or about their usual lurking place, then continued his course down the Ohio with unabated ardor, and on the second day came in sight of a boat just at dusk of the evening. A momentary scrutiny convinced him that it was the one he was in pursuit of, and he concluded it must have been delayed by some misfortune, as he did not expect to come up to it so soon, if at all. However this might be, one thing was certain, the boat was there, and more still, the crew were careless, a certain sign that they felt secure and free from any dread of danger. So much the better for his purpose, thought the villain.

Driving on through the forest, at a speed far exceeding the slow motions of the boat, he resolved to collect a body of savages, and intercept the prize. Fortune seemed to favor him; for on the next day he fell in with a large force of warriors, who were "on the war-path," and ready for any work that gave promise of blood, booty, or scalps. They were easily induced to further the designs of Ramsey, of whose character they were well aware; and placing themselves under his guidance, he soon posted them along the banks of the river to watch for the coming boat. At dark it was descried, but being too far out to admit of being attacked, the enemy silently withdrew, and hastening forward, took a second position below the first. This was done several times, and, at last, Ramsey had the satisfaction of seeing the boat near the Ohio

shore. When within fifty yards of the bank, the Indians, to the number of several hundred, suddenly came down to the edge of the water, and opened a heavy fire upon the crew.

The boat was commanded by Captain James Ward---was a crazy old thing, with only a single pine board for a bulwark. The captain was at one oar, and his nephew, a young man, at the other. Knowing that all depended on reaching the middle of the stream, the captain used his best exertions to force the vessel out; but his nephew let go his oar, and took up his gun to fire. As he did so, he was pierced through with a ball, and fell, mortally wounded. His oar dropped into the river; and the exertions of the captain only tended to force the boat nearer the shore. Seeing this, the savages gave a yell of triumph, and prepared to take possession of the prize. Ward, however, seized hold of a board, and with it took the place of his nephew, giving his own oar to one of the men, and made renewed exertions to gain the current, the enemy, meanwhile, pouring upon the crew an incessant volley of balls, thick as the falling hail of the storm, which soon riddled everything above the plank breastwork, and killed or wounded all the horses on board---seven in number.

During this time most of the crew were too badly frightened to do or be conscious of anything, excepting danger. One large, fat old Dutchman, in particular, was so taken aback, he threw himself down flat, with his face to the deck, hoping thus to escape with his life. Unfortunately for his peace of mind, however, his posterior protuberance was of such enormously aldermanic dimensions, that it projected above the defenses, and became a fine and laughable target for the savage marksmen, who aimed the great majority of their shots thereat. As the bullets tore through the old fellow's unmentionables, and raking his hide, made it smart, he would shift his position, and endeavor to shield himself all over; but it was of no use. In spite of all the efforts he could make, the young mountain *would* remain in view in its exposed situation, to the great annoyance of its owner, and the equally great merriment of the enemy. In this sad predicament the phlegmatic hero of the flesh mountain lay, piteously bemoaning his fate, and cursing his foes.

As the balls would rake the subnascent appendage, making it twinge with the sharp sting, he would cry out:

"Oh! oh, Lort! haf' mercy on *me* and *mine*!"

But his cries availed nothing; and so losing all patience, he raised up his head, and, looking at the enemy, called to them:

"Oh, now, t'ere! quit t'at tam nonsense, will you?"

The boat was, finally, saved, with all on board, except the young man and the horses. (For further particulars of this affair, see "Western Adventure," page 275-6.)

Ramsey discovered at the commencement of the fray that this was not the boat he was in quest of, and so, leaving the Indians to accomplish its capture as they pleased, he hastened onward in the hope of still overtaking the right vessel. In this he failed; already had it reached its destination, and the Waltons were in their new home. He returned, and reported his ill success to Durant, who was greatly vexed at the issue of his undertaking, but resolved to renew his efforts to obtain possession of Ellen, or in some way work her ruin.

CHAPTER V.

STILL AT WORK.

An evil heart, bent on mischief, is never contented in idleness, but, like the volcanic fires, its passions and thirst for revenge, when not in open eruption, are actively at work in secret and darkness, preparing for new outbursts, bearing death along their path, and leaving devastation, blight and ruin in their wake. This was much the case with Louis Durant, after the failure of his attempt on the boat. He was resolved to accomplish the villainy on which he had set his heart, and

to this end determined to leave no means untried, be they ever so base, which lay within his reach.

To proceed openly, however, was not exactly practicable, as by so doing too many eyes would be upon him; and he was too cowardly to face an open foe on fair ground. So he went to work in secret.

After mature deliberation, and the revolving and the re-revolving of the matter in his mind, he concluded to join the Indians, and through their aid accomplish the consummation of his designs. In carrying out this plan, he was very materially aided by his old accomplice in crime, Ramsey, whose familiarity with the red men gave him at once the facilities for introducing his friend to their notice, which he did with a flourish and eulogium. Things went on smoothly enough while Durant was learning the language, customs, manners and habits of his new allies. He had as much as he could do to convince them of his bravery and undaunted courage, which qualities, believing he was deficient in them, they as often as possible put to the test. In many of these adventures he barely came off with credit whole, a thing he found absolutely necessary to maintain any kind of credit with this singular people, and, for this purpose, he called into action every particle of courage from every crack and crevice of his system, and brought the whole to bear upon one point, the wavering of his own heart, and, with it, the staying of his almost quaking limbs, and ready-to-run-away feet. He had just "*quantum sufficit*" for this purpose, and *none to spare*.

These achievements occupied about two years in their accomplishment, at the end of which period, Durant, having established himself pretty fairly in the good graces of his red brethren, felt as though the time had arrived for him to put in execution his long intended project; for, be it known, his desire for vengeance had neither slumbered nor died during the two years, but was the grand moving impulse to every important act. These years, so full of restrained wrath on his part, were years of peace to his intended victim. Ellen Walton, save the fear of Indians, and the usual trials incident to pioneer life, had spent her time in hopeful quiet, full of love's anticipated bliss in the bright *future*.

Almost had she forgotten Durant and his threats. Pity she should ever be awakened from her blissful dreams to dread reality.

Very early in the spring of 1787, and not quite two years since her father's settlement in the country, on a very pleasant day, she ventured to walk out a short distance into the forest, which adjoined their dwelling. Becoming interested in her own musings, she sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, to give free vent and wide range to her thoughts. The reader can, doubtless, imagine as well as we, the rainbow hues of her straying fancy, as it reveled in the rosy bowers of love.

"Miss Walton, I believe I have the honor of addressing."

[Illustration: "Looking up, she saw a tall, dark man standing before her, his eye bent upon hers with a look that sent the blood to her heart."---See page 36.]

At the sound of her name, Ellen sprung to her feet, with a suppressed scream of fright on her lips. Looking up, she saw a tall, dark man standing before her, his eye bent upon hers with a look that sent the blood to her heart, she hardly knew why; for certainly the individual before her was a stranger, or one with whom she had had so slight an acquaintance, as to remember nothing concerning him. While her mind was running over all the passing acquaintances she had ever made, and endeavoring among them to put the personage before her, he continued to scan her countenance with a steady gaze, as if to read her thoughts, which divining, he continued:

"I perceive you do not remember me, though we have met before. My memory is not so treacherous; and, beside, your looks made a lasting impression on my mind, an impression that time can never efface or obliterate; and to this impression you are indebted for my present visit---an unceremonious one, I must confess."

At this point of his discourse Ellen made a movement as if to retrace her steps homeward, seeing which, he went on:

"Do not be impatient, fair maiden, or in haste to go, for I have that to tell thee which is of the utmost importance both to thy present and future welfare."

This adoption of the familiar and solemn style of address, had the effect rather to increase than diminish the tremors about the girl's heart; yet she silently awaited his words:

"I am come to warn thee that great, very great and imminent danger is hanging, impended but by a thread, over thy head."

This blunt and unexpected announcement caused Ellen to start with a shudder, and sent the blood still more forcibly upon her heart, which labored, for a moment, under the load, and then beat so loud she was afraid the stranger would hear it. Noticing the effect of his words, he continued:

"Thou hast an enemy, a bitter enemy, who has sworn to do thee an evil, and it is in his heart to keep the oath. I see by the pallor of thy countenance thou hast not forgotten him."

