

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME DE GEIGENKLANG was an English lady of large fortune, of the most amiable and fascinating manners, and of the highest fashion; her balls, parties, and musical *soirées*, being the rendezvous of the most select and distinguished society, both native and foreign, and the object of every young man's ambition. Next to Almack's, these treats were more *recherché* than any thing of the same nature in London, where the Baroness herself contributed not a little to the pleasure and amusement of her guests. She was the only daughter of a rich and eminent merchant, who, having amassed a splendid fortune, yielded to the entreaties of his child, and, quitting the sombre and dismal alleys of the city, purchased a noble estate, a seat in parliament, and a capital mansion at the west end of the town. Miss Cranbourn,—who was well connected on the maternal side, possessed a beautiful face, lovely figure, and was as remarkable for the grace of her dancing, as for her skill in music,—gradually obtained a first-rate position in the fashionable world. In those days, fortunately for many aspirants of both sexes, this elevation was a matter of greater facility than at present. That awful and powerful inquisition, that holy office in King-street, from which there is no appeal, had not yet sprung into existence; consequently the merits and progress of each forthcoming youth or damsel did not depend upon the capricious judgment of half-a-dozen female Charons, in case of whose refusal to ferry a man over the Styx of Fashion, he had much better *plier baggage*, and content himself with the rustic amusements of Russel Square and its vicinity, or trust his success to the Beaux Nash of Cheltenham and Bath.

Suitors of all ranks had presented themselves for the hand of Miss Cranbourne, but hitherto her thoughts had been more intent on the gayeties and amusements of the world, than on the serious cares of domestic life. Her

hour of subjection, however, at length arrived, and she found herself suddenly attacked by some of those twitches and twinges, that species of *tic douloureux*, or rather *aigre-doux*, which are some of the infallible symptoms of a love fever.

The cause of these sensations was the young and handsome Baron de Geigenklang, a *Tyrolean* nobleman, who had been introduced at her house, where might always be seen the most distinguished and illustrious foreigners whom speculation, politics, or curiosity attracted to England. The Baron, whose attachment for Miss Cranbourne was not at all diminished by the charms of her large fortune, found it a matter of much greater facility to obtain the fair lady's consent than that of her father, who continued unmoved, in despite of the prayers and entreaties of the lovers.

Mr. Cranbourne, like many other of our countrymen, had imbibed, among other *vulgar* national prejudices, the most rooted aversion to his daughter's marrying a foreigner; he lost all patience at the idea of his hard-earned consols and the produce of his broad acres passing into the hands of a stranger. Submitting to, rather than uniting in, the wishes of his daughter, he consented to his drawing-rooms' being converted into a species of Babel, where he had some difficulty, from the mixture of tongues around him, and his ignorance of every language but his own, to communicate with any of his guests; but he looked upon all this assemblage of princes, dukes, counts, barons, marquises, and chevaliers, clothed with high-sounding and never-ending names (which clothing is often the extent of their wardrobe), as a set of adventurers, who flock towards our island, with the very disinterested purpose of picking up some of those immense fortunes, which they have heard it merely requires a little dancing, a little singing, a small proportion of flirting, curly hair, and an affectation of constitutionalism and anti-catholicism, to carry off and appropriate to themselves. No man had more perfect esteem and deference for the hereditary nobility of our own country than Mr. Cranbourne, and he would have rejoiced to have found his name engrafted on some noble genealogical tree of indigenous growth; but no-

thing annoyed him so much as the thought of his child being disguised under a name that nearly dislocated his jaw to pronounce, and he sickened at the prospect of the fruits of his labour and economy being at some future period expended in clearing out the moat of some German prince's *schloss*, rebuilding the pigeon-house of some French count's rambling chateau, or in defraying some of the carnival expenses of an Italian marquis.

Mr. Cranbourne well knew that England was considered, in many parts of the Continent, as a never-failing resource, a species of El Dorado, for the junior branches of that superabundant nobility, which, in many instances, is so ludicrously numerous, so far exceeding the nomenclature of any Christian calendar, that it is absolutely necessary to have recourse to numbers, like the bridegrooms in "*Les Petites Danadies*," in order to distinguish them from each other. He was aware that, in defiance of their eternal *jactance* and praise of the purity of their climate, the brilliancy of their native sun, and the merits of their kitchen, that they would gladly endure the hardship of beefsteaks, the scorplings of port wine, and all the trachial and catarrhal miseries of our fogs, damp, and cloudy skies, if they could but bask in the glowing reflection of some of those golden mines, which have excited their cupidity, and of which, in their own country, they have such very limited and contracted notions.

