CHAPTER II. TWO YOUNG HEARTS.

"HE is growing too fast," said the doctor to my mother; "and he is getting a great deal too clever for a boy at his age. Remove him from school, ma'am, for six months; let him run about in the open air at home; and if you find him with a book in his hand, take it away directly. There is my prescription."

Those words decided my fate in life.

In obedience to the doctor's advice, I was left an idle boy--without brothers, sisters, or companions of my own age--to roam about the grounds of our lonely country-house. The bailiff's daughter, like me, was an only child; and, like me, she had no playfellows. We met in our wanderings on the solitary shores of the lake. Beginning by being inseparable companions, we ripened and developed into true lovers. Our preliminary courtship concluded, we next proposed (before I returned to school) to burst into complete maturity by becoming man and wife.

I am not writing in jest. Absurd as it may appear to "sensible people," we two children were lovers, if ever there were lovers yet.

We had no pleasures apart from the one all-sufficient pleasure which we found in each other's society. We objected to the night, because it parted us. We entreated our parents, on either side, to let us sleep in the same room. I was angry with my mother, and Mary was disappointed in her father, when they laughed at us, and wondered what we should want next. Looking onward, from those days to the days of my manhood, I can vividly recall such hours of happiness as have fallen to my share. But I remember no delights of that later time comparable to the exquisite and enduring pleasure that filled my young being when I walked with Mary in the woods; when I sailed with Mary in my boat on the lake; when I met Mary, after the cruel separation of the night, and flew into her open arms as if we had been parted for months and months together.

What was the attraction that drew us so closely one to the other, at an age when the sexual sympathies lay dormant in her and in me?

We neither knew nor sought to know. We obeyed the impulse to love one another, as a bird obeys the impulse to fly.

Let it not be supposed that we possessed any natural gifts, or advantages

which singled us out as differing in a marked way from other children at our time of life. We possessed nothing of the sort. I had been called a clever boy at school; but there were thousands of other boys, at thousands of other schools, who headed their classes and won their prizes, like me. Personally speaking, I was in no way remarkable--except for being, in the ordinary phrase, "tall for my age." On her side, Mary displayed no striking attractions. She was a fragile child, with mild gray eyes and a pale complexion; singularly undemonstrative, singularly shy and silent, except when she was alone with me. Such beauty as she had, in those early days, lay in a certain artless purity and tenderness of expression, and in the charming reddish-brown color of her hair, varying quaintly and prettily in different lights. To all outward appearance two perfectly commonplace children, we were mysteriously united by some kindred association of the spirit in her and the spirit in me, which not only defied discovery by our young selves, but which lay too deep for investigation by far older and far wiser heads than ours.

You will naturally wonder whether anything was done by our elders to check our precocious attachment, while it was still an innocent love union between a boy and a girl.

Nothing was done by my father, for the simple reason that he was away from home.

He was a man of a restless and speculative turn of mind. Inheriting his estate burdened with debt, his grand ambition was to increase his small available income by his own exertions; to set up an establishment in London; and to climb to political distinction by the ladder of Parliament. An old friend, who had emigrated to America, had proposed to him a speculation in agriculture, in one of the Western States, which was to make both their fortunes. My father's eccentric fancy was struck by the idea. For more than a year past he had been away from us in the United States; and all we knew of him (instructed by his letters) was, that he might be shortly expected to return to us in the enviable character of one of the richest men in England.

As for my poor mother--the sweetest and softest-hearted of women--to see me happy was all that she desired.

The quaint little love romance of the two children amused and interested her. She jested with Mary's father about the coming union between the two families, without one serious thought of the future--without even a foreboding of what might happen when my father returned. "Sufficient for

the day is the evil (or the good) thereof," had been my mother's motto all her life. She agreed with the easy philosophy of the bailiff, already recorded in these pages: "They're only children. There's no call, poor things, to part them yet a while."

There was one member of the family, however, who took a sensible and serious view of the matter.

My father's brother paid us a visit in our solitude; discovered what was going on between Mary and me; and was, at first, naturally enough, inclined to laugh at us. Closer investigation altered his way of thinking. He became convinced that my mother was acting like a fool; that the bailiff (a faithful servant, if ever there was one yet) was cunningly advancing his own interests by means of his daughter; and that I was a young idiot, who had developed his native reserves of imbecility at an unusually early period of life. Speaking to my mother under the influence of these strong impressions, my uncle offered to take me back with him to London, and keep me there until I had been brought to my senses by association with his own children, and by careful superintendence under his own roof.