And true it was that the mention of "an enemy" called up her old foe to the most vivid recollection of the now thoroughly alarmed Ellen. With the utmost exertion of her strength and will, she could barely suppress the outward manifestations of her terror.

"Well, this enemy, whom you had well-nigh forgotten, has never, for a single day, had thee out of his mind. Ever since his threat, he has been laying deep schemes to ruin thee, and once very nearly succeeded. For two years he has been at work in a new way; his plans are about matured, and *you will soon be in his power!*"

This last clause was spoken slowly, and emphasized on every word. All the time he was speaking, Ellen's feelings became more and more intensely excited, and, at the close, had reached the limit of control. For a moment she was overcome, and leaned against a tree for support; but seeing the stranger make a motion as though to assist her, she rallied again, and, becoming more composed, demanded:

"How know you these things of which you speak?"

"It matters but little to thee, to know more than the facts in the case; these I tell thee, but no more."

"Then you have come as a kind friend to warn me of my danger?"

"Aye, and more."

"Thanks! thanks! and pardon me if, at the first, I looked with suspicion on a friend. The circumstances of our meeting is my apology for the ungenerous thought."

"Thou hadst cause to suspect, if not to fear me, and for thy thought I have no need to pardon thee. But my mission is not yet completed."

"Then let us go to the house of my father, which is but a short way off, and there hear what further is to be said."

"No, I have but little time, and this place will answer my purpose quite as well as your father's house, with the situation of which I am well acquainted."

"Indeed! Then you are not a stranger in these parts?"

"Not entirely so; but as my business was with you, more particularly, it was natural that I should familiarize myself with your place of abode, that, if need be, I might render myself efficient in a case of emergency, which may arrive but too soon."

This allusion to danger re-awakened Ellen's apprehensions, which noticing, he continued:

"I have told you of overhanging peril; yet I have told you but half. You are unable to escape from the net that is woven around you---you have no means in your power to free yourself from the unseen toils that have been secretly laid to ensnare you. Every step you take is one of danger, and every effort you make to flee from that danger, may but drive you nearer to destruction. Such is the nature of your enemy's operations, that while they are secret, they are sure; and so thoroughly has every preparation been made, and so exact has every minute particular been examined and attended to, there is no possibility of his scheme failing, and equally no possibility for you to escape."

"Your words are words of doom. How am I to interpret your enigmatical conduct? But now I thought you a friend, come to give me timely warning to guard against threatened danger, when, all at once, you declare my situation a hopeless one! If you *are* my friend, why not warn me sooner, and in time?"

This was said in a firm manner, and gave the stranger to understand he had no common, timid nature to deal with. The truth was, the thought had flashed across Ellen's mind that this man was some way connected with Durant, perhaps employed by him, and she began to conclude it might be a trick to frighten her, after all. If so, or if not, she determined to meet boldly what he had to say. The man perceived the change, and replied:

"My seemingly enigmatical conduct is easily explained. It is true I have a long time been known to the fact that most determined designs of mischief were entertained against you, and that your enemy was ceaselessly at work to perfect his plans; but just as I was preparing to come to inform you of this state of affairs, I was so unfortunate as to be desperately wounded in battle with the Indians. I have but just recovered; the fresh scar you can see on my temple."

And brushing away the hair, he exposed a hardly healed, terrible gash. This appeared to satisfy his listener.

"I have, therefore, done the best I could, and you must charge the rest to fate---a fate whose inexorable decree I almost rebelled against bowing to. But I am here, my warning is given, and I can only regret that it comes so late."

These words and the exhibition of the scar restored Ellen's confidence in the stranger, and, with it, her fears returned. He perceived this, and proceeded:

"Though your case is a desperate one, there is still some hope; there is a *possibility* of your deliverance from impending peril."

"Then let me know how I am to act."

"I fear to do so."

"Why fear?"

"It may prove a desperate alternative."

"Nothing can be so dreadful as falling into the hands of my enemy."

"Perhaps not; still you may be unable to choose between the evils."

"Let me know them, and I will try."

"As I said, it may be a desperate alternative, and I must ask of you beforehand to pardon me for being compelled to give you only the choice between what may prove one of two equally direful evils. Your only hope of relief from present evil *is in me.*"

This was an unexpected announcement; it fairly startled Ellen, and, in the moment of bewilderment, she made no reply. He continued:

"Do not consider me selfish---at least do not condemn me for my selfishness. If you have ever loved, you know what almost omnipotent power that passion has over the mind and heart. For long years I have loved you in secret, with a burning, consuming intensity of feeling, which defies all efforts to describe. I cannot tell you all the joy or agony love has awakened in my bosom; I can only say, that you have it now in your power to render me supremely happy, or abjectly miserable. If you will cast yourself on my love, I will save you from your plotting foe, and devote my life to your service, and to make you happy. If I had any other means of saving you, I would not propose this one, but I have not. Just now I have not time to explain all that I would like to make clear, and must ask you, for the present, to take my word; for at any moment, even now, your malignant foe may come upon us, and then all is lost. Can you accept the alternative?"

"I---I thank you, but I cannot."

"You say, in view of all the facts, this is your unalterable decision, from which I may not hope to persuade you?"

"It is. For all or any kind intentions and wishes you may have had or still entertain for me, please accept my sincere thanks; but do not attempt to change my purpose, for it is fixed, and I would save us both the pain of repeating it."

"Then farewell, and God protect you!"

"Amen!"

This one word was said in such a fervent, and, at the same time, confident manner, the stranger paused a moment as he was turning away; for a short time he seemed engaged in deep thought, which had the effect of totally changing his former, and apparently predetermined course of action. Turning again to Ellen, who saw his hesitancy of action, he said:

"You rely, then, in God?"

"I do, most assuredly."

"And you have a hope that He will deliver you from the sad situation in which you are now placed?"

"I humbly trust He will shield and protect me from harm."

"Perhaps that confidence induces your present course of action?"

"Doubtless it does, in part."

"Well, let me tell you that angels nor devils can save you!"

"I have no wish to be saved by the devils."

"I wonder you can be at all merry in your situation."

"I begin to be less apprehensive than I was."

"Indeed! and why, pray?"

"To be plain, an explanation will not be very flattering to your vanity, or very creditable to my penetration, and, therefore, I had rather not make it."

"I see you suspect me, so you may as well know the truth."

Saying which, he threw off some outward disguises, and stood before the astonished maiden---LOUIS DURANT himself!

"You see me, Ellen Walton, and in me your worst enemy, because you will not permit me to be a friend. I have made the present attempt to win you by stratagem, in the not very sanguine hope of success. I have failed---now for my revenge. Know that all I have said concerning my plans, and the net I have woven around you, is true. You are now in my power, and I only forbear taking you captive at this time because I wish you to live for a short period in dread and suspense, as you once made me."

"Keep to the truth, sir, in making your statements."

"I intend to; and so bid you beware, and *to escape if you can!*"

"I have a very comfortable expectation for the future, thank you."

"Well, cherish it, then; hug it close, for it will be short lived, I give you fair warning."

"The warnings of a man who comes with the tissue of falsehood, are of little worth. Keep them to yourself."

"Beware how you presume on my forbearance; it may give way."

"I presume on nothing but your cowardice."

"Enough! enough! I will bear no more! I go, but you will see me soon again! *Your doom is sealed! 'Cowardice!' This from a woman! Gods! but I'll remember this in my revenge!*"

He started, as if to leave the place, but turned again, and said.

"Girl, I dislike to leave you in this manner. For the love I bear you, I would still see you happy---happy as a wife and not a despised outcast---the scorn of society. You might once have been my honorable bride; yes, you might still be. Passing by all your insults, I would still offer you my hand, and honorable marriage."

"Infamous villain! how dare you insult my self-respect by even naming such a thing? Never dare again, to couple my name with yours! never, sir! It is the basest sacrilege to humanity!"

"Very well. Our *names* shall *not* be coupled; our *destinies shall be!* Go, with the consoling thought to cheer you for a few fleeting hours. Here I stand and swear it---witness my oath, ye trees! witness it, earth and sky! and, if such beings there are, witness it, angels and devils---*Ellen Walton shall be mine!*"

He was so deeply absorbed in calling on his witnesses, he noticed nothing about him, and now looking to the spot where she stood, to observe the effect of his words, behold, Ellen was not there. His tragic agony had been wasted on the "desert air." Turning away once more, he left the place in a rage.

