

CHAPTER XVIII

ELIZA PARSONS

On Sunday morning Mr. Burke again appeared at Elmhurst, and told Kenneth he wanted an interview with Eliza Parsons.

"I don't want you to send for her, or anything like that, for it would make her suspicious," he said. "I'd like to meet her in some way that would seem accidental, and not startle her."

"That is rather a hard thing to arrange, Mr. Burke," said the boy, with a smile.

"Why, I think not," declared Louise. "It seems to me quite easy."

"That's the woman of it, sir," laughed Kenneth; "if it's a question of wits her sex has the advantage of us."

"What do you propose, miss?" asked the detective, turning to Louise.

"I'll have Martha send the girl into the garden to gather flowers," she replied; "and you can wander around there and engage her in conversation."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Can this be arranged now?"

"I'll see, sir."

She found Martha and asked her to send Eliza Parsons for some roses and chrysanthemums, which were in a retired place shut in by evergreen hedges.

"One of the other maids will know the garden better," suggested the housekeeper.

"But I wish Eliza to go."

"Very well, Miss Louise."

From an upper window the girl watched until she saw Eliza Parsons leave the house with a basket and go into the retired garden she had chosen. Then she returned to the library for Mr. Burke and led him toward the same place.

"Eliza is just beyond that gap in the hedge," she said, and turned away.

"Wait a moment, please," he said, detaining her. "On second thought I would like you to come with me, for your tact may be of great assistance. Have you spoken much with Eliza?"

"Not at all, I think. Beth has talked with her, but I have scarcely been near her since she came here."

"You are willing to come?"

"I shall be glad to."

"The poet Saxe," said Mr. Burke, walking through the gap beside Louise, "has never been properly appreciated by his countrymen, although since his death his verses are in greater demand than while he lived. Do you care for them?"

"I don't know Saxe very well," she answered, observing that they were approaching a place where Eliza was bending over a rose-bush. "But one or two of his poems are so amusing that they linger in my memory."

Eliza turned at the sound of their voices and gave them a quick glance. But the next moment she resumed her occupation of cutting roses.

"The man's greatest fault was his habit of punning," remarked the detective, watching the girl's form as he drew nearer. "It is that which blinded his contemporaries to his real talents. What exquisite roses, Miss Merrick! May I ask for one for my button-hole?"

"Yes, indeed!" she replied, pausing with him just beside Eliza. "Will you cut that bud yonder, for Mr. Burke, my dear?"

The maid silently obeyed and as the detective took the flower from her hand he said:

"Why, isn't this Eliza Parsons?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, carelessly.

"Don't you remember me, Eliza?"

She seemed a little surprised, but answered promptly:

"No, sir."

"I'm William Burke, your mother's cousin. How did you leave your brother Harry, and have you heard from Josephine lately?"

The girl gave him a startled look and shrank back.

"Why, how nice!" cried Louise. "I did not know you knew Eliza's family, Mr. Burke."

"Yes, she is one of my relatives, and came from Roanoke, Virginia. Isn't that correct, Eliza?"

"Yes, sir--no! I--I don't remember!" she said, in a low tone.

"Don't remember, Eliza? That is strange."

The girl stared at him half frightened, and drew her hand over her eyes with a gesture of bewilderment.

"I hope, my dear, you are not going to be like your mother," said Mr. Burke, gently. "My poor cousin Nora was subject to a strange lapse of memory at times," he remarked to Louise. "She always recovered in time, but for days she could remember nothing of her former life--not even her own name. Are you ever affected that way Eliza?"

She looked up at him pleadingly, and murmured in a low voice:

"Let me go! Please let me go!"

"In a moment, Eliza."

Her hands were clasped together nervously and she had dropped her basket and scissors on the path before her. The man looked intently into her eyes, in a shrewd yet kindly way, and she seemed as if fascinated by his gaze.

"Tell me, my dear, have you forgotten your old life?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Poor girl! And you are trying to keep this a secret and not let anyone know of your trouble?"

Suddenly she started and sprang away, uttering a cry of terror.

"You're trying to trap me," she panted. "You know my name is not Eliza Parsons. You--you want to ruin me!"

From the position in which they stood in the corner of the garden, with high hedges behind the maid, and Mr. Burke and Louise blocking the path in front, there was little chance of escape. But she looked around wildly, as if about to make the attempt, when Louise stepped forward and gently took Eliza's hand in her own.

"Mr. Burke is a good man, my dear, and means well by you," she said in her sweet, sympathetic tones. "He shall not bother you if you are afraid of him."