Mr. Cranbourne was determined, if possible, that his daughter should escape the miseries which the sentimentality, or rather the unnatural fondness for every thing foreign, whether it were a man or a mantua-maker, had entailed upon other of her countrywomen; and his prejudices were strengthened by witnessing the unfortunate results of many of these unions. He had nobly given his thousand pounds towards the Portuguese subscription, he had added a large sum to collections for the sufferers by Swiss avalanches, Hanoverian inundations, conflagrations in Canada, explosions in Flanders, fevers in Holland, and no one ever was more active in his efforts to afford relief or assistance to the Society for Foreigners in Distress; but his blood curdled at the thoughts of his house being converted into a receptacle for all the needy relations of

his daughter's husband, who, to evince their gratitude for the kindness, hospitality, and almost ludicrous generosity they have met with, return to their country and forthwith either publish the most libellous and disgusting works against the land where they have been received with so much hospitality, or make it a point of uttering the most abominable falsehoods and calumnies against individuals whose only error consisted in lending them money never to be repaid, or in giving them food and raiment when they were penniless and starving. In fine, until the hour of his death, nothing could induce Mr. Cranbourne to yield upon this point, and his daughter, who had too much respect and sincere attachment for her parent to permit her taking any steps without his consent, resolved to sacrifice her own affections, and to await the period when she should be her own mistress.

This event occurred sooner than she expected or desired; her worthy parent having unfortunately taken a cold in returning from the House of Commons, which ended in his death, and, in due time, in the marriage of Miss Cranbourne with the young Baron.

With few exceptions, the Baroness was now perhaps one of the happiest persons in the world, and had no other drawback to her felicity but occasionally some little fits of jealousy, when her husband remained too long behind the scenes at the Opera, or when she herself was too ill to attend at a public breakfast at Buxton House, or when some *prima donna*, who had promised to sing at her concert, chose to be indisposed, and sat provokingly silent in a corner. She was excessively fond of what she called "bringing people together." Nothing afforded her so much pleasure as a flirtation; as she was convinced that it made the individuals themselves perfectly happy (though not less ridiculous) during its existence, and afforded her no small amusement in watching its progress, and shooting forth her own little satirical remarks on the occasion.

To this lady, Alfred made up his mind to intrust that part of his plan which merely embraced the marriage of his cousin and Emily, without of course divulging his motives. Not so, however, with Lady Catesby, whom he destined as his principal agent, and to whom he meant to

recount all his plans boldly ; whether he acted prudently, may be judged from the difference between the character of his two friends. Her Ladyship had been much less scrupulous than the Baroness in pleasing herself, and although without any of those advantages of fortune, had risen, by a concatenation of circumstances, to a place not less distinguished in society, though far different in public opinion.

She was the daughter of a clergyman, residing on the north-western coast of England, and had completed her education abroad, where she had imbibed that laxity of principle, which, on her return to her native country, exposed her to the machinations of a military officer, to whose arts she fell a victim ; and who having neglected her, she eventually succeeded in marrying his superior, who left her at his death, soon after, in the possession of a very considerable fortune.

Her weeds sat lightly on her brow, and at the age of twenty it was evident that the future occupied a greater portion of her thoughts than the past : ambition and the desire of advancing herself in society had taken the place of every softer sentiment, and she looked forward with confidence to some new alliance, which should place her in that sphere of life in which she was desirous of moving. In short, her cards were so admirably played, that she quickly turned the head of Sir Laurence Catesby ; and, in the eighteenth month of her widowhood, once more entered into the solemn engagement to love, cherish, and obey a man whom in fact she determined to rule, command, and hate, as soon as she found herself established at the head of his household.

Sir Laurence was a man of high character, holding an important situation under government : so far Lady Catesby's desires were gratified, but she soon gave evident proofs to her fond and doating husband, that the thoughts of domestic happiness were not among her calculations, and that she married him for any purpose rather than that of ordering his dinners, or nursing her children. Her aim was to shine in the highest circles of fashion, and she little cared what methods she adopted to obtain this object. Chance, however, threw into her path an ally and as-

sistant whom she little expected, and although the result proved the unceasing theme of discord at home, and in a certain degree the loss of reputation abroad, yet she endured the one with becoming resolution, and was utterly indifferent to the other.