Ellen, though she had left, heard his words in the distance, and notwithstanding she had made a show of boldness, she was really alarmed, and greatly dreaded the future. She knew that an evil-minded man, however contemptible, was capable of doing infinite harm to a fellow-being, when determinedly set thereon. Thus, between hope and fear, her time was passed.

CHAPTER VI.

PLANS FRUSTRATED---ESPIONAGE.

Durant, who considered himself a perfect genius in contriving strategical measures, now turned all his attention to the execution of the secret plans he had matured. He first accompanied a body of Indians, who were ready to march upon the settlements of Kentucky, with a select few, to whom he had confided his intentions of capturing a white squaw. With these villains he intended to attack the house of the Waltons, while the main body of the savages made their onset upon the bulk of the settlement, including the block-house. This measure failed, for the simple reason that he had mistaken the house, and a family by the name of Scraggs suffered in the stead of his intended victim.[A]

[Footnote A: "Western Adventure," page 179-182.]

He next resolved to go, with a few of his renegade followers, in a secret manner, and steal Ellen at night, or during some of her daily walks, when alone. Soon after crossing the river, he was taken sick, and his followers, mistaking his directions, went another way, and made a worse blunder than on the first occasion; and a party of whites coming into the vicinity of his camp, the villain hastened to recross the river to the Ohio side, not yet knowing the fate of the expedition, that portion of the band who had been commissioned with the execution of the plot not having returned when he was forced to retreat. However, he was not long kept in suspense; one of his men came back, and reported a wonderful adventure with a "big squaw, taller than the greatest warrior," who killed a number of the Indians, he said, and when two of the others undertook to get down the chimney, "big squaw took up mighty great wallet, all full of feathers, more than was on all the eagles of all the hunting grounds of the red men, and tearing it open, easy as we tear a leaf, poured them on the fire. Big black smoke puff up quick as powder flash, and down come Indian like he shot. White squaw take up big tomahawk, and strike both on the head. Me nearly in the door by this time; big squaw jump at me with he great tomahawk, so big the great chief no lift it, and lifted it to strike. Me no like to be killed by old squaw, so me come away." A very marvelous story told the Indians, full of high flourishes and exaggerations, but founded on truth, nevertheless.[B]

[Footnote B: "Western Adventure," page 187.]

Durant saw that some mistake had been made, and that his attempt had signally failed, notwithstanding his confidence and boasting, and the care with which he had laid his "hidden toils." He was greatly exasperated at the failure of his plots, on the success of which he had built such sanguine hopes.

After much reflection, and the formation and abandonment of many schemes for the accomplishment of his object, he finally hit upon a plan which he felt sure would succeed. This time he called into requisition the services of his old crony in crime, the infamous, but not untainted, Ramsey. With him and a couple of trusty Indians, he set out on his expedition, resolved to succeed at the risk of his life. Ellen he would possess at all hazards.

The party reached a point which was as near the settlement as prudence allowed them to go, and here, in the deep forest, his three companions hid themselves, while he went forward to make observations, and work out the details of the plot and attack. Stealthily approaching the vicinity of the Waltons, he secreted himself in a hollow tree during the day, from an orifice of which, at some distance from the base, he had quite a commanding view of the adjacent country for a considerable distance either way. Here he placed himself to make observations.

It was in the early part of autumn; the weather was mild and pleasant; the forest had put on its diadem of rich colors, purple, scarlet and yellow, and was gorgeously beautiful in the ripened glory of its drapery. The season, the scene, the sunny warmth all invited to a participation in the enjoyment which nature held out to those who would accept her bounty, and refresh themselves in her sylvan bowers.

It was on the second day of his watch, that Durant had the satisfaction of noticing the arrival of a gentleman at the house of Mr. Walton, which was followed on the succeeding day by a circumstance which at once gave him fresh encouragement and sanguine hopes. Ellen made her appearance, leaning on the gentleman's arm; they were out enjoying the pleasure of an excursion into the quiet woods, and to his infinite gratification, wended their way to his immediate neighborhood.

Fortune sometimes favors the wicked, and, in this instance, she smiled on the villain; for the lovers, fancying the spot, seated themselves on the trunk of a fallen tree, that lay close to the one in which he had ensconced himself, and by placing his ear near the orifice, he could distinctly hear what passed between them.

"It is so refreshing to sit in the shade of the 'gray old forest,'" said Ellen. "I have not enjoyed such a treat these many months."

"Why, with your facilities, I should think you would recreate every day in pleasant weather."

"That was my habit formerly; but the last time I ventured out alone, I met with an unexpected streak of ill luck, which has deterred me ever since from laying myself liable to a repetition of the same bad fortune."

"Indeed! You have not informed me of this before."

"For the simple reason that more agreeable thoughts and memories have occupied my mind; and, after all, it is hardly worth relating, though it made me feel very unpleasant for a time."

"I must know of this adventure."

"It was only the unlooked-for appearance of my old and sworn enemy, Durant, who made another attempt to deceive me; but failing in his designs, finally renewed his threats of revenge."

She then, at her lover's request, narrated the incidents of her interview with Durant, as already known to the reader.

"Strange that the villain should form such an unaccountable dislike for you, when you never injured him in the least."

"I think his bad nature was excited, and his ill-will increased, by a few words of merited rebuke I was forced, by his unmanliness, to pronounce against him, the last time he was at our house in Virginia."

"And you have heard nothing from him since the day he obtruded himself upon your notice here in the woods?"

"Nothing direct or definite, though I think he made an attempt to capture me, with the aid of some Indians, soon afterward, but failed in his object from some cause. But notwithstanding I have heard no direct tidings from him, I feel a constant dread of evil, as though some impending calamity was hanging over me."

"Such fears had better be banished at once from your mind."

"I know it, and have tried to get rid of them, but they will, despite my efforts to the contrary, come into my mind. I do not and will not yield to them, though I find it impossible at all times to shake them off."

"Singular, truly; I pray God, they presage no harm."

"Oh, I so much wish you could always be near me; I dread nothing in your presence."

"I hope the time is not far distant when this dearest wish of both our hearts will be realized."

The conversation took a tender cast at this point; and as matters of the heart are secrets between lovers, which they dislike for third parties to look into, we will take ourselves away, and leave them to enjoy their hour of happiness in undisturbed quiet.

Several days brought a return of much the same routine of events, the lovers always spending an hour of each afternoon in the woods. Durant kept to his tree, and the others invariably occupied the same seat near his hiding-place. At the end of a week, Durant learned from the conversation of the young couple that the gentleman was to return to Virginia in a day or two, to make preparations for the coming wedding, which was to take place about the holidays, he being now on a visit to arrange the preliminaries, and enjoy for a brief time the society of his betrothed. When they had returned home, Durant muttered to himself:

"Now is my time! To-morrow is their last day for walking, and, like loving fools as they are, they will be so absorbed in each others' feelings, and the silly sentimentality of love, as to be easily surprised. Yes, to-morrow will be my time!"

And gloating over the anticipated triumph, he left his burrow, and hastened to his companions, to make known his intentions, and prepare everything for the event of the morrow. He and one Indian were to seize and secure Ellen, while Ramsey and the other should perform the more difficult task of capturing her lover. All the details of their arrangements were discussed and adopted; and Durant, now that he felt certain of his victims---for his hate of Ellen's lover was bitter, though of recent date---was almost beside himself with malignant and hellish joy. He saw before him the speedy accomplishment of his fiendish purpose---the gratification of his inveterate hate and long sought revenge, by the commission of the most damnable act known this side of the "bottomless pit" of darkness; and his sin-polluted heart

actually swelled with venomous delight, and demoniac exultation. One of the fairest flowers of earth is to be plucked by his rude hand, and soiled by his touch and embrace! Will he succeed in his satanic designs?

