

FANNY BURNLEY

THE WANDERER; OR,
FEMALE DIFFICULTIES
(VOLUME 4 OF 5)

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Difficulties (Volume 4 of 5)**

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The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties (Volume 4 of 5)

CHAPTER LX

Juliet was precipitately followed by Lord Melbury.

'It is not, then,' he cried, 'your intention to return to Mrs Ireton?'

'No, my lord, never!'

She had but just uttered these words, when, immediately facing her, she beheld Mrs Howel.

A spectre could not have made her start more affrighted, could not have appeared to her more horrible. And Lord Melbury, who earnestly, at the same moment, had pronounced, 'Tell me whither, then, – ' stopping abruptly, looked confounded.

'May I ask your lordship to take me to Lady Aurora?' Mrs Howel coldly demanded.

'Aurora? – Yes; – she is there, Ma'am; – still in the gallery.'

Mrs Howel presented him her hand, palpably to force him with her; and stalked past Juliet, without any other demonstration of perceiving her than what was unavoidably manifested by an heightened air of haughty disdain.

Lord Melbury, distressed, would still have hung back; but Mrs Howel, taking his arm, proceeded, as if without observing his repugnance.

Juliet, in trembling dismay, glided on till she entered a vacant apartment, of which the door was open. To avoid intrusion, she was shutting herself in; but, upon some one's applying, nearly the next minute, for admittance, the fear of new misconstruction forced her to open the door. What, then, was her shock at again viewing Mrs Howel! She started back involuntarily, and her countenance depicted undisguised horror.

With a brow of almost petrifying severity, sternly fixing her eyes upon Juliet, Mrs Howel, for a dreadful moment, seemed internally suspended, not between hardness and mercy, but between accusation and punishment. At length, in a tone, from the deep sounds of which Juliet shrunk, but had no means to retire, she slowly pronounced, while her head rose more loftily at every word, 'You abscond from Mrs Ireton, though she would permit you to remain with her? 'Tis to Lord Melbury that you reveal your purpose; and the inexperienced youth whom you would seduce, is the only person that can fail to discover your ultimate design, in taking the moment of meeting with him, for quitting the honourable protection which snatches you from want, if not from disgrace: at the same time that it offers security to a noble family, justly alarmed for the morals, if not for the honour of its youthful and credulous chief.'

The terror which, in shaking the nerves, seemed to have clouded even the faculties of Juliet, now suddenly subsided, superseded by yet more potent sensations of quick resentment. 'Hold, Madam!' she cried: 'I may bear with cruelty and injustice, for I am helpless! but not with insult, for I am innocent!'

Mrs Howel, surprised, paused an instant; but then harshly went on, 'This cant, young woman, can only delude those who are ignorant of the world. Whatever you may chuse to utter to me of that sort will be perfectly null. What I have to say is simple; what you have to offer must, of course, be complicate. But I have no time to throw away upon rants and rodomontades, and I have no patience to waste upon impostors. Hear me then without reply.'

'Not to reply, Madam, will cost me little,' indignantly cried Juliet: 'but to hear you, – pardon me, Madam, – force only can exact from me so dreadful a compliance.'

She looked round, but not having courage to open a further door, nor power to pass by Mrs Howel, walked to a window.

Not heeding her resistance, and disdaining her emotion, Mrs Howel continued: 'My Lord Melbury is not, it is true, like his sister, under my immediate care; but he is here only to join her ladyship, whom my Lord Denmeath has entrusted to my protection. And, therefore, though he is as noble in mind as in rank, since he is still, in years, but a boy, I must, in honour, consider myself to be equally responsible to my Lord Denmeath for the brother as for the sister. This being the case, I must not leave him to the machinations of an adventurer. In two words, therefore, – Declare yourself for what you are; or return with Mrs Ireton to Brighthelmstone, and remain under her roof, since she deigns to permit it, till I have restored my young friends, safe and uninjured, to their uncle. Otherwise –'

Juliet, casting up her eyes, as if calling upon heaven for patience, would have opened the window, to seek refuge in the air from sounds of which the shock was insupportable: but Mrs Howel, offended into yet deeper wrath, advanced with a mien of such rigid austerity, that she lost her purpose in her consternation, and listened irresistibly to what follows: 'Otherwise, – mark me, young woman! the still unexplained mystery with which you have made your way into the kingdom, will authorise an application which you will vainly try to elude, and with which you will not dare to prevaricate. You will take your choice, and, in five minutes, you will be summoned to make it known.'

With this menace she left the room.

In an agony of terrour, that again absorbed even resentment, Juliet remained motionless, confounded, and incapable of deliberation, till the groom of Mrs Ireton came to inform her that his lady was ready to set out.

Juliet, scarcely herself knowing her own intentions, precipitately ejaculated, 'The crisis is arrived! – I must cast myself upon Lady Aurora!'

The servant said he did not understand her.

'Tell Lady Aurora – ;' she cried, 'or Lord Melbury, – no, Lady Aurora, – ' she stopt, fearfully balancing upon which to fix.

The groom asked what he was to say.

'You will say, – I must beg you to say, – ' cried Juliet, endeavouring to recollect herself, 'that I desire, – that I wish, – that I take the liberty to request that Lady Aurora will have the goodness to honour me, – that I shall be eternally obliged if her ladyship will honour me with a few moment's conversation!'

The groom went; and almost the next instant, she heard the fleet step of Lady Aurora approaching, and her soft voice, with unusual emphasis, pronounce, 'Pardon me, dear Madam, but I could not refuse her for a thousand worlds!'

'She ought not to refuse her, Mrs Howel!' added, with fervency, the voice of Lord Melbury; 'in humanity, in justice, in decency, Aurora ought not to refuse her! Whatever may be your fears of objections to an intimacy, there can be none to common civility; for though we know not what Miss Ellis has been, we see what she now is; – a pattern of elegance, sweetness, and delicacy.'

'A moment, my lord! – one moment, Lady Aurora!' answered Mrs Howel; 'we may be overheard here; – honour me with a moment's attention in another room.' She seemed drawing them away, and not a word more reached Juliet.

A dreadful ten minutes preceded any farther information: a quick step, then, followed by a tap at the door, re-awakened at once terrour and hope. She awaited, motionless, its opening, but then saw neither the object she desired, nor that which she dreaded; neither Lady Aurora nor Mrs Howel, but Lord Melbury.

Affrighted by the threatened vengeance of Mrs Howel, but irresistibly charmed by his generous defence, and trusting esteem, Juliet looked so disturbed, yet through her disturbance so gratified, that

Lord Melbury, evidently much agitated himself, approached her with a vivacity of pleasure that he did not seek to repress, and could not have disguised.

'Miss Ellis will, I am sure, forgive my intrusion,' he cried, 'when I tell her that it is made in the name of my sister. Aurora is grieved past all expression not to wait upon you herself; but Mrs Howel is in such haste to depart, from her fear of travelling after sun-set, that it is not possible to detain her. Poor Aurora sends you a thousand apologies, and entreats you not to think ill of her for appearing thus unfeeling –'

'Think ill of Lady Aurora?' interrupted Juliet, 'I think her an angel! –'

'She is very near it, indeed!' cried Lord Melbury, ardently; 'as near it, I own, as I wish her; for I don't see, without wings, and flying to heaven, how she can well be nearer! However, since you are so kind, so liberal, as to do her that justice, would it be possible that you could communicate, through me, what you had the goodness to intend saying to her? She is quite broken-hearted at going away with an appearance of such unkindness. Can you give her this consolation?'

'Oh, my lord!' answered Juliet, with an energy that shewed off all guard, 'if I might hope for Lady Aurora's support – for your lordship's protection, – with what transport would my o'er-burthened heart, – 'Seized with sudden dread of Mrs Howel, she stopt abruptly, and fearfully looked around.

Enchanted by a prospect of some communication, Lord Melbury warmly exclaimed, 'Miss Ellis, I swear to you, by all that I hold most sacred, that if you will do me so great an honour as to trust me to be the bearer of your confidence to my sister, no creature upon earth, besides, shall ever, without your permission, hear what you may unfold! and it shall be my whole study to merit your good opinion, and to shew you my respect.'

