

TYBORNE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EASTERN HOSPITALS AND ENGLISH NURSES."

CHAPTER VII.

"Her love to him,
Before a spark of his grew dim."—WILLIS.

MASTER GREGORY OLDCASTLE, although he did not dare to broach the subject to Isabel, had not any fear of Walter, and was very desirous of proving to him the utter corruption and horrors of the Church of Rome. Walter did not shrink from the encounters, and indeed rather enjoyed them; and when they had taken place two or three times, there was no doubt he had reason to do so, for Lord Beauville desired Constance should be present, and hear how well Master Oldcastle could defend his cause; and so oftentimes Constance, attended by Rose Ford, sat in the garden at her work while Master Gregory and Walter recommenced the strife. Walter's whole spirit was thrown into his argument; he was well instructed in controversy, and possessed great natural clearness and eloquence. Many a peal of laughter would the discomfiture of Master Oldcastle elicit from Constance. At other times she would lean forward, her whole attention absorbed in the contest, her embroidery falling from her hands, her eyes fixed on Walter, who stood a picture of energy and vigour, tossing back the dark locks from his brow, his eyes radiant with light and eagerness, and his face in one glow; and she felt that from his heart flowed every word of his gallant defence of his holy faith. It was no task learnt by heart, as Master Gregory's (albeit he grew heated enough on the subject) appeared to be.

Often after these contests, Lady Constance would call on Walter to explain some point she had not understood, or to translate some Latin quotation; for the little lady was not to be numbered among the learned ladies of her day, and her awe of Isabel was sensibly increased by finding she understood both Latin and Greek. It may naturally be supposed that these conversations generally wandered from theology to lighter subjects. Constance loved to hear of Walter's college life, of his studies, his emulation there for fame, and the pleasures and frolics which he had shared with his companions; and, in return, Constance related anecdotes of her childhood, great part of which had been spent within the atmosphere of the court. She knew all the men whose names were then great in the world; and she could describe many a brilliant pageant and royal progress: in such converse hours slipped away. Neither the Earl nor Lady Anne interfered in this intercourse; the latter left her niece to do as she listed in this as in all her other pursuits; while the former did all he could to encourage it. Whenever Lady Constance rode forth, Walter was sent to the side of her palfrey; he sat by her side at supper; he became her regular escort wherever she went; and so the days went by of the bright summer at Apswell Court. But the time did not hang heavily now on Walter's hands: all day long he was occupied either in contriving something for her pleasure or in her society. At night his dreams were of her. Walter loved with all the vehemence of his youth and all the strength of his nature; his life became wrapped up in her. He made an idol and fell down and adored it. For some time he never wondered whether his love was returned. In itself it was happiness enough; and when the longing to be loved again did come, Walter feared to speak lest he should break the spell. Was Constance unconscious of the love she had inspired? She was court-bred; young as she was she had imbibed some of the poison of that hollow worldliness which pervaded those of the Tudor sovereigns above all other courts. She had learnt how cheaply love, and truth, and honor were held; and for some time Constance trifled on, forgetting in the amusement of the hour the misery she might be bringing on Walter; but there was too much that was generous and good in Constance's soul for this frivolity to last; the nobleness of the heart that was cast at her feet grew daily upon her, and Constance loved, not with the idolatry she received, but warmly, deeply, and sincerely Constance loved.

Lord Beauville had gone to court, and their love was yet unspoken, though each knew well the other's secret, and rejoiced in the knowledge.

Isabel now withdrew entirely from the society of the Lady Beauvilles; she could not endure to see her brother tamely and blindly yielding himself a dupe to Lord Beauville's schemes, for she doubted not that the Earl allowed his daughter to give encouragement to her brother only to let him have the mortification of being refused; for to allow his only and beautiful daughter, who might ally herself to the highest houses in the kingdom, to marry the penniless and proscribed Baron de Lisle, was impossible. She dared not remonstrate with Walter, for the distance between them was too great now. She sighed over the estrangement, without being conscious she had caused it.

"It is as I foresaw," mused she: "he would not take my counsel, would not lean on me, and this is the result."

The Earl came home somewhat unexpectedly; and as he sat at supper that night, he seemed disinclined for conversation, but his glance passed often from Constance to Walter and from Walter to Constance, till the former felt embarrassed. When alone that night, Walter determined the following day he would tell his story of his love for Constance to Lord Beauville. He was not utterly blind to the possibility of a refusal; but when he reflected on the evident encouragement the Earl had given to hopes he must have known but too likely to spring up, his courage rose. Walter was sanguine, and lovers look not beyond the present; he went to sleep, to dream of Constance.

At an early hour the following day, while Walter was deliberating what would be the best time for him to seek Lord Beauville, he was summoned to the Earl. He found him in his private cabinet, employed in writing, and surrounded with papers and letters, for

he had a heavy charge of state affairs, a great share of the queen's confidence.