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOVERS

Ellen Walton, ere she left the home of her childhood for the scenes of border life, was the affianced bride of Walter Hamilton, a young man of most promising talent, irreproachable character, and fine looking withal; and, in a word, was worthy of the high favor he found in the eyes and the heart of his beloved. As gathered from the narrations of the last chapter, he was now on a visit to the wilderness home of his betrothed, to arrange for the nuptials, which were to be solemnized on Christmas Eve, the winter season being deemed most safe from the predatory excursions of the Indians. All these particulars their bitter adversary was familiar with; and he so exulted over the sad termination of their plans, he could scarcely command his feelings, or act with becoming sanity.

Without further ado, we will introduce the lovers at their last interview in the forest, previous to Hamilton's return home. The same spot finds them seated again, as though fate led them surely on into the jaws of destruction, and opened the way of triumph for the plotting villain.

"And this is the last time we shall enjoy together the sweet solitude of this sylvan temple of love?" said Hamilton, after they had been conversing for some time on the hopes before them.

"Oh, I pray it may not be the *last* time! What fatal words!" replied the fair Ellen, as a momentary pallor overspread her beautiful face.

"You know, love I only meant for this visit. Of course, I hope to enjoy the same felicity many times when we shall mutually sustain to each other those dearest of all relations; after that our hopes shall have been fully consummated."

"I know you did not intend to say the last time for life; but the word *last* struck with a chill to my heart, and called up old dreads, which, unbidden, sent a thrill of fear through my spirit. I could not avoid the thought that this *might be*, indeed, our last meeting. Would to heaven the unwelcome thought were banished from my mind, never again to return."

"Well, love, just banish it. You are certainly in no personal danger; and there is hardly a possibility, let alone a probability, protected as I shall be, of my encountering serious danger on my way home."

"I know all you say; I can see no cause of fear; no reason to apprehend danger; yet I *do* feel alarmed; but it is a vague, undefined sensation, which I hope reason will soon banish from my mind. I am not now, and never have been, a believer in presentiments, and I do not intend to become a convert to the notion to-day."

"I am glad to hear you speak in that manner. There are but few things in the compass of possibility that may not be achieved, if we bring a resolute will to bear upon them. The belief in presentiments, signs of good and bad luck, and the like, is calculated, in no small degree, to 'make slaves of us all,' and to detract very much from the happiness we might otherwise enjoy. I have known persons who were perfect slaves to such things, having their evil omens and good omens, their bad days and good days, their moon signs, their owl signs, their cat and dog signs, and I know not what all other kinds of signs, all of which were regarded with the reverence due only to sacred things. I must confess I have often been disgusted at the tomfoolery of some of these 'signs' people."

"Really, I hope you do not intend to be *personal* in your remarks?"

"My usual reply to such inquiries is, 'if the shoe fits, wear it;' but you know, love, I had no intention of alluding to you in what I said; at least, if you did not know it, I tell you so now."

"Very well; your amusing strictures on the 'signs' have had the effect to dispel, in a good degree, my forebodings of evil, whatever may have given rise to them. I presume, if the sign is really reliable, I may now conclude that the danger, if any was near me, has passed away."

"One would naturally suppose that the more imminent the danger, the heavier would be the pressure on the spirits."

"And who knows but some unseen calamity *was* near us---a serpent, for instance, whose deadly fangs might have proved fatal, or some other unknown or invisible foe, with power to work us evil?"

"Without entering the field of speculation, we will just suppose your snakeship has departed, and, as your spirits have recovered their wonted elasticity, let us talk of more pleasing and interesting matters."

"With all my heart."

And *had* the serpent, Durant, really withdrawn himself? Had some long buried cord of human sympathy at last been touched in his heart, and the slumbering emotions of a better nature awakened? Let us hope so if we can.

The lovers continued to converse of their hopes for the future, and regrets for the immediate separation; and their attention became so fixed in each other, that it would have required some extraordinary occurrence or sound to arouse them. In reply to a remark of his companion, Hamilton said:

"Yes, but four months, and our probation will be ended. Would that they would speed away as rapidly as the past week. Four months, and then shall our happiness be---"

The sentence was never finished. At that precise moment rude hands grasped each lover. A smothered cry arose to Ellen's lips, but was hushed by a covering which was placed and fastened over her mouth. They were both secured with thongs, and led away into captivity. As Ellen was being secured, the miscreant captor hissed in her ear:

"Be of good cheer, you are in the hands of Durant, the 'DOG!' who distinctly remembers your former kindness and amiability!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAPTIVES.

With all the speed possible, Durant hurried off toward the Ohio, determined as soon as it could be done, to place that river between himself and captives and any pursuers that might follow them, when it became known that the lovers were missing.

It was a matter of wonder with Ellen's family what could keep her and Hamilton out so late in the evening; and when darkness set in, and they were still absent, the wonder changed to alarm. Search was instantly made; they were traced to their resting-place; the evident marks of a scuffle were visible; and the unanimous opinion of all was that they were in the hands of Indians. Preparations for pursuit were immediately instituted, and by daylight next morning, a strong band of armed pioneers, well mounted, were on the trail of the fugitives, determined to retake the captives, if such a feat were in the bounds of possibility.

Durant had everything so arranged, that his party need not be subjected to a moment's delay. Every member of his band, including the prisoners, expected a vigorous pursuit, and the lovers were not without hope that it would prove successful. In this hope, they, as far as circumstances and ability permitted, endeavored to retard the progress of the captors by slow movements; and Durant was finally constrained to threaten them, if they did not step with greater alacrity; for he feared they might be overtaken.

At length the hilly banks of the Ohio were reached; the clear waters of that noble stream lay before them; and between the prisoners and despair, and no friends in sight to bid them hope! Durant now concluded all was safe; and the malice of his heart, which the pressure of circumstances had kept smothered, began again to display itself. Pointing to the verdure-clad and tree-crowned hills on the other side of the river, he said:

"Once there, amid the lovely groves of Ohio, and you are beyond the last hope of recovery from my power, my beautiful girl! Then and there I shall have the exquisite pleasure of informing you more particularly concerning my plans for the future. For the present, receive my assurances, that nothing else could give me such unbounded satisfaction as the felicity unspeakable of having won my old and dear love from all competitors for her hand and person, and the certain assurance, that, for the time to come, she is all my own, without fear of rivalry!"

The bitter irony attempted in this malignantly polite address went to the heart of the fair girl; but she resolutely set herself against any display of fear, or the least manifestation of alarm, well knowing that the marks of such emotions would but increase the revengeful feeling of delight evinced by her adversary.

Just as Durant concluded his speech, the tramp of horses' feet was heard in the distance, and the cry raised by the Indians:

"White man come! white man come!"

All hands sprung to unmoor the canoes, which were in readiness, concealed among the drooping branches of some trees which overhung the margin of the stream. While thus engaged, Hamilton, who was watching his opportunity, knocked down the Indian who guarded him, sent Durant whirling round like a top to the distance of ten or twelve feet, seized Ellen in his arms, and with strength almost superhuman, and a speed miraculous under the circumstances, bounded away in the direction of the approaching horsemen, who were now visible through the interstices of the forest, a good way off, but coming rapidly on to the rescue, though, as yet, in ignorance of their near proximity to friends and foes.

"Seize them! seize them!--shoot the infernal dog!" roared Durant, in a hoarse voice of passion and rage, so soon as he recovered from the astonishment and fright into which the unceremonious assault of Hamilton had thrown him.

[Illustration: "Hamilton knocked down the Indian who guarded him, sent Durant whirling round like a top to the distance of ten or twelve feet."---See page 54.]

His first command was not obeyed, for Hamilton and Ellen were already beyond reach when the order was given; but the second one led to the discharge of two guns without effect, and the leveling of a third by Ramsey, with a coolness and steadiness of nerve and aim which gave assurance of success. His finger was on the trigger, when Durant himself threw up the muzzle of the rifle, and sent the ball whizzing through the air, some ten feet above the heads of the fugitives.

"My revenge must be fuller than that, or not at all," he said. "The ball would have killed both, and I would not have had that for the world."