'O my lord! O Lord Melbury,' cried Juliet, 'what hopes, what sweet balsamic hopes you pour into my wounded bosom! after sufferings by which I have been nearly, – nay, through which I have even wished myself demolished! –'

Lord Melbury, inexpressibly touched, eagerly, yet tenderly, answered, 'Name, name what there is I can be so happy as to do! Your wishes shall be my entire direction. And if I can offer you any services, I shall console Aurora, and, permit me to say, myself, still more than you.'

'I will venture, then, my lord, – I must venture! – to lay open my perilous situation! – And yet I may put your feelings, – alas! – to a test, alas, my lord! – that not all your virtues, nor even your compassion may withstand!'

Trembling almost as violently as she trembled herself, from impatience, from curiosity, from charmed interest, and indescribable wonder, Lord Melbury bent forward, so irresistibly and so palpably to take her hand, that Juliet, alarmed, drew back; and, calling forth the self-command of which her sorrows, her terrors, and her hopes had conjointly bereft her, 'If I have been guilty,' she cried, 'of any indiscretion, my lord, in this hasty, almost involuntary disposition to confidence, – excuse, – and do not punish an error that has its source only in a – perhaps – too high wrought esteem! –'

Starting with a look nearly of horror, 'You kill me,' he cried, 'Miss Ellis, if you suspect me to be capable, a second time, of dishonouring the purest of sisters by forgetting the respect due to her friend! –'

'No, my lord, no!' warmly interrupted Juliet; 'whatever you think dishonourable I am persuaded your lordship would find impracticable: but the stake is so great, – the risk so tremendous, – and failure would be so fatal! –'

Her preturbation now became nearly overpowering; and, not with standing she was prepared, and resolved, to disclose herself, her ability seemed unequal to her will, and her breast heaved with sighs so oppressive, that though she frequently began with – 'I will now, – I must now, –' she strove vainly to finish her sentence.

After anxiously and with astonishment waiting some minutes, 'Why does Miss Ellis thus hesitate?' cried Lord Melbury. 'What can I say or do to remove her scruples?'

'I have none, my lord, none! but I have so solemnly been bound to silence! and ...'

'Oh, but you are bound, now, to speech!' cried he, with spirit; 'and, to lessen your inquietude, and satisfy your delicacy, I will shew you the way to openness and confidence, by making a disclosure first. Will you, then, have more reliance upon my discretion?'

'You are too, – too good, my lord!' cried Juliet, again brightening up; 'but I dream not of such indulgence: 'tis to your benevolence only I apply.'

'Oh, but I have a fancy to trust you! Aurora will be delighted that I should have found such a confidant. Yet I have nothing positive, – nothing fixed, – to say, it is but an idea, – a thought, – a kind of distant perspective ...'

He coloured, and looked embarrassed, yet evidently with feelings of pleasure.

A radiant smile now illumined the face of Juliet, 'Ah! my lord,' she cried, 'if I might utter a conjecture, – I had almost said a wish – .'

'Why not?' cried he, laughing.'

'Your lordship permits me? – Well, then, let me name – Lady Barbara Frankland? –'

'Is it possible?' cried he, while the blood mantled in his cheeks, and pleasure sparkled in his eyes; 'what can have led you to such a thought? How can you possibly have suspected ... She is still so nearly a child...'

'It is true, my lord, but, also, how amiable a child! how richly endowed with similar qualities to those which, at this instant, engage my gratitude! –'

He bowed, with smiling delight. 'I will not deny,' he cried, 'that you have penetrated into my secret; though as yet, in fact, it is hardly even a secret; for we have not, – hitherto, – you will easily believe, conversed together upon the subject! Nor shall we say a word about it, together, till I have made the tour. But I will frankly own, that we have been brought up from our very cradles, with this notion, mutually. It was the wish of my father even in our infancy. –'

'Hold it then sacred!' cried Juliet, with strong emotion. 'Happy, thrice happy, in such a wish for your guide!'

She burst into tears.

'How your sorrows,' said he, tenderly, 'affect me! and how they interest me more deeply every moment! Tell me, then, sweet Miss Ellis! – amiable friend of my sister! – tell me why you are thus afflicted? and how, and in what manner, there is the least possibility that I may offer you my services, or procure you any consolation?'

The door here was abruptly opened by Mrs Howel.

Red with constrained rage, yet assuming a courteous demeanour, 'Your lordship will pardon,' she cried, 'my intrusion;' but Lady Aurora is so delicate, that I am always uneasy at keeping her ladyship out late.'

Highly provoked, yet deeply confused, Lord Melbury stammered that he was extremely sorry to have detained them, and begged that they would set out; promising to follow immediately.

Civily smiling, though fixing her eyes upon his face in a manner that doubled his embarrassment, she entreated him to use his own influence with Lady Aurora, to prevail upon her ladyship to proceed.

Too much perturbed to resist, he ran out of the room; casting a glance at Juliet, as he passed, expressive of his chagrin at this interruption, and full of sensibility and respect.

Juliet dreadfully affrighted, and utterly confounded, had hid her streaming eyes, and conscious blushes, with her handkerchief, upon the entrance of Mrs Howel; but, when left alone with that tremendous lady, mingled terror and indignation would have urged immediate flight, had she not been apprehensive of seeming to follow, and clandestinely, Lord Melbury.

Benign had been as yet the countenance, and melody itself the voice of Mrs Howel, compared with the expression of the one, or the sound of the other, while she now pronounced the following words: 'The terms, young woman, that I would keep with a person of name and character; the honour

and delicacy due to myself in any intercourse with such a one, I set wholly aside in treating with an adventurer. I know all that has passed! I have heard every syllable! Convinced, therefore, of your deep laid scheme, to captivate to his disgrace a youth of an illustrious house, by revealing to him a pretended tale, which you craftily refuse to trust to all who may better judge, or try, its truth; I shall take, without delay, such measures as it behoves should be taken, by a friend of his family, and of himself, to effectually open his eyes to your arts, and to his own danger. In one word, therefore, Will you, and this instant, return to Brighthelmstone under the superintendence of Mrs Ireton?'

'No, Madam!' Juliet, without hesitation, replied.

'Enough! I shall myself take in charge, then, that you do not quit the castle, till the arrival of a peace-officer; who may conduct you where you may make your confession with rather more propriety than to a young nobleman!'

Neither native courage, nor resentment of hard usage, could support Juliet against a menace such as this. She changed colour, and sunk, terrified, upon a chair.

Mrs Howel, after a moment's pause, magisterially moved to the door; whence she took the key, which was within side, and was leaving the room; but Juliet, struck with horror at such a preparation for confinement, started up, exclaiming, 'If you reduce me, Madam, to cry for help, I must cast myself at once upon the protection of Lord Melbury; – and then assure yourself, – be very sure! he will not suffer this outrage!'

'This affrontery exceeds all credibility! Assure yourself, however, young woman, and be very sure, in return! that I shall not be intimidated by an imposter, from detecting imposition; nor from consigning it to infamy!'

With a scoffing smile of power, she then left the room, locking the door without.

Consternation alone had prevented Juliet from rushing past her, and forcing a passage; though such violence was as opposite to her nature, as to propriety, and to the habits of her sex.

Alone, and a prisoner, the first reflexion that found way through her disturbance, served less to diminish her terror than to awaken new alarm. It represented to her all the blighting horrors of calumny, in being known to place her confidence in Lord Melbury, while forced to exact that he himself should guard her secret. She felt as if cast upon a precipice, from which, though a kind hand might save, the least imprudence might precipitate her downfall. She struggled for fortitude, she prayed for patience. What, indeed, she cried, are any sufferings that Mrs Ireton can inflict, compared with those I am flying? If I must submit to transient tyranny, or hazard incurring misery as durable as my existence, – can I hesitate to which I shall yield?

Hastily, now, she looked for the bell, and rang it repeatedly, till some one through the door demanded her orders.

'Acquaint Mrs Ireton,' she answered, 'that I am ready to attend her to Brighthelmstone.'

The door was almost instantly unlocked, and Mrs Howel again appeared. 'I deign not, young woman,' she sternly said, 'to enquire into the reasons, the arts, or the apprehensions that may have induced your repentance: I am aware that whatever you would tell me is precisely what I ought not to believe. I come merely to give you notice that, if you venture to attempt keeping up any sort of correspondence with Lady Aurora Granville, or with Lord Melbury, nothing can save you from detection and punishment. Mark me well! You will be properly watched.'