My mother hesitated about accepting this proposal; she had the advantage over my uncle of understanding my disposition. While she was still doubting, while my uncle was still impatiently waiting for her decision, I settled the question for my elders by running away.

I left a letter to represent me in my absence; declaring that no mortal power should part me from Mary, and promising to return and ask my mother's pardon as soon as my uncle had left the house. The strictest search was made for me without discovering a trace of my place of refuge. My uncle departed for London, predicting that I should live to be a disgrace to the family, and announcing that he should transmit his opinion of me to my father in America by the next mail.

The secret of the hiding-place in which I contrived to defy discovery is soon told. I was hidden (without the bailiff's knowledge) in the bedroom of the bailiff's mother. And did the bailiff's mother know it? you will ask. To which I answer: the bailiff's mother did it. And, what is more, gloried in doing it--not, observe, as an act of hostility to my relatives, but simply as a duty that lay on her conscience.

What sort of old woman, in the name of all that is wonderful, was this? Let her appear, and speak for herself--the wild and weird grandmother of gentle little Mary; the Sibyl of modern times, known, far and wide, in our part of

Suffolk, as Dame Dermody.

I see her again, as I write, sitting in her son's pretty cottage parlor, hard by the window, so that the light fell over her shoulder while she knitted or read. A little, lean, wiry old woman was Dame Dermody--with fierce black eyes, surmounted by bushy white eyebrows, by a high wrinkled forehead, and by thick white hair gathered neatly under her old-fashioned "mob-cap." Report whispered (and whispered truly) that she had been a lady by birth and breeding, and that she had deliberately closed her prospects in life by marrying a man greatly her inferior in social rank. Whatever her family might think of her marriage, she herself never regretted it. In her estimation her husband's memory was a sacred memory; his spirit was a guardian spirit, watching over her, waking or sleeping, morning or night.

Holding this faith, she was in no respect influenced by those grossly material ideas of modern growth which associate the presence of spiritual beings with clumsy conjuring tricks and monkey antics performed on tables and chairs. Dame Dermody's nobler superstition formed an integral part of her religious convictions--convictions which had long since found their chosen resting-place in the mystic doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg. The only books which she read were the works of the Swedish Seer. She mixed up Swedenborg's teachings on angels and departed spirits, on love to one's neighbor and purity of life, with wild fancies, and kindred beliefs of her own; and preached the visionary religious doctrines thus derived, not only in the bailiff's household, but also on proselytizing expeditions to the households of her humble neighbors, far and near.

Under her son's roof--after the death of his wife--she reigned a supreme power; priding herself alike on her close attention to her domestic duties, and on her privileged communications with angels and spirits. She would hold long colloquys with the spirit of her dead husband before anybody who happened to be present--colloquys which struck the simple spectators mute with terror. To her mystic view, the love union between Mary and me was something too sacred and too beautiful to be tried by the mean and matter-of-fact tests set up by society. She wrote for us little formulas of prayer and praise, which we were to use when we met and when we parted, day by day. She solemnly warned her son to look upon us as two young consecrated creatures, walking unconsciously on a heavenly path of their own, whose beginning was on earth, but whose bright end was among the angels in a better state of being. Imagine my appearing before such a woman as this, and telling her with tears of despair that I was determined to die, rather than let my uncle part me from little Mary, and you will no longer be astonished at the hospitality which threw open to me the sanctuary of Dame

Dermody's own room.

When the safe time came for leaving my hiding-place, I committed a serious mistake. In thanking the old woman at parting, I said to her (with a boy's sense of honor), "I won't tell upon you, Dame. My mother shan't know that you hid me in your bedroom."

The Sibyl laid her dry, fleshless hand on my shoulder, and forced me roughly back into the chair from which I had just risen.

"Boy!" she said, looking through and through me with her fierce black eyes. "Do you dare suppose that I ever did anything that I was ashamed of? Do you think I am ashamed of what I have done now? Wait there. Your mother may mistake me too. I shall write to your mother."

She put on her great round spectacles with tortoise-shell rims and sat down to her letter. Whenever her thoughts flagged, whenever she was at a loss for an expression, she looked over her shoulder, as if some visible creature were stationed behind her, watching what she wrote; consulted the spirit of her husband, exactly as she might have consulted a living man; smiled softly to herself, and went on with her writing.

"There!" she said, handing me the completed letter with an imperial gesture of indulgence. "His mind and my mind are written there. Go, boy. I pardon you. Give my letter to your mother."