He had hardly uttered these words, when the sharp crack of the remaining Indian's rifle, who had recovered from the blow given him by Hamilton, and was glad of the opportunity of so speedily avenging it, rung in his ear with piercing shrillness, and looking in the direction of the flying couple, Durant saw Hamilton stagger with his burden, and then both fell to the earth. Instantly the demon was roused within him; every emotion of fear was swallowed up in his usually cowardly heart by the burning thirst for revenge which rankled in his bosom; and crying "*Come!*" he rushed to the spot where the lovers lay, followed by his comrade. Both were wounded, but neither was dead. Lifting the bleeding Ellen in his arms, he bore her back, while Ramsey and an Indian did the same by Hamilton. Springing into their canoes, and bending to the oars with all the strength they could muster, they were soon far out into the stream, and had just reached a point of safety, when the pursuing party of whites came up to the water's brink. Several shots were fired at the canoes without effect, and then the men tried to force their horses into the river; but by yelling and splashing the water with their oars by the enemy, the beasts were effectually frightened, so that no efforts of their riders could induce them to attempt the unwilling task of swimming across.

Durant could perceive the agony of the father and brother of Ellen, as they wrung their hands in despair, still vainly striving to urge forward their stubborn steeds. Feeling perfectly secure, now that the pursuers were effectually baffled in their designs, he gave orders to cease the frightening demonstrations, and continue their course. In a few minutes the Ohio shore was gained, and they soon buried themselves in the deep woods beyond and were lost to the sight of those on the opposite bank, who reluctantly turned their faces homeward, and, in deep and mournful silence, retraced their steps, revolving in their minds what next could be done.

Hamilton and Ellen were both severely wounded, the ball having passed through the right side of each, but no vital part seemed to have suffered, and the wounds were not deemed mortal of themselves, but might prove fatal if not properly attended to. Durant's first care was to have them dressed and bound up; and he used every means within his reach to expedite their recovery. He had them taken to a place of safety, a kind of cove, known to himself and Ramsey, which was in an obscure and unfrequented spot, where they were carefully nursed until in a fair way for speedy recovery.

Until now, Durant had been careful to say and do nothing that might tend to excite the minds of his captives, fearing that inflammation might ensue, and rob him of his anticipated triumph and revenge. But so soon as their convalescence was distinctly manifest, the crisis and the danger past, he began to torment his victims; the one of his wounded vanity, his disappointed avarice, and his venomous hate; the other of his envy and jealous malice. In consummating his revenge upon Ellen, he would not only gratify his malicious and vengeful nature, but minister, also, to the basest passions of a corrupt human heart. Seating himself in her presence one day, he said:

"I now understand why it was that I found no more favor in your sight while so foolishly attempting to win your love. Your heart was already occupied, a circumstance you took good care to conceal. Thank my stars, my rival is now in my hands! And do you know, my dear, that he is a doomed man? If not, permit me to inform you of the fact."

"Sir, what has he ever done to you that you should wish to harm him?"

"Done! Has he not robbed me of your love, your hand, and made my life a hopeless desert and a weary waste?"

"No, sir, he has not. My heart was his before I saw you, and *you*, sir, attempted the part of a robber, not Mr. Hamilton. Now judge yourself by your own rule and what fate should be yours?"

"Ah, very fine logic, truly; but, unfortunately, you have not the power to back it up. I presume you have never beheld the sacrifice of a victim on a funeral pile, nor more than read of prisoners burned at the stake; how would such a spectacle affect you, think?"

This was said with a peculiar expression, and was evidently intended to make a strong impression; but whatever its real effect upon the mind of his auditor, no visible tokens of dread or pain were manifested, and Ellen replied:

"I do not know, so much would depend on circumstances; but that I would abhor the actors in the scene of barbarous cruelty, I can well imagine."

This was not the kind of a reply expected, and Durant changed his discourse from an insinuating tone to a direct manner.

"I perceive it will be necessary for me to render my meaning more explicit, and I now change the form of my query, and beg to know how you would probably feel, were you compelled to witness the burning of your lover at the stake?"

A momentary paleness blanched the cheek of the fair girl, as this heartless interrogation was fully comprehended, but recovering herself quickly from the rude shock, she replied:

"I doubt not the sight would be a harrowing one, but I do not anticipate such an unlikely event."

"Pardon me, but I may as well tell you at first, that this fate is in store for you."

"Why do you persist in this attempt at refinement of cruelty? Bad as you are, I give you credit for too much humanity to believe your words are more than an idle threat, which you have no intention of putting into execution."

"Then you have given me credit for more humanity than is justly my due; for I never was more earnest in my life, and it is my fixed determination to do exactly what I have intimated."

Ellen, who had all the time been really alarmed, now gave way, in her reduced strength of body, to the feelings which, until now, she had kept in subjection; and, changing her tone, commenced pleading with the miscreant:

"Mr. Hamilton has never harmed you, and can, therefore, only be hated by you through me; do not, then, make him the object of your wrath, but let it fall on me. I will readily burn at the stake to save him."

This last remark, as it showed the depths and tenderness of her love for his rival, only excited him the more, and he repeated his intention of burning Hamilton at the stake in her presence, with many additions, purposely introduced to make a more horrifying impression. In vain she pleaded for her lover, and offered herself as the sacrifice; the only effect of her prayers was to render him more savage and determined in his intentions and avowals. The excitement of the interview, however, in her case, superinduced a state of fever, which bid fair, for a few days, to render her recovery very doubtful. This result was not expected by Durant, and he in turn became alarmed, lest his dearly bought vengeance should yet slip from him. Every exertion was put forth for her restoration, and finally success crowned the well directed but ill intentioned efforts of the villain. Ellen's fever abated, and she again began to mend. It would be some time, however, ere the monster would dare renew his threats, and in the interim, he set his wits to work with a little different object in view. A new thought had entered his mind, the ultimate end of which he would endeavor to carry out.

He had never fallen in love with savage life, because it was one of too much peril to suit his natural disposition to cowardice, and he would gladly return to civilized life, if he could do so safely--his Indian home and habits having only been adopted as a means, and the only means, of ministering to his revengeful desires. His idea looked to the accomplishment of this object, and he was fain to believe he saw a way to succeed. As Ellen was to act a part in his newly formed plan, his manner toward her changed. He was polite and respectful in his words and attentions. He was, also, very kind and considerate toward Hamilton. They were both surprised at this unexpected change in the demeanor of their captor, but were unable to account for it. All was explained in time. One day, after Ellen was much restored, he

ventured on the following communication:

"I have," he said to her, "had very serious thoughts of late. A singular dream, which made a powerful impression on my mind, opened up to my mental vision the sinfulness of my past life, and convinced me of the necessity of repentance and reformation. I would gladly amend my ways, and lead a new and better life, but my way is hedged up before me. I am an outcast of society, made so by my own acts, the dark enormity of which I now behold with astonishment, and, unless some great influence is brought to bear in my favor, I dare not return to a Christian community, and if I remain here among the heathens, I may give up all hope at once, as it will be impossible for me, as one of the savages, to become a moral and Christian man. It is in your power, fair lady, to give me the requisite guarantee of safety. May I hope that you will extend to me the hand of salvation?"

Ellen hardly knew whether to believe in the man's sincerity or not; but hoping for the best, she replied:

"If in your good intentions I can aid you in any way, I shall be most happy to do so."

"Thank you; I expected as much from your generous heart, though I have merited nothing but hatred from you by my acts. I will consult Mr. Hamilton on the subject, before pointing out more definitely the mode in which you can serve and save me."

Leaving her presence, he placed himself before Hamilton, whom he addressed after this manner:

"I am aware, my good sir, that you are on somewhat intimate terms with Miss Walton, the lady in another apartment of this rather dismal abode, and, I doubt not, have much influence over her. If so, I very much desire the benefit of that influence, to aid me in the best and noblest undertaking of my life."

He then explained his intentions and desires of reformation, and the impediments in the way, much in the same manner as he had done to Ellen; after which he continued:

"Now, to relieve me from my embarrassing situation, I deem it needful to form a connection with some influential person or family, whose recommendation and protection will secure me from harm, and restore me to the bosom of that society from whose enjoyments and privileges I severed myself by a rash act, committed in an hour of passion, and followed up by a strange course of infatuation ever since. I know of none upon whose names and aid I would sooner cast myself than upon you and Miss Walton, as your families are of the first respectability, and could throw an effectual shield around me. I would, therefore, that you let me bear to the young lady the assurances that you approve my plans and purposes, (if you really do so,) and that you are willing to aid me yourself, and hope she will also, in carrying them out."

