

HAWTHORNDEN.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD OCEAN VISITED, AND NEW FRIENDS FOUND.

THE intelligence contained in this letter weighed on Rosine's health and spirits; she solaced herself somewhat by a full outpouring of her heart to her mother, which she could now do without oversight; confessing to an ever-present yearning for her dear embrace. She did not pine or complain, but assured her parents that she had learned to love Colonel Hartland's family very sincerely, she would be always happy but for the great distance from those best loved.

Dr. Hartland exclaimed, on his next visit to the seaside, upon Rosine's ill looks. "She had gone back," he said, "to where she was before she left town, and if this was the effect of the sea-air, he should order her at once into the interior."

"How is Laura?" was her first question.

"Very bad," replied he. "I saw her physician yesterday. He says the disease is gone, and the delirium, but her mind seems to be in a state of collapse." He would not say more of Laura, but turned with interest to the collection of mosses, shells, and other sea treasures she had gathered during her sojourn by the beach, and which Miss Greenwood had promised to come the next day and arrange for her in their rightful places, before they were carried to the city.

The next day passed without the appearance of Miss Greenwood either at the house or on the beach; but the Doctor only shrugged his shoulders when Rosine wondered at this non-fulfilment of her promise. The day after his departure Miss Greenwood made her first appearance at the farm-house. She found her young friend quite alone, the Colonel having gone to town on business preparatory to their going away, which was to take place the next week.

With busy pliant fingers she soon made order in the confused mass of marine curiosities which Rosine had collected, telling her as she laid each one in its place, how much she would miss her cheerful face in her daily walks, and how she had come to love her very dearly. She blushed deeply when Rosine ventured to hope they might meet in the city.

"My dear child," she said at length, "this little green spot in my life will never be forgotten. I live very quietly, but perhaps you will sometimes come to the Navy Yard to see me. Mind, I shall mark that day with a white stone that brings you; but you will have younger and gayer companions."

"I haven't any gay companions now," replied Rosine, smiling sadly. "I don't think I want any."

"That is hardly a natural wish for one so young and hopeful as yourself, and with so many looking to you for comfort."

"Looking to me for comfort!" replied Rosine, opening her eyes in astonishment.

"Yes; all looking to you for comfort," repeated her friend. "From the gleanings I have gathered from you in our happy hours, and from my own heart being so drawn to you, I know that many hearts are trusting to you for comfort. Your own dear mother first, whom you have made me love; your sister, your brothers, but more particularly just now, Colonel Hartland's family. The Colonel's heart is evidently set upon his newly found daughter. Good, noble man! He only wants one thing to make him nearly perfect; but that is the greatest want. You know what I mean—a religious spirit. To you, dear Rosa, this blessing has been given in large measure. O, if you could impart it to others! Then, there is the absent Lieutenant, his letters manifest his dependence, his deference for you. Then Laura, poor foolish child, some time you may be able to do something for her." she paused a moment.

"Have you forgotten Ned?" said Rosa, smiling, willing to change the subject from Laura.

"That is hardly possible in a review of the family. If you can persuade Edward Hartland to care for his soul,"—she paused,—"unbaptized even!" she exclaimed, with something like a groan. "O, Rosa, it is dreadful to see our friends living in the neglect of this first duty, without which—"

"The Doctor is a great deal older and wiser than I," said Rosine, timidly, "and influences me, but I don't think I can influence him."

"Influence is mutual necessarily. Dr. Hartland has nearly lost his faith in woman, and faith in God is very apt to follow. A sister, a young sister, trusting, confiding, actuated by firm religious faith and right principles, must help him mightily; but I am foolish to allow myself to talk thus," she added, rising to go. Her voice was agitated, and dear sympathetic Rosine as she embraced her, whispered, "Dear Miss Greenwood."

"Don't call me Miss Greenwood, my sweet one; call me Dora, or Miss Dora, if you like it better. I wish you were my sister," she said, returning the affectionate caress.

In a few days Colonel Hartland and Rosine were on their way to the city, and the following week Dr. Hartland fulfilled his promise, and she found herself quietly settled at Hawthorndean, the home of her grandfather, enjoying the fresh breezes from the hillsides, drinking in life and health, both for soul and body.

Dr. Hartland could leave his post but for one day, but he would return for her by and by, and for the fishing excursion he had promised himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONVALESCENCE.