She then retired, shutting, but no longer locking the door.

All of philosophy, of judgment, or of forbearance that the indignant Juliet possessed, was nearly insufficient to keep her firm to her concession upon an harangue thus insulting. Necessity, however, inculcated prudence. I will await, she cried, better days! I will learn my ultimate doom ere I seek any mitigation to my passing sorrows. If all end well, – this will be as nothing! – forgive and forgotten at once! If ill, – in so overwhelming a weight of woe, 'twill be still less material!

CHAPTER LXI

Juliet was aroused from this species of patient despondency by the groom of Mrs Ireton, who broke in upon her with orders to enquire, whether it were her intention to detain his lady at the castle all night? adding, that all the rest of the party had been gone some time.

Juliet followed him to the hall, where she was greeted, as usual, with sharp reproaches, conveyed through ironical compliments.

Upon reaching the portico, she perceived, hastily returned, and dismounting his horse, Lord Melbury.

He held back, with an air of irresolution, till Mrs Ireton, to whom he distantly bowed, was seated; and then, suddenly springing forward, offered his hand to her depressed and neglected dependent.

Blushingly, yet gratefully she accepted his assistance; and having placed her in the coach, and made a slight compliment to Mrs Ireton, the carriage drove off; and, the final amazement over, the envenomed taunts of that lady were indulged in a full scope of unrestrained malignity during the whole little journey.

Juliet scarcely heard them; new perplexity, though mingled with hope and pleasure, affected and occupied her. Lord Melbury, in aiding her into the carriage, had said, 'I am afraid you will lose your shawl;' and, snatching at it, as if to present its falling, he enveloped a small packet in the folds which he put into her hands, of which, in her first confusion, she was scarcely conscious; though she felt it the instant that he disappeared.

Was it money? Nothing, in her helpless state, could be more welcome; yet to what construction, even from himself, might not its acceptance be liable? Nevertheless, with so suspicious and illjudging a witness by her side, to call him back, might seem accusing him of intentions of which she sincerely believed him guiltless.

The moment that she could disengage herself from her troublesome charges, she stole to her chamber, where she read the following words, written with a pencil upon the cover of a letter.

'How shall I ever endure myself again, should Miss Ellis withdraw her kind promise of communication, in resentment of an acquiescence in quitting her, for which already I begin almost to disdain myself? Yet my consent was granted to two of the purest of her admirers and well wishers. I could not have been biassed an instant by those who know not how to appreciate her. Hold, therefore, amiable Miss Ellis, your condescending promise sacred, though I make a momentary cession of my claim upon it, to the pleadings of those who are every way better entitled to judge than I am, of what will best demonstrate the high and true respect felt for Miss Ellis, by
'Her most obedient,
'humble servant,
'MELBURY.

'P.S. Aurora had no time to entreat for your permission to lodge the enclosed trifle in your hands. She is ashamed of its insignificance; but she has a plan, which I shall unfold when I have next the honour of seeing you, to solicit, as a mark of your confidence, becoming, through me, your banker till your affairs are arranged.

'Pardon this paper. I write on horseback, to catch you flying.'

Soft were the tears of Juliet, and radiant the eyes whence they flowed, as she perused these words. Nor could she hesitate in accepting the offering, though the little gold-purse, which contained

it, was marked with the cypher of Lord Melbury. It was presented in the name of his sister; a sister whom he revered as truly as he loved; such a name, therefore, sanctioned both the loan and the kindness. And the intimation, given by the young peer himself, of the equal influence over his mind possessed by Lady Barbara Frankland, proclaimed and proved the purity of his regard, and the innocence of his intentions.

An idea now struck her, that bounded to her heart with rapture. Might not the sum of which she permitted herself to take the disposal, prove the means of re-union with Gabriella? A very small part of it would suffice for the journey; and the rest might enable them, when once together, to make some arrangement for being parted no more.

A plan so soothing could not, even for a moment, present itself to her imagination, unaccompanied by some effort to put it into execution, and she instantly wrote a few lines to her beloved friend; stating the present possibility of their junction, and demanding her opinion, her consent, and her directions, for the immediate accomplishment of so delicious a scheme.

Cheered by a hope so dear to her wishes, so promising to her happiness, Juliet, now, was perfectly contented to continue at Brighthelmstone, till she should receive an answer to her proposal.

But, before its arrival was yet possible, she was called to a messenger, who would deliver his commission only to herself.

She descended, not without perturbation, into the hall; where a countryman told her, that he had been ordered to beg that she would go, at the usual time, the next morning, to the usual place, to meet her old friend.

He was then walking off; but Juliet stopt him, to demand whence he came, and who sent him.

A lady, he answered, who spoke broken English, and who had named five of the clock in the morning.

'Oh yes! Oh yes!' cried Juliet: 'I will not fail!' whilst a soft murmur finished with 'Tis herself! – 'tis my Gabriella!

What brought her back to Brighthelmstone, now occupied all the thoughts of her friend. Was it a design to fix her abode where her maternal enthusiasm might daily be cherished by visiting the grave of her child? Or, was it for the single indulgence of bathing that melancholy spot once more with her tears?

It was already night, or Juliet would have sought to anticipate the meeting, by some enquiry at their former lodgings: the morning, however, soon arrived, and, nearly with its dawn, she arose, and, by a previous arrangement made with the gardener, quitted the house, to hasten to the church-yard upon the hill.

In her way thither, she was seized, from time to time, with something like an apprehension that she was pursued; for, though no one came in sight, the stillness of the early morning enabled her to hear, distinctly, a footstep that now seemed to follow her own, now to stop till she had proceeded some yards.

It might merely be some workman; – yet would not a workman overtake her, and pass on? It was more probably some traveller. Nevertheless, she would not ascend the hill without making some examination; and, casting a hasty glance behind her, she perceived a tall man, muffled up, whose air denoted him to be a gentleman; but who instantly hung back.

A thousand anxious doubts were now awakened. Was it possible that she had been summoned upon any false pretence? Gabriella had not written; and though that omission had, at first, appeared the natural result of haste upon her arrival; joined to the difficulty of immediately procuring writing implements, it left an opening to uncertainty upon reflection, by no means satisfactory. That she should not personally have presented herself at the house of Mrs Ireton, could excite no surprize, for she well knew that Juliet had neither time nor a room at her own command; and to re-visit the grave of her child had always been the purpose of Gabriella.

With a slackened and irresolute step, she now went on, till, wistfully looking towards the church-yard, she descried a female, with arms uplifted, that seemed inviting her approach. Relieved and delighted, she then quickened her pace; though, as she advanced, the form retreated, till, gradually, it was wholly out of sight.

This affected and saddened her. The little grave was on the other side of the church. It is there, then, only, she cried, there, where our melancholy meeting took place, that my ever wretched Gabriella will suffer me to rejoin her!

With an aching heart she proceeded, though no Gabriella came forward to give her welcome; but when, upon crossing over to the other side of the church, in full sight of the little grave, no Gabriella was there; and not a human being was visible, she felt again impressed with a fear of imposition, and was turning back to hurry home; when she observed, just mounting the hill, the person by whose pursuit she had already been startled.

Terrour now began to take possession of her mind. She had surely been deluded, and she was evidently followed. She had neither time nor composure for divining why; but she was instantly certain that she could be no object for premeditated robbery; and the unprincipled Sir Lyell Sycamore alone occurred to her, as capable of so cruel a stratagem to enveigle her to a lonely spot. The height of the man was similar: his face was carefully concealed; but, transient as had been her glance, it was obvious to her that he was no labourer, nor countryman.

To descend the hill, would be to meet him: to go on yet further, when not a cottage, perhaps, might be open, would almost seem to expect being overtaken: yet to remain and await him, was out of all question. She saw, therefore, no hope of security, but by endeavouring to regain the street, through a circuitous path, by sudden rapidity of flight.

But, upon gliding, with this design, to the other side of the church, she was struck with amazement to see that the church-door was ajar; and to perceive, at the same instant, a passing shadow, reflected through a window, of some one within the building.