Hamilton was still confined by his wound, which had been a much more serious one than that inflicted upon Ellen; and in his then state of prostration, was not as well prepared to scorn the motives of Durant, or penetrate his designs, as he might have been under more favorable auspices; and having no reason to doubt the sincerity of the seemingly repentant man, he entered into his plans at once, with all the warmth of a benevolent and Christian heart. He said:

"I can hardly believe it necessary that I should say a word to Miss Walton, to induce her to put forth her best endeavors to serve you in so worthy a work; but, if need be, bear to her the assurance of my hearty approval of your designs and wishes, and that I shall do all in my power to aid you in the laudable efforts you are making to return to a Christian country, and a virtuous life."

"As I have, very unfortunately, laid myself liable to her distrust, will you have the goodness to place your approval on this slip of paper?"

Saying which, he handed him the paper and a pencil. He wrote as follows:

"MISS WALTON:---The bearer, Mr. Durant, has laid before me his intentions and wishes, and the difficulties in the way of his reformation. I most heartily approve his plans, as they seem to be the most judicious that now occur to me, and hope you will assist him to the utmost of your ability in his very worthy object.

"HAMILTON."

As Durant run his eye over the lines, a peculiar expression of satisfaction crossed his features, and with the warmest thanks on his lips, he departed, and lost no time in again presenting himself before Ellen, whom he thus addressed:

"I have just laid my case before Mr. Hamilton, whose opinion on the subject you will find here expressed in his own hand-writing."

And he gave her the slip. She read the lines traced upon it, when he proceeded:

"If I only dared to hope you would as readily approve and as heartily enter into my plans, all disquiet in my heart would at once be set at rest."

"I am quite sure I shall object to nothing Mr. Hamilton approves; and in all good endeavors, I shall be most happy to render you all the assistance I can command or bestow."

"Then I need entertain no further apprehensions, and will at once make known to you the details which seem to me necessary to be carried out. There are very few persons in the settlements who have any knowledge of my connection with the Indians, and my first request is that you never, under any circumstances, allude to this connection, or let it be known that I have been here. Have I your promise?"

"Most certainly."

"I desire, in the second place, that you will say as much good of me as you can, (and that, I am sorry to say, will be but little,) to those who may ask you for information concerning me; but if you have *nothing* good to say, then that you will say no evil, and especially if my Indian life is alluded to. May I hope for your favor in this respect?"

"I will do my best to exonerate you in all cases where your reputation is at stake, and to aid you in reaching a place of honor in society."

"Thank you. I have but one additional solicitation to make, and if to this you can give your assent, I shall be truly happy, delighted, and confident."

All this time he had been driving at one point, which he had now reached, but was slow to present. A momentary pause ensued; Ellen was in doubt as to the nature of the requirement, and he of the propriety of making it. But he had set his all upon the desperate stake for which he was playing, and it would not now do to leave the game. He at length went on:

"I shall not feel myself safe in society unless I can form an alliance with some family of note and respectability. I am not as extensively acquainted as some others---in a word, I know of no young lady but yourself to whom I can offer my hand, and having loved you so long and ardently, I can do nothing less than make this as my final request, *that you consent to become my wife*. I make this request the only condition of release, and upon your acceptance of my hand

depends my present and future hope, my salvation in time and eternity. My fate is in your hands, and you can raise me to heaven, or cast me down to hell. Will you save me?"

It would be quite impossible to depict the consternation this announcement created in the mind of Ellen. In spite of her better judgment, and the precedents in the villain's former life, she had suffered herself to be beguiled by his seeming sincerity of manner into the hope that he was really desirous of reforming; and even now she could hardly believe her own ears, so consummate was his hypocrisy; but as the whole truth shone out to her comprehension, she saw through his scheme at once---that all his seeming repentance was a pretense as hollow as his own heart. The hope that had begun to swell in her heart was blotted out in a moment. She replied without hesitation:

"I cannot accede to your last proposition."

"Why not?"

"It is impossible."

"Then you willingly consign me to wretchedness in this life, and to perdition hereafter."

"I do no such thing. *You* are not responsible for *my* acts; and your repentance can be just as sincere without a wife as with one."

"You are mistaken. If I am doomed to remain among the Indians, I shall never be able to reform, however earnestly I may desire to do so; and if I go to the settlements, I shall be slain as a foe, unless protected by family ties and influence; these I can secure in no other way than by becoming your husband."

"I am of an entirely different opinion; and I think your whole scheme a very thin and flimsy contrivance, of which you ought to be ashamed."

"But there are two against you. Mr. Hamilton, as you have already seen, perfectly coincides with me in his views, and---"

"I beg leave to correct you. Mr. Hamilton never consented to your last proposition, for the very good reason that it was never mentioned to him; in this respect you have tried to deceive me; but to put the matter to rest, at once and forever, let me say, as mistress of my own decisions, that whether *he* should consent to your proposition or not, *I never will!*"

"Then, as you voluntarily cast me off, and consign me to infamy and hopeless wretchedness, be the consequences upon your own head. I came to you and implored assistance in my extremity, but you turned away, and left me in despair. Do not, therefore, accuse me of cruelty if I demand by force that which you have denied as a free gift. You know that I have the power of life and death over yourself and Hamilton, and I now ask you, as a last resort, to choose between assenting to become my wife and seeing your lover at the stake! You may well start and turn pale; for as sure as there is a sky above and the earth beneath us, I swear that one or the other fate shall be yours. Make your own election, and, in doing so, bear in mind that Hamilton's death will be gratuitous, if caused, for you shall then be worse than my wife. As a lawful companion, I will use my best endeavors to make you happy; as a companion in what the world calls *guilt*, I will bind myself by no such promise. Think of all these things, and then decide."

"Louis Durant, the very proposition you make, accompanied as it is by the alternative, is one of such black enormity, that if nothing else were added to debase you in my estimation, I would spurn your offer as I would the proffered hand of Satan himself or of the vilest imp in the loathsome pit of night where he reigns! You have your answer. As well try to

pluck the sun from his place in the heavens or wrench the sparkling stars from the firmament as to alter my resolve."

"Perhaps you will think differently when the trying hour comes, perhaps repent when it is too late."

"Never, sir villain! Do you suppose I cannot penetrate the thin gauze that is intended to hide your motives? Your highest aspiration is after the *Wealth* you imagine me to possess; if I were poor, you would not even offer me your hand, let alone make such efforts to obtain it. I see through all your devices, base miscreant, including your sham repentance, which deserves the descent of God's just indignation upon your guilty head, and polluted soul!"

"Your perceptions are exceedingly acute, I must confess; but I leave you for the present, to reflect on the subject, so vital to us all, and hope that reason may yet prevail."

Much after the same manner he continued to persecute her, day after day, and with no better success. In the meantime Hamilton had so far recovered as to be able to walk about. To him Durant appealed; but his offer of freedom, on condition of using his influence to induce Ellen to consent to become his captor's wife, was rejected with the contempt and scorn it merited, and a brave man could give it.

This was the last peg upon which the villain hung a hope of working out his purpose, and he now resolved to fall back on his first intention, and execute his long threatened vengeance. The stake was prepared after the most approved Indian model, and the fagots piled high around it. The two victims were then led out to see what awaited them; and this excess of cruelty, this torture in advance, was forced upon the lovers with a view to shake their resolution.

Again they were separately and jointly appealed to; but with the same result as before; they were pale with hopeless despair, but firm and unwavering in purpose.

"I would die a thousand deaths of torture, my beloved Ellen, rather than persuade you to sacrifice yourself to save me," was Hamilton's language to his companion in distress. "Life without you would be a burden; and I can now die with a pleasing hope of reunion beyond the grave."

Durant would not permit a continuation of such interchange of thoughts, and they were separated.

On the following day Hamilton was fastened to the stake, and an Indian stood ready with a torch to fire the combustibles so soon as the word of command was given.

"Behold the fate of him you pretend to love!" said Durant to Ellen, whom he had dragged to the spot. "His destiny is yet in the balances; say but the word, and he shall go free!"

Pale as death itself, and scarcely able to stand, Ellen replied:

"The will of God be done! I am prepared for the worst!"

"The worst?" and he hissed in her ear some words of infamy.

"Oh, God! not that! not that!" and she reeled as if struck with a blow.

"Then, in the name of reason, save yourself, save both! It is easily done."