"Ah, Walter," said he, turning round so as to face him, "I desire some converse with you. Dost know thou hast been here full six months?"

Walter started. "Is it, indeed, so long?" said he, as he remembered that spring had indeed passed into summer, and summer begun to yield to autumn, and it had seemed one short day to him, who had so sighed over the loneliness and tedium of the first few weeks.

"It is too long since your mother's death," answered the Earl, for you to be able longer to plead that excuse for retirement from court; you must now present yourself before the queen, and endeavour to win her favour."

"But can I appear before her in my own title, my lord?"

"Most certainly you can; you have now only to come forward, and by swearing fealty to Elizabeth, you can hold both your title and estates."

"Swear fealty!" answered Walter; "if that is all that is required, I am willing and ready to make all the reasonable submission that a sovereign can require of a subject; but I had deemed far more was asked than this."

"When I say Swear fealty," said the Earl, "I do not mean saying the oath with your lips, but ranging yourself among those faithful followers who abjure all that can hinder their devotion to their queen. Those who hold an Italian prince as greater than an English-born sovereign, are no true and loyal subjects."

"I understand you not, my lord. In all temporal matters I will serve Elizabeth Tudor; but I will never forswear my religion, and confess that the keys given to an apostle long ages ago are now fallen into a woman's hands."

Walter drew himself up when he spoke; he was arming himself as if for a contest with Master Gregory. The Earl fixed his keen eyes upon him.

"I had deemed differently, Walter de Lisle; observing, as I have done, certain passages between you and the Lady Constance. Dost mean me to understand," continued he, his voice growing hoarse and anger, "that to trifle away thy time, thou hast dared to act the suitor to a daughter of mine?"

"Lord Beauville," he answered, "this very day I would have sought you to tell my tale. I love the Lady Constance with my whole heart and soul; the very earth she treads upon is dear to me."

A momentary expression of anguish passed over the Earl's face; but he answered, "I do not perceive your meaning; what proposals had you to make, if you intended to seek the hand of Lady Constance Beauville?"

Walter raised his head proudly. "My lord, a De Lisle might wed with the noblest house in Europe, and bring no stain on their escutcheon. You know well the injustice of the law which deprives me of my inheritance; give me Constance for my wife, and let us seek a foreign court, where my rank will be recognised."

"I would sooner see her dead at my feet than send her an exile to a foreign court. No, Walter; there is but one path—take your place, as it is offered you, among the peers of England; an alliance with this house would not prejudice you in the eyes of Elizabeth, and, believe me, to no man on earth would I sooner commit my child. To-night you shall see Constance, for it is but fair that you should learn whether you have won her favour. I am no tyrant; Constance shall marry the man she loves, for I know my child will love no one who is not noble, true, and fitting for her alliance. I return to court in three days: ere then I must receive your answer, for, save as the accepted suitor of my daughter, with your present feelings, Apswell Court is no fitting place for you."

Soon after Walter had quitted the apartment, the Lady Constance was summoned thither, and remained for a considerable time alone with her father. Meanwhile Walter spent the day wandering restlessly about and counting the hours ere he could see Constance. He was not cast down; lover-like, he put all his trust in Constance. "She shall marry the man she loves," rang in his ears. "If she loves me, he cannot refuse, he cannot part us; and Walter had not much uncertainty. He believed Constance, as the type of all womanly perfection, incapable of trifling; and Walter's nature, like all true ones, was full of trust in others.

The short autumn evening was closing in, the gorgeous hues of the sunset yet floated in the sky, and on the distant horizon the moon was rising, when Walter and Constance met beneath the shade of the trees of Apswell Court. What needs it to linger on that meeting? Then was whispered the story that, though so very old, is still ever new, as the world goes on. They loved each other, and in the first bliss of the acknowledgment the future was forgotten.

"Constance, my own," said Walter at last, "have you seen the Earl, and do you know what passed between him and me this morning?"

"Yes," she whispered, drawing closer to her lover; "he told me all, and bade me come hither this evening."

"He cannot mean the cruelty he threatened," said Walter; "he will not part us now, my Constance?"

"Dear Walter, my father is very firm; I fear me, if you will not comply with his conditions"—she hesitated.

"But, sweet Constance, he has not, then, told you all: you would not honour me with your love if I were a recreant to honour and faith?"

"But, Walter, listen," said Constance, sweetly. "I know the court, and you do not; there are hundreds there Catholics in heart, though Protestants in outward seeming. Nay, am I not nearly that myself, for your eloquence has well nigh converted me?"

"Has it, dearest?" answered he; "then surely there is no reason why we should not cast our lot together, and seek a land where we may worship God in peace, and wait for brighter days to dawn over this unhappy land."