Was this accident? or had it any connection with the tall unknown who followed her?

Filled with wonder and alarm, though a stranger to every species of superstition, her feet staggered, and her presence of mind threatened to play her false; when again a fleeting shadow, of she knew not whom nor what, gleamed athwart a monument.

Summoning now her utmost force, though shaking with nameless apprehensions, she crossed, with celerity, a gravestone, to gain what appeared to be the quickest route for descending; when the sound of a hasty step, immediately behind her, gave her the fearful intelligence that escape was impossible.

Nevertheless, though nearly overcome with dread, she was pressing on; but some one, rushing abruptly past her, and turning short round, stopt her passage.

Horror thrilled through her every vein, in the persuasion that she was the destined victim of deliberate delusion, when the words, 'It is, indeed, then, you!' uttered in an accent of astonishment, yet with softness, made her hastily raise her eyes, – and raise them upon Harleigh.

Bereft of prudence, in the suddenness of her joy; forgetting self-command, and casting off all guard, all reserve, she rapturously held out to him her willing hands, exclaiming, 'Oh, Mr Harleigh! – are you, then, my destined protector? – my guardian angel?'

Speechless from transported surprize, Harleigh pressed to his lips and to his heart each unresisting hand; while Juliet, whose eyes beamed lustrous with buoyant felicity, was unconscious of the happiness that she bestowed, from the absorption of the delight that she experienced.

'Precious, for ever precious moment!' cried Harleigh, when the power of utterance returned; 'Here, on this spot, where first the tortures of the most deadly suspense give way to the most exquisite hopes, –'

The countenance of Juliet now again underwent a change the most sudden; its brilliancy was overclouded; its smiles vanished; its joy died away; not, indeed, to return to its look of horror and

affright, but to convey an expression of the deepest shame and regret; and, with cheeks tingling with burning blushes, she strove to regain her hands; to recover her composure; and to account to him, by relating what had been her dread, and her mistake, for her flattering reception.

But she strove in vain: her efforts to disengage herself had no more that frozen severity which Harleigh had not dared resist; and though her earnestness and distress shewed their sincerity, her varying blushes, her inability to find words, and her uncontrollable emotion, demonstrated, to his quick perception, that to govern her own conflicting feelings, at this critical moment, was as difficult as to resume over his accustomed dominion.

'Here on this spot,' he continued, 'this blessed, sacred, hallowed spot! clear, and eternally dismiss, every torturing doubt by which I have so long been martyrized! Here let all baneful mystery, all heart-wounding distrust, be for ever exiled; and here –'

A faint, but earnest, 'Oh no! no! no!' now quivered from the lips of Juliet; but Harleigh would not be silenced.

'And here, where you have condescended to call me your protector, – your destined protector! – a title which gives me claims that never while I live shall be relinquished! – claims which not even yourself, now, can have power to recall –'

'Hear me! hear me! –' interrupted, but vainly, the pleading Juliet; Harleigh, uncontrouled, went on.

'Initiate me, without delay, in the duties of my office. Against whom, and against what may I be your protector? You have called me, too, your guardian-angel; Oh suffer me to call you mine! Consent to that sweet reciprocation, which blends felicity with every care of life! which animates our virtues by our happiness! which secures the performance of every duty, by making every duty an enjoyment!'

A frequent 'Alas! alas!' was all that Juliet could gain time to utter, from the rapid energy with which Harleigh overpowered all attempt at remonstrance.

'Why, why,' he then cried, with redoubled vivacity; 'Why not exile now, and repudiate for ever, that terrible rigour of reserve that has so long been at war with your humanity? – Listen to your softer self! It will plead, it will surely plead for gentler measures!'

'Oh no, no, no!' reiterated the agitated Juliet, with a vehemence that would have startled, if not discouraged him, had not another incautious 'Alas! alas!' stole its way into the midst of her tremulous negatives; and revealed that her heart, her wishes, her feelings, bore no part in the refusals which her tongue pronounced.

This was not a circumstance to escape Harleigh, who, indescribably touched, fervently exclaimed, 'And what, now, shall sunder us? Pardon my presumption if I say us! What is the power, – the earthly power, – while yet I live, and breathe, and feel, that can now compel me to give up the rights with which, from this decisive moment, I hold myself invested? No! our destinies are indissolubly united! – All procrastination, – all concealment must be over! They would now be literally distracting. Why, then, that start? – Why that look? – Can you regret having shewn a little feeling? – a trait of sensibility? – O put a period to this unequalled, unexampled mystery! I am yours! faithfully, honourably yours! Yours to the end of my mortal existence; yours, by my most sacred hopes, far, far longer! – You weep? – not from grief, I trust, – I hope, – not from grief flow those touching tears? Open to me your situation, – your heart! Here, on this sacred, and henceforth happiest spot, where first you have accorded me a ray of hope, let our mutual vows be plighted to all eternity!'

Juliet, whose whole soul seemed dissolved in poignant yet tender distress, cast up to heaven, as if imploring for aid, her irresistibly streaming eyes; when, caught by some shadowy motion to turn them towards the church, she fancied that she beheld again the female, whose appearance and vanishing had been forgotten from the excess of her own emotions.

Startled, she looked more earnestly, and then clearly perceived, though half hidden behind a monument, a form in white; whose dress appeared to be made in the shape, and of the materials,

used for our mortal covering, a shroud. A veil of the same stuff fell over the face of the figure, of which the hands hung down strait at each lank side.

Struck with awe and consternation, Juliet involuntarily ceased her struggles for freedom; and Harleigh, who saw her strangely moved, pursuing the direction of her eyes, discerned the object by which they had been caught; who now, slowly raising her right hand, waved to them to follow; while, with her left, she pointed to the church, and, uttering a wild shriek, flitted out of sight.

Could it be Elinor? Each felt at the same instant the same terrible apprehension. Harleigh sprang after her; Juliet, almost petrified with affright, was immovable.

The fugitive entered the church, and darted towards the altar; where she threw her left hand over a tablet of white stone, cut in the shape of a coffin, with the action of embracing it; yet in a position to leave evident the following inscription:

'This Stone

Is destined by herself to be the last kind covering

of all that remains of

ELINOR JODDREL:

Who, sick of Life, of Love, and of Despair,

Dies to moulder, and be forgotten.'

Casting off her veil when she perceived Harleigh, 'Here! Harleigh, here!' she cried, in a tone authoritative, though tremulous, 'tis here you must reciprocate your vows! Here is the spot! Here stands the altar for the happy; – here, the tomb for the hopeless!'

Suspicious of some sinister purpose, Harleigh was at her side with the swiftness of lightening; but not till her fingers were upon the trigger of a pistol, which she had pointed to her temple; though in time, by attaining her arm, and forcibly giving it a new direction, to make her fire the deadly weapon in the air.

Her own design, nevertheless, seconded by the loud din of a pistol, so close to her ear, and let off by her own hand, operated upon her deranged imagination with a belief that her purpose was fulfilled; and she sunk upon the ground, uttering, with a deep groan, 'Oh Harleigh! bless the dying Elinor, – and be happy! –'

Harleigh, terrified and shocked, though thankfully perceiving her mistake, dropped down at her side, and supported her head; while congratulating eyes stole a glance at Juliet; who, at the sound of the pistol, had hastened, aghast, to the spot; but who now, dreading to be seen, retreated.

'Oh Elinor!' he then cried, 'what direful infatuation of wrong is this! – What have you done with your nobler, better self? – How have you thus warped your reason and your religion alike, to an equal and terrible defiance of here and hereafter?'

Recovering, at these interrogatories, to conscious failure, and conscious existence, she hastily arose, indignantly spurned at the tablet, looked around for Juliet with every mark of irritation, and, casting a glance of suffering, yet investigating shame at Harleigh, "'Tis again, then,' she cried, 'abortive! – and, a third time, I am food, for fools, – when I meant to be food only for worms!'

She then peremptorily demanded Juliet; who, affrighted, was absconding, till shrieks rather than calls forced her forward.