The villain's words calmed her in a moment, and she responded:

"Either fate is more than I can bear; but I will not perjure my soul to save myself from any fate it pleases God to send upon me."

"And you will not be an honorable bride, then?"

"Yours,---*never!*"

"Fire the fagots!" he commanded in a voice of rage, and the order was instantly obeyed by the Indian who stood impatiently awaiting the word.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BURNING STAKE

The material around the stake was the most highly inflammable that could be collected, and a mighty blaze soon spread along the pile, with its fiery spires leaping high in air, and its forked tongues hissing like serpents! Snapping, crackling, roaring! the devouring flames rushed to their work of death!

The stake was in the center of the heap, the wood being piled around it at a distance of some feet, leaving an open space on all sides, in which the prisoner could walk, being fastened with a cord, some ten feet in length, one end of which was lashed to the stake, a large post, driven firmly into the ground. This vacant space was purposely left, that the sufferings of the doomed might be prolonged, a species of cruelty common in Indian tortures. As it would be some time before the flames would touch Hamilton, though his sufferings from heat would be excruciating in a little while, murdering him by slow inches, Durant hoped that the sufferings and reflections of this interval would bring repentance at the eleventh hour, and cause his victim to plead for mercy on his own terms.

The fiery circle kept drawing nearer and nearer, narrowing the space between life and death at every moment; yet no groan escaped the lips of Hamilton; and he evinced the steady and unflinching heroism of a martyr. At a sign from Durant, the Indians prepared themselves with long splinters, which were to be fired at one end, and then driven into the flesh of the sufferer; the guns were loaded with powder, to be fired against the naked person of the prisoner when the signal should be given. Hamilton saw all these preparations, but they shook not his firm resolve for a moment. His proud soul rose above all the horrors of the scene, and remained calm in the dignity of its earthly despair and eternal hopes. He knelt down by the stake and engaged in prayer:

"Oh, Father! give me strength to endure this trial by fire! Forsake me not in this hour of extremity, but send Thy ministering angels to strengthen and sustain my spirit, that it faint not with the consuming flesh! And, oh, God! protect Thy persecuted daughter, and save, oh, save her from the grasp of the destroyer! Let not the wicked triumph! my God, let not the wicked triumph! but shield, oh, shield the innocent! Thou art He who canst do wonders; make known Thy power in the rescue and salvation of the afflicted child of misfortune from the hands of the spoiler! Not for myself, but for her, I implore Thee for deliverance! Oh, hear my prayer in her behalf, and send help in the hour of need!"

Durant listened to this prayer in spite of himself; there was a something about it which held him spell-bound, fascinated; and he forgot, for the moment, that his followers were awaiting his orders---everything, in fact, but the one scene before him, the man on his knees at the stake. And there was another of those present no less deeply interested, though in a different way---Ellen, who was in agony at the sight before her. A thought entered her mind---a wild thought, which only despair could arouse. She saw the fixed attention of her persecutor, and at the close of Hamilton's fervent prayer, she sprung from the midst of her enemies, and ere they comprehended her design, or had time to lift a hand to stay her progress, rushed through the flames, and fell on her knees by the side of her lover. In a moment they were in each others'

arms, shedding tears on each others' bosoms.

The spectators of this strange exhibition were struck dumb with wonder, as they beheld this act of devoted heroism, and looked on in astonishment, then exchanged glances of bewilderment and consternation. A solemn pause ensued, as though all were paralyzed by such a deed of self-devotion to death.

"Tear away the fire! scatter the burning embers!" at length fell from the lips of Durant, as he aroused himself from the spell that was on him. "Quick! for your lives! for if they are not rescued, you shall all die!"

His command was obeyed with alacrity, and every one present worked as though life really depended upon his exertions.

Unobserved by any of the actors in this strange and exciting drama, a dark cloud had gathered and spread over the face of heaven, black as the heralding banner of an approaching hurricane, from whose bosom the lurid lightning leaped forth, and the deep-toned thunder resounded. Presently the large drops of rain fell pelting on the leaves; then the first heavy dash of the fitful storm came down, and presently extinguished the fire, which, by this time, was pretty well scattered over the ground. Walter and Ellen, still locked in a close embrace, were rescued from the jaws of the devouring element, and restored to a state of life more painful to contemplate than the prospect of ending existence in each others' arms, even at the stake.

But He who had interposed to save them, was now speaking through the storm in a voice which made the guilty Durant tremble with conscious-smitten fear. Flash followed flash in quick succession, and the jarring thunder, loud and terrible, broke, peal after peal, on the ear! Then the howling wind, like ten thousand furies, came crashing and roaring through the forest, bearing whole trees on its driving wings, while others bent low before the blasting swoop of its leveling might!

Cowering like a condemned criminal, the dark-deeded villain crept toward a shelter, dragging with him his captives. Suddenly a dazzling flood of light, blinding and bewildering, enveloped the whole party, and, at the same instant, an earth-shaking, sky-rending burst of sound stunned them all to prostration. It was some seconds before any one recovered. Then Hamilton arose and lifted Ellen also. On looking around, they perceived a large oak had been riven by the descending bolt at a short distance from them. A splinter from the tree had struck Durant on the breast and temple, and he lay bleeding and senseless upon the earth, but whether dead or alive, none could tell, as they had no time to certainly determine the point at such a moment. Hastily gathering him up, Ramsey and two of the Indians carried him to the cave, where they were all glad to congregate themselves during the continuance of the frightful tornado.

Once sheltered, Walter and Ellen gazed out upon the raging tempest in bewildered amazement, not unmixed with awe. Never had they beheld the elements so fearfully agitated as now! Blacker than midnight were the pall-like clouds that "hung the heavens." Loud as thunder was the roaring of the wind. Incessantly the vivid lightnings blazed forth in blinding flashes; while above all the mingled commotion of the storm strife, the bursting thunders boomed. Like feathers in the breeze, great limbs of trees were wrenched from their places, and whirled, and twirled, and borne away. The tough oaks were twisted from their stems, or pulled up by the roots, while the smaller trees were snapped off like brittle reeds.

"Terribly grand!" said Hamilton to his companion.

"A fearful display of God's power!" responded Ellen.

"A mere breath of his omnipotence---nothing more!"

For half an hour the tempest raged in violence, then its fury was spent, and soon after the clouds rolled away. During its continuance, the wild passions of the savages were awed into quiet, and their hearts filled with other thoughts and

emotions than those of vengeance and cruelty. They were silent as the grave, and harmless as silent.

The party now found time to look about them. Durant had manifested signs of life, but was evidently badly hurt. Presently he opened his eyes, and stared about, but his glances were those of bewildered delirium. A high fever was burning in his veins; its fires penetrated to the head, and, reveling amid the brain, unhinged reason, and let loose the fierce passions so long time grown strong and o'ermastering.

Who shall paint the darkness of a corrupt heart, when for years the basest feelings human nature is capable of experiencing have been nourished until more than mature? It was more dreadful to listen to the ravings of Durant than to witness the fearful war of the elements. The tempest just over, was nothing to the one that was struggling and out-breaking in his bosom. We shall not attempt to record all the dark revelations he made of his own evil thoughts and deeds, as we would spare the reader's feelings from the shock so revolting a record would produce. In his delirium he raved of the past, and unbosomed his intentions for the future. First he seemed to be enacting over the tragic scenes of the day.

"Tear away the fagots!" he cried. "I say, tear them away! Stupid blockheads! do you not know that I must have my revenge on the girl? Scatter the fagots! Gods! if she dies the heart's blood of every dog of you shall be spilled! I--I must, I *will* have her alive!"

During the utterance of those words his voice, gestures, and expression of countenance were in keeping with the language itself, and truly horrible. Suddenly a change came over his countenance; the dark lines of passion retreated, and an expression of timidity or fear came in their place. He muttered incoherently for a time, and then, as if communing with himself, he spoke in a subdued voice of the last scene in his conscious life. A few sentences were audible and connected, showing how his mind was affected by the tempest:

"How I dread the storm! It tells me there is a God! that the thunder is his voice, and the fierce wind but the motion of his breath! And the lightning! oh, the lightning! how it looks into the heart and exposes all its secrets to the eye of Deity! What a flash was that! Come! to the cave! to the cave!"

