

## CHAPTER VI.--HER INGENUITY INSTIGATES HER

September 19.--Three months of anxious care--till at length I have taken the extreme step of writing to him. Our chief distress has been caused by the state of poor Caroline, who, after sinking by degrees into such extreme weakness as to make it doubtful if she can ever recover full vigour, has to-day been taken much worse. Her position is very critical. The doctor says plainly that she is dying of a broken heart--and that even the removal of the cause may not now restore her. Ought I to have written to Charles sooner? But how could I when she forbade me? It was her pride only which instigated her, and I should not have obeyed.

Sept. 26.--Charles has arrived and has seen her. He is shocked, conscience-stricken, remorseful. I have told him that he can do no good beyond cheering her by his presence. I do not know what he thinks of proposing to her if she gets better, but he says little to her at present: indeed he dares not: his words agitate her dangerously.

Sept. 28.--After a struggle between duty and selfishness, such as I pray to Heaven I may never have to undergo again, I have asked him for pity's sake to make her his wife, here and now, as she lies. I said to him that the poor child would not trouble him long; and such a solemnization would soothe her last hours as nothing else could do. He said that he would willingly do so, and had thought of it himself; but for one forbidding reason: in the event of her death as his wife he can never marry me, her

sister, according to our laws. I started at his words. He went on: 'On the other hand, if I were sure that immediate marriage with me would save her life, I would not refuse, for possibly I might after a while, and out of sight of you, make myself fairly content with one of so sweet a disposition as hers; but if, as is probable, neither my marrying her nor any other act can avail to save her life, by so doing I lose both her and you.' I could not answer him.

Sept. 29.--He continued firm in his reasons for refusal till this morning, and then I became possessed with an idea, which I at once propounded to him. It was that he should at least consent to a form of marriage with Caroline, in consideration of her love; a form which need not be a legal union, but one which would satisfy her sick and enfeebled soul. Such things have been done, and the sentiment of feeling herself his would inexpressibly comfort her mind, I am sure. Then, if she is taken from us, I should not have lost the power of becoming his lawful wife at some future day, if it indeed should be deemed expedient; if, on the other hand, she lives, he can on her recovery inform her of the incompleteness of their marriage contract, the ceremony can be repeated, and I can, and I am sure willingly would, avoid troubling them with my presence till grey hairs and wrinkles make his unfortunate passion for me a thing of the past. I put all this before him; but he demurred.

Sept. 30.--I have urged him again. He says he will consider. It is no time to mince matters, and as a further inducement I have offered to enter into a solemn engagement to marry him myself a year after her

death.

Sept. 30. Later.--An agitating interview. He says he will agree to whatever I propose, the three possibilities and our contingent acts being recorded as follows: First, in the event of dear Caroline being taken from us, I marry him on the expiration of a year: Second, in the forlorn chance of her recovery I take upon myself the responsibility of explaining to Caroline the true nature of the ceremony he has gone through with her, that it was done at my suggestion to make her happy at once, before a special licence could be obtained, and that a public ceremony at church is awaiting her: Third, in the unlikely event of her cooling, and refusing to repeat the ceremony with him, I leave England, join him abroad, and there wed him, agreeing not to live in England again till Caroline has either married another or regards her attachment to Charles as a bygone matter. I have thought over these conditions, and have agreed to them all as they stand.

11 p.m.--I do not much like this scheme, after all. For one thing, I have just sounded my father on it before parting with him for the night, my impression having been that he would see no objection. But he says he could on no account countenance any such unreal proceeding; however good our intentions, and even though the poor girl were dying, it would not be right. So I sadly seek my pillow.

October 1.--I am sure my father is wrong in his view. Why is it not

right, if it would be balm to Caroline's wounded soul, and if a real ceremony is absolutely refused by Charles--moreover is hardly practicable in the difficulty of getting a special licence, if he were agreed? My father does not know, or will not believe, that Caroline's attachment has been the cause of her hopeless condition. But that it is so, and that the form of words would give her inexpressible happiness, I know well; for I whispered tentatively in her ear on such marriages, and the effect was great. Henceforth my father cannot be taken into confidence on the subject of Caroline. He does not understand her.

12 o'clock noon.--I have taken advantage of my father's absence to-day to confide my secret notion to a thoughtful young man, who called here this morning to speak to my father. He is the Mr. Theophilus Higham, of whom I have already had occasion to speak--a Scripture reader in the next town, and is soon going to be ordained. I told him the pitiable case, and my remedy. He says ardently that he will assist me--would do anything for me (he is, in truth, an admirer of mine); he sees no wrong in such an act of charity. He is coming again to the house this afternoon before my father returns, to carry out the idea. I have spoken to Charles, who promises to be ready. I must now break the news to Caroline.

11 o'clock p.m.--I have been in too much excitement till now to set down the result. We have accomplished our plan; and though I feel like a guilty sinner, I am glad. My father, of course, is not to be informed as yet. Caroline has had a seraphic expression upon her wasted, transparent

face ever since. I should hardly be surprised if it really saved her life even now, and rendered a legitimate union necessary between them. In that case my father can be informed of the whole proceeding, and in the face of such wonderful success cannot disapprove. Meanwhile poor Charles has not lost the possibility of taking unworthy me to fill her place should she--. But I cannot contemplate that alternative unmoved, and will not write it. Charles left for the South of Europe immediately after the ceremony. He was in a high-strung, throbbing, almost wild state of mind at first, but grew calmer under my exhortations. I had to pay the penalty of receiving a farewell kiss from him, which I much regret, considering its meaning; but he took me so unexpectedly, and in a moment was gone.

Oct. 6.--She certainly is better, and even when she found that Charles had been suddenly obliged to leave, she received the news quite cheerfully. The doctor says that her apparent improvement may be delusive; but I think our impressing upon her the necessity of keeping what has occurred a secret from papa, and everybody, helps to give her a zest for life.

Oct. 8.--She is still mending. I am glad to have saved her--my only sister--if I have done so; though I shall now never become Charles's wife.