With an exaltation so violent that it seemed incipient frenzy, Elinor hailed her. 'Approach, Ellis, approach!' she cried. 'Oh chosen of the chosen! Oh born to shew, and prove the perfectibility of earthly happiness, and the falsehood and sophistry of the ignorance and superstition that deny it! Approach! and let me sanction your nuptial contract! I here solemnly give you back your promise. I renounce all tie over your actions, your engagements, your choice. Approach, then, that I may join your hands, while I quaff my last draught of tender poison from the grateful eyes of Harleigh, whose happiness, – my own donation! – will cast a glory upon my exit!'

Juliet stood motionless, pale, almost livid, and appearing nearly as unable to think as to speak. But the feelings of Harleigh were as much too actively alive, as hers seemed morbid. Agitation beat in every pulse, flowed in every vein, throbbed even visibly in his heart, which bounded with tumultuous triumph, that Juliet, now, was liberated from all adverse engagements: and though he sought, and meant, to turn his eyes, with tender pity, upon Elinor, they stole involuntarily, impulsively, glances of exstatic felicity at the mute and appalled Juliet.

The watchful Elinor discerned the distraction, which he imagined to be as impenetrable as it was irresistible. Shame, mingled with despondence, superseded her exaltation; and disdainfully, and even wrathfully, she disengaged herself from his hold; but, suspicious of some new violence, he hovered over her with extended arms; and presently caught a glimpse of a second pistol, placed behind the tablet, and, as nearly as possible, out of sight. Her intention could not be doubted; but, forcibly anticipating her movement, he seized the destined instrument of death, and, flying to the porch, fired it also into the air.

Elinor now was confounded; she reddened with confusion, trembled with ire, and seemed nearly fainting with excess of emotion; but, after holding her hands a minute or two crossed over her face, she forced a smile, and said, 'Harleigh, our tragi-comedy has a long last act! But you can never, now, believe me dead, till you see me buried. That, next, must follow!' And abruptly she was rushing out of the church, when she was encountered, in the porch, by her foreign servant, accompanied by the whole house of Mrs Maple.

Juliet, satisfied that this victim to her own passions and delusions, would now fall into proper hands, eagerly glided past them all; and, finding the streets no longer empty, fled back to the mansion of Mrs Ireton.

CHAPTER LXII

Juliet re-entered her chamber without having been missed, but in a perturbation of mind indescribable; affrighted, confused, overpowered with various and varying sensations; wretched for Elinor; dissatisfied with herself; and yet more at war with what seemed to be her destiny; ejaculating, from time to time, Oh Gabriella! receive, console, strengthen, and direct your terrified, – bewildered friend! —

Unusual sounds from the hall soon announced some disturbance; but, wholly without courage to go forth upon any enquiry, she remained, in trembling ignorance of what was passing; till she was relieved by a visit from Selina, which gave her the extreme satisfaction of hearing that Elinor was actually in the house.

Grief, however, though unmixt with surprize, followed the information, when she heard, also, that Elinor was in so disordered a state, that she had been forced from the church only by the interference of Mr Naird; for whom Mr Harleigh had sent; and who had positively told her, that, if she would not submit to be conveyed to some house, and try to repose, he should hold it his duty to send for proper persons to controul and take care of her, as one unfit to be trusted to herself.

Even then, though evidently startled, she would not consent to go back to Lewes, which she had quitted, she loudly declared, for ever: but, after wildly enquiring for Ellis, and being assured that she was returned to Mrs Ireton's, she was, at length, wrought upon to accept an invitation, which, through measures that were taken by the active Harleigh, Mrs Ireton had been prevailed with to send to her; and which included her sister and Mrs Maple.

What else of the history of this transaction was known to Selina, was speedily revealed.

The whole house of Mrs Maple had been awakened at day-light, by the foreign servant of Elinor; who came to bid Tomlinson call up Mrs Maple, and acquaint her, that he believed that her niece was determined to make away with herself. She had found means, he said, over night, to induce the clerk of the church at Brighthelmstone to let her have the key of the church, to begin a drawing, of one of the monuments, at sun-rise, when no idle loungers would interrupt her: and the clerk, knowing her for a lady of property and fashion, in the neighbourhood, had not had the thought to refuse her. She had made him, the lackey, come for her at Mrs Maple's, with a post chaise, and wait near the house at three o'clock in the morning: she and Mrs Golding then got into it, while he attended, as usual, on horseback. They stopt at a place, by the way, to receive a heap of things, that he did not take much notice of, as it was not well light; and then they all galloped to Brighthelmstone. He thought no harm, all the time, as his lady so often went about oddly, nobody knowing why. She made the chaise stop at the church-yard, and told him, and Golding, to help up with all the things, into the church. She then said she was going to begin her drawing; and bid the postilion wait at some inn, till she went for him. But she told the lackey to stay in the church-yard. She and Golding were then shut up together a quarter of an hour; when Golding came out, crying. Her lady, she said, had put a white trimmed stuff dress over her cloaths, that made her look as if she were buried alive, and just the same as a ghost; and she was afraid all was not right; for she had made her help to place what she had called a pallet, for her drawing, upon the altar-table, and it looked just like a coffin; only it was covered over with paper. She had ordered that they should both go to an inn, and return for her, with the chaise, at eight o'clock. Neither of them knew what to make of all this; but so many out of the way things had passed, and nothing had come of them, that, still, they should have done only as they were bid, but that the lackey recollected two loaded pistols, which his lady had made him charge, upon the route, to frighten away robbers, by firing one of them off, she said, if they saw any suspicious persons dodging them: and these, which had been put carefully into the chaise, Golding had seen, in the hand of her mistress, in the church. This gave him such a panic, that he thought it safest to ride back to Madame Maple's, and tell the whole at once. All the family, upon this alarming

news, set out for Brighthelmstone, the moment that the horses could be got ready: and, just as they arrived at the church, Elinor herself, had appeared, bursting from it into the porch.

Her indignation at thus being followed and detected, had been terrible: Who, she asked, had any right to controul her? But that was nothing to her disturbance, when she found that Ellis had vanished. She grew so agitated, that it was frightful, Selina continued, to see her; and looked frantically about her, as if for means to destroy herself: and nothing could urge her to quit the church, or church-yard, whence she eagerly tried to command away all others; till Mr Harleigh had recourse to Mr Naird, who had alarmed her into submission. They had then brought her in a chaise, between Mrs Maple and the surgeon, to Mrs Ireton's; where, to hide herself, she said, from light and life, she had gloomily consented to go to bed; but she raved, sighed, groaned, started, and was in a state of shame and despair, the most deplorable.

Juliet heard this narration with equal pity and terrour; but no sooner understood that Mrs Maple had entreated Mr Harleigh to remain at Brighthelmstone, for a day or two, than she determined to quit the place herself, persuaded that these bloody enterprizes were always reserved for their joint presence.

The nearly exhausted Elinor passed the rest of the day without effort, without speech, and almost without sign of life. But, early on the following morning, Juliet received from her a hasty summons.

Juliet essayed, by every means that she could devise, to avoid obeying it; but every effort of resistance was ineffectual. By compulsion, therefore, and slowly, she mounted the stairs, secretly determining that, should Harleigh also be called upon, she would seize the first instant in which she could elude observation, to escape, not alone from the room, nor from the house, but from Brighthelmstone; whence she would set off, by the quickest conveyance that she could find, for London and Gabriella. Elinor, muffled up, and looking pale, haggard, and altered, was reclining upon a sofa; not in compliance with the request of her friends, but from an indispensable necessity of repose, after the violent exertions which had recently shaken her already weakened frame. At the entrance of Juliet she lifted up her head, with an air of eager satisfaction, and exclaimed, 'You are really, then, here? And you come, at length, to my call? Harleigh is less courteous! Triumphant Harleigh! he leaves me, he says, to take some rest: – rest? –'

She paused, and her under lip shewed her contempt of the idea; and presently, with a sarcastic smile, she added, 'Yes, yes, I shall certainly take rest! I mean no less. He, too, will take some rest! There, at least, ultimately, our destinies will approximate. And you, even you, victorious Ellis! will sink to vapid rest, like those who have never known happiness!'

With a laugh, then, but expressive of scorn, not gaiety, she exclaimed, 'And I, too, preaching? Can we never be tired, and good for nothing, but we must take to moralizing? Summon him, however, Ellis, yourself. Tell him to come without delay. I am sick; – and he is sick; and you are sick; – we are all round sick of this loathsome procrastination.'