A short time after her first appearance at the Opera, where her striking countenance, and, above all, her novelty, attracted considerable attention, she remarked a young and evidently very fashionable man observing her with particular earnestness, and not less decided symptoms of admiration: this was the food in which her vanity delighted, and she therefore made no attempt to withdraw herself from the fixed gaze of the stranger. Her satisfaction was, however, converted into alarm, when, in a few seconds after Sir Lawrence had quitted the box, the door opened and the same gentleman whom she had seen in the pit presented himself before her. This personage, who was no other than Alfred Milton, very coolly commenced addressing her, with his usual look, "It is evident from Lady Catesby's surprise, that she has entirely forgotten the individual who had the pleasure of once seeing her in a less agreeable situation."

The colour forsook Lady Catesby's face as she recognised in the person before her, one who had been intimately acquainted with all her former history, and she could scarcely articulate a single word in reply.

"Do not be alarmed, Madam, I beg," continued Alfred, observing immediately that he was right in his conjectures, "though some years have elapsed, yet have I not forgotten the beautiful face which I once saw under different circumstances; and my only object in thus introducing myself, is to offer you my congratulations at your change of fortune, and to promise you, under certain conditions, the most profound secrecy."

It would be impossible to describe Lady Catesby's sensations at Alfred's declaration of his knowledge of her former situation: she was taken too much by surprise to permit her to deny the fact; and she at once saw her reputation and hopes of advancing in society, at the mercy of a man whose character she had already heard painted, not in the most favourable light, and already she fancied her-

213 Foulca

self cast down from that place in society which it had cost her so much time and effort to obtain. Agitated and almost fainting with vexation and alarm, she could only answer, while tears of passion filled her eyes:—"I am at your mercy, Sir, and have no right to expect that you should not betray me."

It is unnecessary to repeat the dialogue which ensued; we shall merely state that Alfred almost immediately succeeded in pacifying Lady Catesby, and in allaying her fears lest he should divulge the secret which threatened her with such degrading consequences.

Ere the return of Sir Lawrence to the box, his wife had regained all her previous serenity, and she at once introduced Alfred to the Baronet as an old acquaintance, whom she had known intimately at Malta. From this period there arose the strictest intimacy between her Ladyship and Alfred. Not only did they enter into a species of defensive and offensive alliance, but sentiments were awakened in her heart to which it had hitherto been a stranger; and it was evident to Alfred that he had inspired her with an attachment, if we may be permitted to designate by this name the unhallowed passion which now took possession of her breast.

By the influence and exertions of her new ally, joined to her own intrigues, Lady Catesby gradually succeeded in mounting the slippery steps of fashion; and, at the period we are describing, had nothing farther to desire, though her jealousy of Alfred, and her constant fears of being betrayed by him, rendered her life a continued scene of anxiety, and gave to her manners and countenance an expression of wildness and irritation, which was attributed by the world to the originality of her disposition. Indeed, Alfred had long been tired with her importunities, and plainly showed that he kept up the intimacy with a view of making use of her on those occasions where he found it necessary to employ a confidante who was completely in his power, rather than from any feelings of regard to her. This she was aware of, and had often broken out into reproaches, which required all the influence Alfred possessed over her to calm and allay. Being latterly engaged in a new intrigue, he had been for some time par-

ticularly inattentive to her, and, in fact, had for some weeks neglected to call ; but as he now required her services, he made two or three attempts to see her at her own house, where she had the firmness to deny herself to him. However, as Alfred made it a standing rule never to commit himself by writing letters, though he carefully preserved those addressed to himself, he determined to await the *fête champêtre* at Madame de Geigenklang's villa, which was to take place in a few days, and where he knew he should meet Lady Catesby, and he doubted not he should soon obtain her co-operation, either by flattery or threats ; which latter was a weapon he never employed but as a last resource ; for he knew that Caspar was not more inextricably bound to the Demon, than the guilty but unfortunate Lady Catesby to himself.

CHAPTER IX.

THE day of the Baroness's *fête*, which was to give Alfred the opportunity of seeing Lady Catesby, and which was so eagerly expected by those who were bidden, and so galling to those who were not invited, at length arrived: Hyde-park, St. James's-street, and the windows of the Clubs, were as forlorn and deserted as if it had been the month of September ; a few beaux were alone to be seen skulking along, as if ashamed of their loneliness. The road leading to the goal of pleasure was in the mean time crowded with gay and splendid equipages, hurrying with all the rapidity of life and death towards the spot ; their respective owners having put forth all the force of their stables, and all the splendour and neatness of their households. Here might be seen the semi-modern ducal coach, solemnly rolling after its train of six ponderous black Normans, their tails carefully gathered up, and confined by a profusion of massy buckles and well-polished straps, and their flanks fuming under the weight of their trappings ; the box at the same time appearing to groan under the