"I--I'm not afraid," said Eliza, with a resumption of her old manner and a toss of her head.

The detective gave Louise a look which she thought she understood.

"Will you finish cutting these roses, Mr. Burke?" she asked, with a smile. "Eliza and I are going to my room. Come, my dear," and without

waiting for a reply she led the girl, whose hand was still clasped in her own, along the path.

Eliza came willingly. Her manner was a little defiant at first, but when Louise drew her unobserved to the side entrance and up the staircase she grew gentle and permitted the other girl to take her arm.

Once in her room with the strange maid, Louise locked the door quietly and said to her companion with a cheerful smile:

"Now we are quite alone, and can talk at our ease. Take that low chair, dear, and I'll sit here."

Eliza obeyed, looking wistfully into the fair face of her new friend.

"You are very pretty, Eliza; and I'm sure you are as good as you're pretty," announced Louise. "So you must tell me about yourself, and whether you are happy here or not. From this time on I'm going to be your friend, you know, and keep all your secrets; and I'll help you all I can."

This rambling speech seemed to impress Eliza favorably. She relaxed somewhat from the tense alertness that was habitual with her, and looked at the other girl with a softened expression.

"I'm afraid you won't be much interested in me," she replied, "but I

need a friend--indeed I need a friend, Miss Louise!"

"I'm sure you do."

"At first I thought I could do without one. I felt I must stand alone, and let no one suspect. But--I'm getting puzzled and bewildered, and I don't know what to do next."

"Of course not. Tell me about it, dear."

"I can't; for I don't know, myself." She leaned forward in her chair and added, in a whisper: "I don't even know who I am! But that man," with a shudder, "tried to trap me. He said he knew Eliza Parsons, and there is no Eliza Parsons. It's a name I--I invented."

"I think I understand," said Louise, with a little nod. "You had to have a name, so you took that one."

"Yes. I don't know why I am telling you this. I've tried to hide it all so carefully. And perhaps I'm wrong in letting this thing worry me. In the main, I've been very happy and content, lately; and--I have a feeling I was not happy before--before--"

"Before what, dear?"

The girl looked at her steadily and her face grew red.

"Before I lost my memory."

For a few moments they sat silently regarding one another, the expressive features of Louise showing a silent sympathy.

"Have you really lost your memory?" she asked.

"Absolutely. Think of it! I wakened one morning lying by the roadside, and shivering with cold. I had on a simple gray dress, with no hat. The sun was just rising, and no one was near. I examined myself with wonder, for I had no idea who I was, or how I came there. There was no money in my pocket, and I had no jewels. To keep warm I began walking along the road. The scenery was all new to me; so far as I knew I had never been in the place before.

"The birds were singing and the cows mooed in the meadow. I tried to sing, too, for my heart was light and gay and I was happy. By and bye I came to a town; but no one seemed to be awakened because it was yet so early. As I walked down the street I saw smoke coming from one of the chimneys, and it suddenly occurred to me that I was hungry. I entered the yard and went around to the back door. A woman was working in the kitchen and I laughed joyfully and wished her a good morning. She was not very pleasant, but it did me good to talk with her; I liked to hear my own voice and it pleased me to be able to talk easily and well. She grudgingly gave me something to eat and then bade me begone, calling me

by some strange name and saying I was a thief. It was then that I invented the name of Eliza Parsons. I don't know why, but it popped into my head and I claimed it for my name and have clung to it ever since."

"Have you no idea what your real name is?" asked Louise, greatly interested in this terse relation.

"I have no idea of anything that dates beyond that morning," replied Eliza. "The first time I looked in the mirror I saw a strange face reflected there. I had to make my own acquaintance," she added, with one of her bright laughs. "I suppose I am between seventeen and twenty years of age, but what my life was during past years is to me a sealed book. I cannot remember a person I knew or associated with, yet things outside of my personal life seem to have clung to me. I remembered books I must have read; I can write, sing and sew--I sew remarkably well, and must have once been trained to it. I know all about my country's history, yet I cannot recollect where I lived, and this part of the country is unknown to me. When I came to Elmhurst I knew all about it and about Mr. Forbes, but could not connect them with my former life."

"How did you happen to come here?" asked Louise.

"I forgot to tell you that. While I was arguing with the woman, who was a Mrs. Hopkins, her husband heard us and came out into the kitchen. He began to question me about myself and I gave any answer that came into my head, for I could not tell him the truth. It pleased me to hear my

voice, I seemed to have a keen sense of the humorous, and if I said anything at all clever, I laughed as heartily as anyone. My heart was light and free from all care. I had no worries or responsibilities at all. I was like the birds who see the sunshine and feel the breeze and are content to sing and be happy.