Alert to seize any pretence to be gone, Juliet was already at the door; when Elinor, suddenly seeming to penetrate into her intentions, called her back; and demanded a solemn promise that she would not fail to return with Harleigh.

To the quick perceptions of Elinor, hesitation was alarm; she no sooner, therefore, observed it, than she peremptorily ordered Selina and Mrs Golding out of the room, and then, yet more positively, commanded Juliet to approach the sofa.

'I see,' she cried, 'your collusion! You imagine, by coming to me alternately, that you shall keep me in order? You conclude that I only present myself a bowl and a dagger, like a Tragedy Queen, to have them dashed from my hands, that I may be ready for a similar exhibition another day? – And can Harleigh, the noble Harleigh! judge me thus pitifully? No! no! Full of great and expansive ideas himself, he can better comprehend the exaltation of which a high, uncurbed, independent spirit is capable. But little minds deem all that is not common, all that has not been practised from father to

son, and from generation to generation, to be trick, or to be impossible. You, Ellis, and such as you, who act always by rule, who never utter a word of which you have not weighed the consequence; never indulge a wish of which you have not canvassed the effects: who listen to no generous feeling; who shrink from every liberal impulse; who know nothing of nature, and care for nothing but opinion: – you, and such as you, tame animals of custom, wearied and wearying plodders on beaten tracks, may conclude me a mere vapouring impostor, and believe it as safe to brave as to despise me! You, Ellis – But no! –'

She stopt, and her look and manner suddenly lost their fierceness, as she added: 'Oh no! – You! You are not of that cast! Harleigh can only admire what alone is admirable. He would soon see through littleness or hypocrisy; you must be good and great at once – eminently good, unaffectedly great! – or how could Harleigh, the punctilious, discriminating Harleigh, adore you? Oh! I have known, and secretly appreciated you long; though I have been too little myself to acknowledge it! I have not been calm enough – perhaps not blind enough for justice! for if I saw your beauty less clearly – O happy Ellis! how do I admire, envy, revere, – and hate you!'

Shocked, yet filled with pity, Juliet would have sought to deprecate her enmity, and soften her feelings; but her fiery eye shewed that any attempt at offering her consolation would be regarded as insult. 'I disdain,' she cried, 'all expedient, all pretence. However the abortion of my purpose may have made me appear a mere female mountebank, I have meant all that I have seemed to mean: though, by waiting for the moment of most *eclat*, opportunity has been past by, and action has been frustrated. But I can die only once. That over, – all is ended. 'Tis therefore I have studied how to finish my career with most effect. Let Harleigh, however, beware how he doubt my sincerity! doubt from him would drive me mad indeed! To the torpid formalities of every-day customs; the drowsy thoughts of every-day thinkers; he may believe me insensible, and I shall thank him; but, indifferent to my own principles of honour! – lost to my own definitions of pride, of shame, of heroism! – Oh! if he touch me there! – if he can judge of me so degradingly ... my senses will still go before my life!'

She held her forehead, with a look of fearful pain; but, soon recovering, laughed, and said, 'There are fools, I know, in the world, who suppose me mad already! only because I go my own way; while they, poor cowards, yoked one to another, always follow the path of their forefathers; without even venturing to mend the road, however it may have been broken up by time, accident or mischief. I have full as much contempt of their imbecility, as they can have of my insanity. But hear me, Ellis! approach and mark me. I must have a conference with Harleigh. You must be present. A last conference! Whatever be its event, I have bound myself to Elinor Joddrel never to demand another! But do not therefore imagine my life or death to be in your power. No! My resolution is taken. Take yours. Let the interview which I demand pass quietly in this room; or be responsible for the consequences of the public desperation to which I may be urged!'

Gloomily, she then added, 'Harleigh has refused to come; I will send him word that you are here; will he still refuse?'

Juliet blushed; but could not answer. Elinor paused a moment, and then said, 'If he knows that he can see you elsewhere, he will be firm; if not ... he will return with my messenger! By that I can judge the present state of your connexion.'

She rang the bell, and told Mrs Golding to go instantly to Mr Harleigh, and acquaint him that Elinor Joddrel and Miss Ellis desired to speak with him immediately.

Vainly Juliet remonstrated against the strange appearance of such a message, not only to himself, but to the family and the world: 'Appearance?' she cried; 'after what I have done, what I have dared, – have I any terms to keep with the world? with appearances? Miserable, contemptible, servile appearances, to which sense, happiness, and feeling are for ever to be sacrificed! And what will the world do in return? How recompense the victims to its arbitrary prejudices? By letting them quickly sink into nothing; by suffering them to die with as little notice and distinction as they have lived; and with as little choice.'

Mrs Golding returned, bringing the respects of Mr Harleigh, but saying that he was forced, by an indispensable engagement, to refuse himself the honour of waiting upon Miss Joddrel.

'Run to him again! – ' cried Elinor, with vehemence; 'run, or he will be gone! Make him enter the first empty room, and tell him 'tis Miss Ellis alone who desires to speak with him. Fly!'

Yet more earnestly, now, Juliet would have interfered; but the peremptory Elinor insisted upon immediate obedience. 'If still,' she cried 'he come not ... I shall conclude you to be already married!'

She laughed, yet wore a face of horror at this idea; and spoke no more till Mrs Golding returned, with intelligence that Mr Harleigh was waiting in the parlour.

The bosom of Juliet now swelled and heaved high, with tumultuous distress and alarm, and her cheeks were dyed with the crimson tint of conscious shame; while Elinor, turning pale, dropt her head upon the pillow of the sofa, and sighed deeply for a moment in silence. Recovering then, 'This, at least,' she said, 'is explicit; let it be final! Your influence is not disguised; use it, Ellis, to snatch me from the deplorable buffoonery of running about the world – not like death after the lady, but the lady after death! Assure yourselves that you will never devise any stratagem that will turn me from my purpose; though you may render ridiculous in its execution, what in its conception was sublime. Happiness such as yours, Ellis, ought to be above all narrow malignity. You ought to be proud, Ellis, voluntarily to serve her whom involuntarily you have ruined!'

Juliet was beginning some protestations of kindness; but Elinor, interrupting her, said, 'I can give credit only to action. I must have a conference; but it is not to talk of myself; – nor of you; nor even of Harleigh. No! the soft moment of indulgence to my feelings is at an end! When I allowed my heart that delicious expansion; when I abandoned it to nature, and permitted it those open effusions of tenderness, I thought my dissolution at hand, and meant but to snatch a few last precious minutes of extacy from everlasting annihilation! but these endless delays, these eternal procrastinations, make me appear so unmeaning an idiot, even to myself, that, for the remnant of my doleful ditty, I must resist every natural wish; and plod on, till I plod off, with the stiff and stupid decorum of a starched old maid of half a century. Procure me, however, this definitive conference. It is upon no point of the old story, I promise you. You cannot be more tired of that than I am ashamed. 'Tis simply an earnest curiosity to know the pure, unadulterate thoughts of Harleigh upon death and immortality. I have applied to him, fruitlessly, myself; he inexorably refers me to some old canonicals; without considering that it is vain to ask for guides to shew us a road, before we are convinced, or at least persuaded, that it will lead us to some given spot. Let him but make clear, that 'tis his own opinion that death does not sink us to nothing; let him but satisfy me, that he does not turn me over to others, only because he thinks as I think himself, and has not the courage to avow it; – and then, in return, I may suffer him to send to me some one of his black robed tribe, to harangue me about here and hereafter.'

All contestation on the part of Juliet, was but irritating; she was forced upon her commission, and compelled solemnly to promise, that she would return with Harleigh, and be present at the conference.

CHAPTER LXIII

With unsteady footsteps, and covered with blushes, Juliet repaired to the parlour, where Harleigh, with delighted, yet trembling impatience, was awaiting her arrival.

The door was half open, and he had placed himself at a distant window, to force her entire entrance into the room, before she could see him, or speak; but, that point gained, he hastened to shut it, exclaiming, 'How happy for me is this incident, whatever may have been its origin! Let me instantly avail myself of it, to entreat –'

'Give me leave,' interrupted Juliet, looking every way to avoid his eyes; 'to deliver my message. Miss Joddrel –'

'When we begin,' cried Harleigh, eagerly, 'upon the unhappy Elinor, she must absorb us; let me, then, first –'

'I must be heard, Sir,' said Juliet, with more firmness, 'or I must be gone! –'

'You must be heard, then, undoubtedly!' he cried, with a smile, and offering her a chair, 'for you must not be gone!'