So she always spoke, with the same formal and measured dignity of manner and language.

I gave the letter to my mother. We read it, and marveled over it together. Thus, counseled by the ever-present spirit of her husband, Dame Dermody wrote:

"MADAM--I have taken what you may be inclined to think a great liberty. I have assisted your son George in setting his uncle's authority at defiance. I have encouraged your son George in his resolution to be true, in time and in eternity, to my grandchild, Mary Dermody.

"It is due to you and to me that I should tell you with what motive I have acted in doing these things.

"I hold the belief that all love that is true is foreordained and consecrated in heaven. Spirits destined to be united in the better world are divinely

commissioned to discover each other and to begin their union in this world. The only happy marriages are those in which the two destined spirits have succeeded in meeting one another in this sphere of life.

"When the kindred spirits have once met, no human power can really part them. Sooner or later, they must, by divine law, find each other again and become united spirits once more. Worldly wisdom may force them into widely different ways of life; worldly wisdom may delude them, or may make them delude themselves, into contracting an earthly and a fallible union. It matters nothing. The time will certainly come when that union will manifest itself as earthly and fallible; and the two disunited spirits, finding each other again, will become united here for the world beyond this--united, I tell you, in defiance of all human laws and of all human notions of right and wrong.

"This is my belief. I have proved it by my own life. Maid, wife, and widow, I have held to it, and I have found it good.

"I was born, madam, in the rank of society to which you belong. I received the mean, material teaching which fulfills the worldly notion of education. Thanks be to God, my kindred spirit met my spirit while I was still young. I knew true love and true union before I was twenty years of age. I married, madam, in the rank from which Christ chose his apostles--I married a laboring-man. No human language can tell my happiness while we lived united here. His death has not parted us. He helps me to write this letter. In my last hours I shall see him standing among the angels, waiting for me on the banks of the shining river.

"You will now understand the view I take of the tie which unites the young spirits of our children at the bright outset of their lives.

"Believe me, the thing which your husband's brother has proposed to you to do is a sacrilege and a profanation. I own to you freely that I look on what I have done toward thwarting your relative in this matter as an act of virtue. You cannot expect me to think it a serious obstacle to a union predestined in heaven, that your son is the squire's heir, and that my grandchild is only the bailiff's daughter. Dismiss from your mind, I implore you, the unworthy and unchristian prejudices of rank. Are we not all equal before God? Are we not all equal (even in this world) before disease and death? Not your son's happiness only, but your own peace of mind, is concerned in taking heed to my words. I warn you, madam, you cannot hinder the destined union of these two child-spirits, in after-years, as man and wife. Part them now--and YOU will be responsible for the sacrifices, degradations and distresses through which your George and my Mary may be condemned to pass on

their way back to each other in later life.

"Now my mind is unburdened. Now I have said all.

"If I have spoken too freely, or have in any other way unwittingly offended, I ask your pardon, and remain, madam, your faithful servant and well-wisher, HELEN DERMODY."

So the letter ended.

To me it is something more than a mere curiosity of epistolary composition. I see in it the prophecy--strangely fulfilled in later years--of events in Mary's life, and in mine, which future pages are now to tell.

My mother decided on leaving the letter unanswered. Like many of her poorer neighbors, she was a little afraid of Dame Dermody; and she was, besides, habitually averse to all discussions which turned on the mysteries of spiritual life. I was reproved, admonished, and forgiven; and there was the end of it.

For some happy weeks Mary and I returned, without hinderance or interruption, to our old intimate companionship The end was coming, however, when we least expected it. My mother was startled, one morning, by a letter from my father, which informed her that he had been unexpectedly obliged to sail for England at a moment's notice; that he had arrived in London, and that he was detained there by business which would admit of no delay. We were to wait for him at home, in daily expectation of seeing him the moment he was free.

This news filled my mother's mind with foreboding doubts of the stability of her husband's grand speculation in America. The sudden departure from the United States, and the mysterious delay in London, were ominous, to her eyes, of misfortune to come. I am now writing of those dark days in the past, when the railway and the electric telegraph were still visions in the minds of inventors. Rapid communication with my father (even if he would have consented to take us into his confidence) was impossible. We had no choice but to wait and hope.

The weary days passed; and still my father's brief letters described him as detained by his business. The morning came when Mary and I went out with Dermody, the bailiff, to see the last wild fowl of the season lured into the decoy; and still the welcome home waited for the master, and waited in vain.