"Mr. Hopkins saw I was wholly irresponsible and reckless, and he decided to use me to spy upon the people here at Elmhurst and report to him what they said and did. I agreed to this readily, prompted by a spirit of mischief, for I cared nothing for Hopkins and had nothing against Mr. Forbes. Also Hopkins paid me money, which I had sufficient knowledge to realize was necessary to me.

"Oh, how happy and gay I was in those first few days! There was not a thought of the past, not an ambition or desire of any sort to bother me. Just to live seemed pleasure enough. I enjoyed eating and sleeping; I loved to talk and laugh; I was glad to have work to occupy me--and that was all! Then things began to happen that puzzled me. The man Hopkins declared he could not trust me because I had once been a thief, and I wondered if he could speak truly. I resented the thought that I may once have been a thief, although I wouldn't mind stealing, even now, if I wanted anything and could take it."

"Oh, Eliza!" gasped Louise.

"It sounds wicked, doesn't it? But it is true. Nothing seems to

influence me so strongly as my own whims. I know what is good and what is bad. I must have been taught these things once. But I am as likely to do evil as good, and this recklessness has begun, in the last few days, to worry me.

"Then I met a young man here--he says his name is Tom Gates--who called me his dear Lucy, and said I used to love him. I laughed at him at first, for it seemed very absurd and I do not want him to love me. But then he proved to me there was some truth in his statement. He said his Lucy had a scar on her left arm, and that made me afraid, because I had discovered a scar on my own arm. I don't know how it got there. I don't know anything about this old Lucy. And I'm afraid to find out. I'm afraid of Lucy."

"Why, dear?"

"I cannot tell. I only know I have a horror of her, a sudden shrinking whenever her name is mentioned. Who was she, do you suppose?"

"Shall I tell you?" asked Louise.

"No--no! Don't, I beg of you!" cried Eliza, starting up. "I--I can't bear it! I don't want to know her."

The protest was passionate and sincere, and Louise marvelled at the workings of this evidently unbalanced intellect.

"What would you like to do, dear?" she inquired.

"I'd like to remain Eliza Parsons--always. I'd like to get away from her--far away from anyone who ever heard of that dreadful Lucy who frightens me so. Will you help me to get away, to escape to some place where no one will ever be able to trace me?"

"Do you think you would be happy then?"

"I am sure of it. The only thing that makes me unhappy now is the horror that this past life will be thrust upon me. I must have had a past, of course, or I shouldn't be a grown woman now. But I'm afraid of it; I don't want to know anything about it! Will you help me to escape?"

She looked eagerly at Louise as she asked this pitiful question, and the other girl replied, softly: "I will be your friend, Eliza. I'll think all this over, and we will see what can be done. Be patient a little while and as soon as I find a way to free you from all this trouble I'll send for you, and we'll talk it over together."

"Will you keep my secret?" demanded Eliza, uneasily.

Louise glanced at the door that communicated with Beth's room. It stood open, but Eliza had not noticed that, as it was behind her. Just now a shadow cast from the other room wavered an instant over the rug, and

Louise's quick eyes caught it.

"I promise to keep your secret, dear," she said earnestly.

The two girls rose and stood facing each other. Louise kissed the beautiful Eliza and whispered:

"Here is one thing for you to remember--that we are always to be true friends, from this time forward. If anyone annoys you, come to me, and I will protect you."

"Thank you, Miss Louise," said Eliza, and then she went away to her own room in a quieter and more thoughtful mood than usual.

When she had gone Louise ran to the door communicating with Beth's room, and to her satisfaction found both her cousins, with Kenneth, Uncle John and Mr. Burke, seated in a group where they must have overheard all that had been said.

"Well!" she cried, eagerly, "did you hear? And what do you think of it all?"

"It's Lucy Rogers, sure enough," said Kenneth.

Louise looked at Mr. Burke.

"It is the most singular case that has ever come under my observation," stated that gentleman. "The girl is perfectly sane, but she has suffered a strange lapse of memory. I have two alternatives to advise. One is to telegraph at once for a specialist. The other is to permit the girl to go away, as she suggests. She will be happier to do so, I am sure."

"Oh, no!" cried the girls.

"She owes a duty to her parents and friends, as well as to herself," said Kenneth, "and I see no reason why she should be unhappy in the future as Lucy Rogers."

Mr. Burke merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Please wire for the specialist at once," said Uncle John.