PHYSICALLY, Laura Marten was slowly recovering, but her mind appeared to be still overshadowed with a heavy cloud. From the first dawn of returning intellect she had missed from her finger the ring of her betrothal; the loss was like a continual fire eating into her heart, for she had instinctively divined into whose possession it had fallen. She spoke of the loss to no one; within, the thought dwelt continually, and her friends sought, without success, to cheer her spirits; she did not rally, she showed no interest in anything, but seemed constantly searching for something which she could not find. The first thing that aroused her in the least, was the letter from Lieutenant Hart-

land, which the Doctor had forwarded as soon as Rosine had given it to him. It was held back by her father at first, lest it might excite her too much, but when day after day went by and there was no change, it was resolved to try what effect the letter would have in arousing her from her apathy. Accordingly, one September morning, as she was seated in the invalid's chair, drawn toward the eastern window that she might have the influence of the early sunlight, and the prospect of the lovely scene that nature spread before her, Captain Marten entered with the Lieutenant's letter in his hand. She did not turn her head to greet her father, but continued to gaze down the long avenue of pines, that brought such fearful memories. An intense melancholy pervaded every feature; twice her name was called ere she gave a look of recognition. The rough old sailor was softened by trouble, and his voice wavered as he said in a tone meant to be jolly, "Laura, ducky, are you ready for a line from the Commodore that is to be, I mean Aleck Hartland?" There was no change in the stony expression of her face, and not a spoken word as she held out her hand for the letter. The Captain was at a loss to know if he should leave her alone with her treasure, but she settled that matter by a wave of the hand that indicated her wish. As soon as the door closed she kissed the precious missive over and over again, pressed it to her heart, laid it in her lap and wept over it, till after many minutes with trembling fingers she ventured to break the seal and read—

"On board the X—, off Cadiz, July —."

"My Precious One:

"A letter from Ned last night exasperated me, and I was so like a madman that I only escaped reprimand from the Captain by pleading illness. Your letter came after it, like healing balm to my spirit. I could not doubt your love; in spite of Ned's malicious hints, I have perfect confidence in you. It would be dastardly in me to wish to deprive you of gentlemen's society during my absence; I leave my honor in your hands with unwavering trust."

At these words Laura uttered a shrill, piercing cry, that soon brought her father, her aunt, and most of the servants to her room; she struggled for composure, but a fearful paroxysm of hysterics was not to be avoided. She grasped the letter convulsively, and it could not be taken from her without tearing it into fragments. Hours passed before the physician could calm her agitation, and weeks passed before she could again sit at the window and gaze down the pine walk. Who can doubt that He that marketh the sparrow's fall, guideth the steps of his dear ones? Sister Agnes was called at this time on an errand of mercy to a charity child, in the very house where Laura was ill. It was a balmy sunny day, such as the closing hours of September often bring to charm us with a remembrance of the past, when Laura heard the gentle tones of Sister Agnes' voice, as she interrogated Mrs. Norris with regard to the orphan.

"Bring her here," said Laura to the servant in attendance; "I must see her, I cannot wait, she will help me, bring her here now—I can't wait."

Her manner was hasty and imperious. After a short consultation below, the good sister was conducted to the room of the invalid, followed by Captain Marten and Mrs. Norris.

"All of you go," said Laura; "I wish to see Sister Agnes alone, and I don't wish to be interrupted."

They obeyed reluctantly, her father whispering to the sister as he went out, "The poor thing is not quite like herself."

"Please lock the door, and sit here," said Laura, pointing to a chair beside her own. Sister Agnes did as she was requested, and took Laura's hand affectionately. "I'm sure you don't know how wicked I am, or you would not have come near me," whispered the sick girl.

"Our dear Lord did not spurn the chief of sinners, and He will not turn away from us," replied she, pressing the hand she held.

"I've been thinking of that," continued Laura, her eyes brightening a little. "He let that poor woman wash His feet, that's what I'd like to do."

"My child, if that is your wish, He welcomes you to His arms." "But I can never repair what I have done," she said, relapsing into the dull, care-worn look. "I can never restore lost confidence."

"We must leave results with the same Blessed One who loves us and cares for us more than any human being can possibly do."

"O, but you don't know all," sighed Laura, and hastily putting out her hand, as if afraid of a temptation to draw back, she took a jewel-box from a drawer near by, and searching in it with trembling fingers, beneath a heavy bracelet, she brought out a slip of paper, and placed it unopened in the hand of her friend. "Tell me," she said, in a hollow voice, "what you think of one who after that, could through vanity and love of admiration, be so unfaithful as to have offered to her the insulting alternative of elopement with another?" For a moment her eyes flashed wildly, and her face flushed crimson. "Love of admiration! vanity!" she soliloquized, taking a hand-glass from the table and looking at herself, "there's nothing to call them forth now."

She was indeed changed; the heavy braids of her long raven hair were gone, her head shaven and covered with a close cap; her bright, healthful color replaced by sallow paleness; her eyes, once so lustrous and fascinating, were dull and heavy with disease, the plump, finely rounded figure emaciated, and the quick, brisk manner changed for an inability to move without assistance.

Sister Agnes carefully read the paper, while the sick girl made these comments upon herself. There was a look first of surprise and wonder, then of sadness and distress, as she closed the paper, giving it again to Laura without comment.

"You agree with me," said the invalid, after waiting for her companion to speak, "one can hardly hope, after such misconduct."

"Our dear Father is more merciful than man," replied Sister Agnes, slowly. "He forgives and restores us to His favor, but He does not assure us of the pardon of our fellow-men, or that we shall escape the temporal disgrace and suffering we may have brought upon ourselves. A full confession of our faults to those we have injured is necessary to our peace."

"Will you help me, guide me, and keep me?" exclaimed Laura, pitifully, clasping her hands.