With the concluding words his quiet ceased, and he struggled as if exerting himself to do something very hastily. A moment more and a short, frightened cry, escaped his lips, and he sunk back, as if dead. It was plain that he was re-living and re-enacting the day, and its scenes; and in this condition he remained for some time; then his insanity took a wilder and wider range, recalling the past, and exposing the future of his life and designs. He raved and cajoled, commanded and persuaded by times; was now quiet, and, anon, in a fever of excitement, or rage. After one of his quiet moods, he slowly aroused and addressed himself in this manner:

"That oath! it was a great mistake, this worst blunder I have made. In spite of myself it will haunt me. And the curse! that awful curse! Gods! will it never cease ringing in my ears! night and day, sleeping and waking it never leaves me! I see her now! How weird-like her prophetic looks! How like the sentence of doom are her words, as, with flashing eye and quivering lip, she says: 'As you have wilfully, voluntarily, and wickedly called it down upon your own head, may the curse of God rest upon you in this world and the world to come.' Gods and demons! if their should be 'a world to come!'---How her words burn into my heart! and, worst of all, they are proving a reality! I am accused! my 'plans of villainy' do fail, and I *am* a 'vagabond upon the face of the earth!' But I'll not endure it longer! I'll shake myself from these haunting fears! aye, and I'll prove them false! I'll do it if all the curses of the universe rise up before me! Avaunt, ye specters! I'll be a man despite your efforts to frighten me by your grim presence!"

Again, in another strain, he broke forth with this development of his inward thoughts.

"Heigh, ho! I am on the track now, and nothing can save her! Oh, but I'll be sweetly revenged! I'll teach the proud minx to insult a Durant! Won't she be humbled, though! ha! ha! ha! How she will struggle and beg for mercy! But will I pity her? Yes, 'as the wolf the lamb!' Oh, if I but possessed her now!"

And again:

"Proud as ever! Never mind, I'll bring her down! I'll wreath that lofty brow with shame! I'll strike her through her lover! To save *him* at the stake she'll yield! I'll revel in her charms, and then---then what? Ha! ha! As a reward for her condescensions, *I'll burn him alive!* Ha! ha! Fool, she'll be to think I'd let a *rival* live, when *her* heart was *his!*" * * *

"How pale she is! the charm works! she'll bend to my will at last. * * Not yet? Look at his agony, have you the heart to see him suffer so? Ah, how dearly you must love him, to stand by and see him burn to ashes when a word from your lips would rescue him from the flames!" * * * * * * *

"Let me see, I'll not suffer him to die so soon; perhaps a little reflection will induce him to persuade her to yield. At all events I'll try the experiment. Ho! Ramsey, cut him loose; we'll adjourn the fun to another day."

Having thus given a few snatches of the revelations made by the villain in his delirium, enough to show what were his intentions toward his prisoners, and the utter blackness of his heart, we will depict another phase of his madness, in which he imagines the swift feet of retribution to be on his track, while the future was uncurtained to his distempered gaze.

"Coming! coming! coming! and there is no escape! * * Away! ye grinning devils! out of my sight, yeimps of h---! Begone! ye ghostly demons, forever pointing with your long fingers! what would you have me see?"

His eyes were wild with a horrible stare, as if fixed by the magic power of some ghastly sight, while large drops of perspiration oozed from every pore, and stood in cold beads upon his brow! In fixed horror he thus remained for some moments, then fell back and covered his eyes with his hands, as if to shut out the dreadful scene!

Then rousing again, he exclaimed in another key:

"No! no! no! not that! I'll not come to that! Alive, and food for crawling worms! No! no! no! Then birds of prey feasting upon my flesh! Oh, God! the curse! the curse!"

This last vision seemed to overpower him, and he lay moaning most piteously for a length of time. Then the wilder phases of a distempered mind came on, and he again resumed his frenzied tone, manner, and language.

"Begone! ye lying fiends, avaunt! I'll not believe your hissing tongues! 'Tis false! all false! Back, or I'll smite you to the earth! Back! back!"

And he fought the air furiously, for a brief period, then sunk back exhausted on his pallet. A troubled half hour's sleep followed, from which he awoke much debilitated. With his waning strength, the delirium took a milder form. The vail of the future seemed still to be lifted, to give him a glimpse of coming events, but the scene that appeared was not dreadful like the ones which had preceded it.

"Happy at last, despite my oath, my vengeance unachieved! All my deep-laid schemes of no avail! Oh, Eliza! thou art indeed revenged! Thy worst predictions are realized."

The fever soon returned in violence, and once more his ravings were dreadful.

"Ho, Ramsey! keep them safe, on your life, keep them safe! do you hear? Your life, if they escape! I'll not be thwarted in my wishes; I'll move all h---I but I'll be revenged! ay, I'll walk through fire, flood and storm to gain my ends and work their ruin! They shall not escape my vengeance, I swear it in the face of earth and heaven!"

But we will not dwell longer on this unpleasant picture of a wretched man exposing his own dark soul to the eyes of others. All the night long he continued to rave in this fever-crazed manner, Hamilton, and much of the time Ellen, too, a witness of his madness. As morning drew near he fell into a more tranquil slumber, and the violence of the fever seemed to have passed. With the early dawn seizing a favorable moment, when all their enemies were asleep, the lovers made their escape. Ramsey and the Indians were so much occupied with Durant, they did not think of the prisoners as they would have done under other circumstances, though they did not feel desirous of seeing the deeds of the past day re-enacted. It was some time before they noticed the escape, and then no pursuit was instituted until after the morning meal was dispatched.

Hamilton and Ellen made the best of their way down the Ohio, and early in the evening had the good fortune to fall upon the camp of a party of whites, under the direction of Ellen's brother, who had busied himself day and night to raise the force and go in quest of the captives, having resolved never to cease his efforts until his sister was rescued, or her fate learned and her death avenged.

The meeting was a happy one; and as the object of the expedition was accomplished, the party returned home, when there was a time of general rejoicing.

CONCLUSION.

We have little more to say. As the reader will conclude without reading the fact, Walter and Ellen were married, according to their original arrangements, and afterward lived in the enjoyment of that happiness which love alone can procure, and which can be found only at the domestic fireside where peace reigns; their descendants may still be found in Kentucky and other western states.

Durant recovered from his hurt, and lived for some years to plot more mischief, and fail in his designs. He at last quarreled with one of his savage followers, and in a fit of anger, struck him a blow with his fist. The indignity was never forgotten or forgiven. The Indian vowed to be revenged, and he kept his oath; dogging the steps of his foe, he found an opportunity to inflict a wound, which felled his adversary to the earth. With proper attention he might have recovered, but his enemy left him disabled and bound, to die by slow inches!

His wound, at first very painful, soon began to mortify, and he felt the worms in his still living body! Vultures came to feast upon him, ere the vital spark of existence had gone out within him, and he had not the strength left to lift a hand, or speak a word in his own defense, though their long beaks were stretched over him and planted in his flesh and eyes! And when death at last came, and laid his icy fingers upon his heart, for the final stilling of its disquiet and guilty throbbing, his failing senses were suddenly and momentarily aroused, and the curdling blood sent again with quickened impulse through his veins, as his dull ears were saluted with the horrible sound of the howlings of wild beasts in the distance; and the last things that his closing, almost sightless balls beheld were the glaring eyes of the monsters of the forest, as they gloated over their prey!

The sight was enough to finish the work of dissolution, already advanced near to completion, and the sluggish blood rushed for the last time upon his paralyzed heart with such chilling coldness and mastering power, that it ceased to beat, and the wretch was dead!

Then a fight took place over his putrefying carcass, and the screech of the vulture, mingled with the angry growl of the wolf, as they contended for the remains of the man of crimes in their wild fury and ferocious hunger!

A few hours longer, and the flesh was all torn from his frame, and only a ghostly, grinning skeleton was left of the once proud and vicious Louis Durant; and yet fresh beasts arriving upon the scene, disappointed in their anticipated feast, howled a dismal requiem over his bones, which were left, without sepulture, to bleach in the winds and storms of heaven!

Such was the terrible end of the *villain*, while the *victims* of his hate and malice, against whom he had plotted so often and so fiendishly, were happy in the enjoyment of life's best blessings; and thus the story points its own moral.

THE END