Juliet declined being seated, but delivered, nearly in the words that she had received it, her message.

Harleigh looked pained and distressed, yet impatient, as he listened. 'How,' he cried, 'can I argue with her? The false exaltation of her ideas, the effervescence of her restless imagination, place her above, or below, whatever argument, or reason can offer to her consideration. Her own creed is settled – not by investigation into its merits, not by reflection upon its justice, but by an impulsive preference, in the persuasion that such a creed leaves her mistress of her destiny.'

'Ah, do not resist her!' cried Juliet. 'If there is any good to be done – do it! and without delay!'

'It is not you I can resist!' he tenderly answered, 'if deliberately it is your opinion I should comply. But her peculiar character, her extraordinary principles, and the strange situation into which she has cast herself, give her, for the moment, advantages difficult, nay dangerous to combat. Unawed by religion, of which she is ignorant; unmoved by appearances, to which she is indifferent; she utters all that occurs to an imagination inflamed by passion, disordered by disappointment, and fearless because hopeless, with a courage from which she has banished every species of restraint: and with a spirit of ridicule, that so largely pervades her whole character, as to burst forth through all her sufferings, to mix derision with all her sorrows, and to preponderate even over her passions! Reason and argument appear to her but as marks for dashing eloquence or sportive mockery. Nevertheless, if, by striking at every thing, daringly, impetuously, unthinkingly, she start some sudden doubt; demand some impossible explanation; or ask some humanly unanswerable question; she will conclude herself victorious; and be more lost than ever to all that is right, from added false confidence in all that is wrong.'

'If so, the conference were, indeed, better avoided,' said Juliet with sadness; 'yet – as it is not the sacred truth of revealed religion that she means to canvass; as it is merely the previous question, of the possibility, or impossibility, according to her notions, of a future state for mankind, which she desires to discuss; I do not quite see the danger of answering the doubts, or refuting the assertions, that may lead her afterwards, to an investigation so important to her future welfare. If she would consult with a clergyman, it were certainly preferable; but that will be a point no longer difficult to gain, when once you have convinced her, upon her own terms of controversy, that you yourself have a firm belief in immortality.'

'The attempt shall surely be made,' said Harleigh, 'if you think such a result, as casting her into more reverend hands, may ensue. If I have fled all controversy with her, from the time that she has publicly proclaimed her religious infidelity, it has by no means been from disgust; an unbeliever is simply an object of pity; for who is so deplorably without resource in sickness or calamity? – those

two common occupiers of half our existence! No; if I have fled all voluntary intercourse with her, it has only been that her total contempt of the world, has forced me to take upon myself the charge of public opinion for us both. While I considered her as the future wife of my brother, I frankly contested whatever I thought wrong in her notions. The wildness of her character, the eccentricity of her ideas, and the violence of all her feelings; with her extraordinary understanding – parts, I ought to say; for understanding implies rather what is solid than brilliant; – joined to the goodness of her heart, and the generosity, frankness, and openness of her nature, excited at once an anxiety for my brother, and an interest for herself, that gave occasion to the most affectionate animadversion on my part, and produced alternate defence or concession on hers. But her disdain of flattery, or even of civil acquiescence, made my freedom, opposed to the courteous complaisance which my brother deemed due to his situation of her humble servant, strike her in a point of view ... that has been unhappy for us all three! Yet this was a circumstance which I had never suspected, – for, where no wish is met, remark often sleeps; – and I had been wholly unobservant, till you –'

Called from the deep interest with which she had involuntarily listened to the relation of his connection with Elinor, by this sudden transition to herself, Juliet started; but he went on.

'Till you were an inmate of the same house! till I saw her strange consternation, when she found me conversing with you; her rising injustice when, with the respect and admiration which you inspired, I mentioned you; her restless vigilance to interrupt whatever communication I attempted to have with you; her sudden fits of profound yet watchful taciturnity, when I saw you in her presence; –'

'I may tell her,' interrupted Juliet, disturbed, 'that you will wait upon her according to her request?'

'When you,' cried he, smiling, 'are her messenger, she must not expect quite so quick, quite so categorical an answer! I must first –'

'On the contrary, her impatience will be insupportable if I do not relieve it immediately.'

She would have opened the door, but, preventing her, 'Can you indeed believe,' he cried, with vivacity; 'is it possible you can believe, that, having once caught a ray of light, to illumine and cheer the dread and nearly impervious darkness, that so long and so blackly overclouded all my prospects, I can consent, can endure to be cast again into desolate obscurity?'

Juliet, blushing, and conscious of his allusion to her reception of him in the church yard, for which, without naming Sir Lyell Sycamore, she knew not how to account, again protested that she must not be detained.

Still, however, half reproachfully, half laughingly, stopping her, 'And is it thus,' he cried, 'that you summon me to Brighthelmstone, – only to mock my obedience, and disdain to hear me?'

'I, Sir? – I, summon you?'

'Nay, see my credentials!'

He presented to her the following note, written in an evidently feigned hand:

'If Mr Harleigh will take a ramble to the church-yard upon the Hill, at Brighthelmstone, next Thursday morning, at five o'clock, he will there meet a female fellow-traveller, now in the greatest distress, who solicits his advice and assistance, to extricate her from her present intolerable abode.'

Deeply colouring, 'And could Mr Harleigh,' she cried, 'even for a moment believe, – suppose, –'

He interrupted her, with an air of tender respect. 'No; I did not, indeed, dare believe, dare suppose that an honour, a trust such as might be implied by an appeal like this, came from you! Yet for you I was sure it was meant to pass; and to discover by whom it was devised, and for what purpose, irresistibly drew me hither, though with full conviction of imposition. I came, however, pre-determined to watch around your dwelling, at the appointed hour, ere I repaired to the bidden place. But what was my agitation when I thought I saw you! I doubted my senses. I retreated; I hung back; your face was shaded by your head-dress; – yet your air, – your walk, – was it possible I could be deceived? Nevertheless, I resolved not to speak, nor to approach you, till I saw whether you proceeded to the church-yard. I was by no means free from suspicion of some new stratagem of Elinor; for,

fatigued with concealment, I was then publicly at my house upon Bagshot Heath, where the note had reached me. Yet her distance from Brighthelmstone for so early an hour, joined to intelligence which I had received some time ago, – for you will not imagine that the period which I spend without seeing, I spend also without hearing of you? – that you had been observed, – and more than once, – at that early hour, in the church-yard –'

'True!' cried Juliet, eagerly, 'at that hour I have frequently met, or accompanied, a friend, a beloved friend! thither; and, in her name, I had even then, when I saw you, been deluded: not for a walk; a ramble; not upon any party of pleasure; but to visit a little tomb, which holds the regretted remains of the darling and only child of that dear, unhappy friend!'

She wept. Harleigh, extremely touched, said, 'You have, then, a friend here? – Is it, – may I ask? – is it the person you so earnestly sought upon your arrival? – Is your anxiety relieved? – your embarrassment? – your suspence? – your cruel distress? – Will you not give me, at length, some little satisfaction? Can you wonder that my forbearance is worn out? – Can my impatience offend you? – If I press to know your situation, it is but with the desire to partake it! – If I solicit to hear your name – it is but with the hope ... that you will suffer me to change it!'

He would have taken her hand, but, drawing back, and wiping her eyes, though irresistibly touched, 'Offend?' she repeated; 'Oh far, – far!.. but why will you recur to a subject that ought so long since to have been exploded? – while another, – an essential one, calls for all my attention? – The last packet which you left with me, you must suffer me instantly to return; the first, – the first –' She stammered, coloured, and then added, 'The first, – I am shocked to own, – I must defer returning yet a little longer!'

'Defer?' ardently repeated Harleigh. 'Ah! why not condescend to think, at least, another language, if not to speak it? Why not anticipate, in kind idea, at least, the happy period, – for me! when I may be permitted to consider as included, and mutual in our destinies, whatever hitherto –'

'Oh hold! – Oh Mr Harleigh!' interrupted Juliet, in a voice of anguish. 'Let no error, no misconstruction, of this terrible sort, – no inference, no expectation, thus wide from all possible reality, add to my various misfortunes the misery of remorse!'

'Remorse? – Gracious powers! What can you mean?'

'That I have committed the most dreadful of mistakes, – a mistake that I ought never to forgive myself, if, in the relief from immediate perplexity, which I ventured to owe to a momentary, and, I own, an intentionally unacknowledged, usage of some of the notes which you forced into my possession, I have given rise to a belief, – to an idea, – to –'

She hesitated, and blushed so violently, that she could not finish her phrase; but Harleigh appeared thunderstruck, and was wholly silent. She looked down, abashed, and added, 'The instant, by any possible means, – by work, by toil, by labour, – nothing will be too severe, – all will be light and easy, – that can rectify, – that –'

She could not proceed; and Harleigh, somewhat recovered by the view of her confusion, gently, though reproachfully, said, 'All, then, will be preferable to the slightest, smallest trust in me? – And is this from abhorrence? – or do you deem me so ungenerous as to believe that I should take unworthy advantage of being permitted to offer you even the most trivial service?'

'No, no, oh, no!' with quickness cried Juliet; 'but the more generous you may be, the more readily you may imagine –'

She stopt, at a loss how to finish.

'That you would be generous, too?' cried Harleigh, revived and smiling.

She could not refrain from a smile herself, but hastily added, 'My conduct must be liable to no inference of any sort. Adieu, Sir. I will deliver you the packet in Miss Joddrel's room.'

Her hand was upon the lock, but his foot, fixed firmly against the door, impeded its being opened, while he exclaimed, 'I cannot part with you thus! You must clear this terrific obscurity, that threatens to involve me, once more, in the horrors of excruciating suspense! – Why that

cruel expression of displeasure? Can you think that the moment of hope, – however brief, however unintentional, however accidental, – can ever be obliterated from my thoughts? that my existence, to whatever term it may be lengthened, will ever out-live the precious remembrance that you have called me your destined protector? – your guardian angel?

He could add no more; a mortal paleness overspread the face of Juliet, who, letting go the lock of the door, sunk upon a chair, faintly ejaculating, 'Was I not yet sufficiently miserable?'

Penetrated with sorrow, and struck with alarm, Harleigh looked at her in silence; but when again he sought to take her hand, shrinking from his touch, though regarding him with an expression that supplicated rather than commanded forbearance; 'If you would not kill me, Mr Harleigh,' she cried, 'you will relinquish this terrible perseverance!'

'Relinquish?' he repeated, 'What now? Now, that all delicacy for this wild, eccentric, though so generous Elinor is at an end? that she has, herself, annulled your engagement? Relinquish, now, the hopes so long pursued, – so difficultly caught? No, I swear to you – '

Juliet arose. 'Oh hold, Mr Harleigh!' she cried; 'recollect yourself a moment! I lament if I have, involuntarily, caused you any transient mistake; yet, do me the justice to reflect, that I have never cast my destiny upon that of Miss Joddrel. No decision, therefore, of hers can make any change in mine.'

She again put her hand upon the lock of the door.

Harleigh fixt upon her his eyes, which spoke the severest disturbance, while, in tremulous accents, he uttered, 'And can you leave me thus, to wasting despondence? – and with this cold, chilling, blighting composure? – Is it from pitiless apathy, which incapacitates for judging of torments which it does not experience? – O no! Those eyes that so often glisten with the most touching sensibility, – those cheeks that so beautifully mantle with the varying dyes of quick transition of sentiment, – that mouth, which so expressively plays in harmony with every word, – nay, every thought, – all, all announce a heart where every virtue is seconded and softened by every feeling! – a mind alive to the quickest sensations, yet invigorated with the ablest understanding! a soul of angelic purity! – '

Some sound from the passage made him suddenly stop, and remove his foot; while the hand of Juliet dropt from the lock. They were both silent, and both, affrighted, stood suspended; till Juliet, shocked at the impropriety of such a situation, forced herself to open the door, – at the other side of which, looking more dead than alive, stood Elinor, leaning upon her sister.

'I began to think,' she cried, in a hollow tone, 'that you were eloped! – and determining to trust to no messenger, I came myself.' She then endeavoured to call forth a smile; but it visited so unwillingly features nearly distorted by internal agony, that it gave a cast almost ghastly to her countenance.

'Why, Harleigh,' she cried, 'should you thus shun me? Have I not given back her plighted faith to Ellis? Yet I am not ignorant how tired you must be of those old thread-bare topics, bows, daggers, poignards, and bodkins: but they have had their reign, and are now dethroned. What remains is plain, common, stupid rationality. I wish to converse with you, Albert, only as a casuist; and upon a point of conscience which you alone can settle. For this world, and for all that belongs to it, all, with me, is utterly over! I have neither care nor interest left in it; and I have no belief that there is any other. I am very composedly ready, therefore, to take my last nap. I merely wish to learn, before I return to my torpid ignorance, whether it can be a fact, that you, Harleigh, you! believe in a future state for mortal man? And I engage you by your friendship, – which I still prize above all things! and by your honour, which you, I know, prize in the same manner, to answer me this question, instantly and categorically.'

'Most faithfully, then, Elinor, yes! All the happiness of my present life is founded upon my belief of a life to come!'

Elinor held up her hands. 'Astonishing!' she cried. 'Can judgment and credulity, wisdom and superstition, thus jumble themselves together! And in a head so clear, so even oracular! Give me, at least, your reasons; and see that they are your own!'

Harleigh looked disturbed, but made not any answer.

The wan face of Elinor was now lighted up with hues of scarlet. 'I feel,' she cried, 'the impropriety of this intrusion; – for who, if not I, – since we all prize most what we know least, – should respect happiness? When you have finished, however, your present conference, honour me, both of you, if you please, – that the period so employed may be less wearisome to either, – with a final one up stairs. Harleigh! A final one!'

Harleigh was still silent.

A yet deeper red now dyed the whole complexion of Elinor, and she added, 'If, to-day, you are too much engaged, – to-morrow will suffice. To-day, indeed, your solemn protestations of belief, upon a subject which to me, is a chaos, – dark, – impervious, impenetrable! has given ample employment to my ideas.'

Repulsing, then, his silently offered arm, she returned, with Selina, to the chamber consigned to her by Mrs Ireton.

CHAPTER LXIV

Harleigh, confused, disconcerted, remained motionless; but when the conscious Juliet would have glided silently past him, he entreated for a moment's audience.

'Oh no, Mr Harleigh, no!' she cried: 'these are scenes and alarms, that must be risked no more! –'

She was hurrying away; but, upon his saying, 'Hear me, at least, for Elinor!' she turned back.

His eye, now reproached even her compliance; but he rapidly communicated his opinion, that the conference demanded by Elinor ought, in prudence, for the present, to be avoided; since, while she had still some favourite object in view, life, would, unconsciously, be still supported. Time, thus, might insensibly be gained, not only for eluding her fatal project, but happily, perhaps, for taming the dauntless wildness that made her, now, seem to stand scoffingly at bay, between life and death.

Juliet saw nothing to oppose to this statement, and thanking him that, at least, it liberated her, was again hastening away.

'Hold, hold!' cried he, stopping her: 'it is not from me that it must liberate you! Elinor has ratified the restoration of your word –'

'Oh, were that all! –' she cried, hastily; but, stopping short, deeply blushing, 'Mr Harleigh,' she added, 'compel me not to repeat declarations that cannot vary! – Aid me rather, generously, – kindly, shall I say? – aid me, – to fly, to avoid you, – lest you become yourself ...' her voice faltered as she pronounced, 'the most fatal of my enemies!'

The penetrated Harleigh, charmed, though tortured, saw her eyes glittering with tears; but she forced her way past him, and took refuge in her chamber.

There, in deep anguish, she was sinking upon a chair, when she received the gentle balm of a letter from Gabriella, written with exstatic joy at the prospect of their re-union.

This decided her plan of immediate escape to London, under a full conviction that Harleigh, to obviate any calumnious surmizes from her disappearance, would studiously shew himself in the world; however cautiously he might avoid any interview with Elinor.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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