

CHAPTER XI. HELENA'S DIARY.

We both said good-night, and went up to our room with a new object in view. By our father's advice we had resolved on keeping diaries, for the first time in our lives, and had pledged ourselves to begin before we went to bed.

Slowly and silently and lazily, my sister sauntered to her end of the room and seated herself at her writing-table. On the desk lay a nicely bound book, full of blank pages. The word "Journal" was printed on it in gold letters, and there was fitted to the covers a bright brass lock and key. A second journal, exactly similar in every respect to the first, was placed on the writing-table at my end of the room. I opened my book. The sight of the blank leaves irritated me; they were so smooth, so spotless, so entirely ready to do their duty. I took too deep a dip of ink, and began the first entry in my diary by making a blot. This was discouraging. I got up, and looked out of window.

"Helena!"

My sister's voice could hardly have addressed me in a more weary tone, if her pen had been at work all night, relating domestic events. "Well!" I said. "What is it?"

"Have you done already?" she asked.

I showed her the blot. My sister Eunice (the strangest as well as the dearest of girls) always blurts out what she has in her mind at the time. She fixed her eyes gravely on my spoiled page, and said: "That comforts me." I crossed the room, and looked at her book. She had not even summoned energy enough to make a blot. "What will papa think of us," she said, "if we don't begin to-night?"

"Why not begin," I suggested, "by writing down what he said, when he gave us our journals? Those wise words of advice will be in their proper place on the first page of the new books."

Not at all a demonstrative girl naturally; not ready with her tears, not liberal with her caresses, not fluent in her talk, Eunice was affected by my proposal in a manner wonderful to see. She suddenly developed into an excitable person--I declare she kissed me. "Oh," she burst out, "how clever you are! The very thing to write about; I'll do it directly."

She really did it directly; without once stopping to consider, without once waiting to ask my advice. Line after line, I heard her noisy pen hurrying to the bottom of a first page, and getting three-parts of the way toward the end of a second page, before she closed her diary. I reminded her that she had not turned the key, in the lock which was intended to keep her writing private.

"It's not worth while," she answered. "Anybody who cares to do it may read what I write. Good-night."

The singular change which I had noticed in her began to disappear, when she set about her preparations for bed. I noticed the old easy indolent movements again, and that regular and deliberate method of brushing her hair, which I can never contemplate without feeling a stupefying influence that has helped me to many a delicious night's sleep. She said her prayers in her favorite corner of the room, and laid her head on the pillow with the luxurious little sigh which announces that she is falling asleep. This reappearance of her usual habits was really a relief to me. Eunice in a state of excitement is Eunice exhibiting an unnatural spectacle.

The next thing I did was to take the liberty which she had already sanctioned--I mean the liberty of reading what she had written. Here it is, copied exactly:

"I am not half so fond of anybody as I am of papa. He is always kind, he is always right. I love him, I love him, I love him.

"But this is not how I meant to begin. I must tell how he talked to us; I wish he was here to tell it himself.

"He said to me: 'You are getting lazier than ever, Eunice.' He said to Helena: 'You are feeling the influence of Eunice's example.' He said to both of us: 'You are too ready, my dear children, to sit with your hands on your laps, looking at nothing and thinking of nothing; I want to try a new way of employing your leisure time.'

"He opened a parcel on the table. He made each of us a present of a beautiful book, called 'Journal.' He said: 'When you have nothing to do, my dears, in the evening, employ yourselves in keeping a diary of the events of the day. It will be a useful record in many ways, and a good moral discipline for young girls.' Helena said: 'Oh, thank you!' I said the same, but not so cheerfully.

"The truth is, I feel out of spirits now if I think of papa; I am not easy in my mind about him. When he is very much interested, there is a quivering in his face which I don't remember in past times. He seems to have got older and thinner, all on a sudden. He shouts (which he never used to do) when he threatens sinners at sermon-time. Being in dreadful earnest about our souls, he is of course obliged to speak of the devil; but he never used to hit the harmless pulpit cushion with his fist as he does now. Nobody seems to have seen these things but me; and now I have noticed them what ought I to do? I don't know; I am certain of nothing, except what I have put in at the top of page one: I love him, I love him, I love him."

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There this very curious entry ended. It was easy enough to discover the influence which had made my slow-minded sister so ready with her memory and her pen--so ready, in short, to do anything and everything, provided her heart was in it, and her father was in it.

But Eunice is wrong, let me tell her, in what she says of myself.

I, too, have seen the sad change in my father; but I happen to know that he dislikes having it spoken of at home, and I have kept my painful discoveries to myself. Unhappily, the best medical advice is beyond our reach. The one really competent doctor in this place is known to be an infidel. But for that shocking obstacle I might have persuaded my father to see him. As for the other two doctors whom he has consulted, at different times, one talked about suppressed gout, and the other told him to take a year's holiday and enjoy himself on the Continent.

The clock has just struck twelve. I have been writing and copying till my eyes are heavy, and I want to follow Eunice's example and sleep as soundly as she does. We have made a strange beginning of this journalizing experiment. I wonder how long it will go on, and what will come of it.

SECOND DAY.

I begin to be afraid that I am as stupid--no; that is not a nice word to use--let me say as simple as dear Eunice. A diary means a record of the events of the day; and not one of the events of yesterday appears in my sister's journal or in mine. Well, it is easy to set that mistake right. Our lives are so dull (but I would not say so in my father's hearing for the world) that the record of one day will be much the same as the record of another. After family prayers and breakfast I suffer my customary persecution at the

hands of the cook. That is to say, I am obliged, being the housekeeper, to order what we have to eat. Oh, how I hate inventing dinners! and how I admire the enviable slowness of mind and laziness of body which have saved Eunice from undertaking the worries of housekeeping in her turn! She can go and work in her garden, while I am racking my invention to discover variety in dishes without overstepping the limits of economy. I suppose I may confess it privately to myself--how sorry I am not to have been born a man!

My next employment leads me to my father's study, to write under his dictation. I don't complain of this; it flatters my pride to feel that I am helping so great a man. At the same time, I do notice that here again Eunice's little defects have relieved her of another responsibility. She can neither keep dictated words in her memory, nor has she ever been able to learn how to put in her stops.

After the dictation, I have an hour's time left for practicing music. My sister comes in from the garden, with her pencil and paint-box, and practices drawing. Then we go out for a walk--a delightful walk, if my father goes too. He has something always new to tell us, suggested by what we pass on the way. Then, dinner-time comes--not always a pleasant part of the day to me. Sometimes I hear paternal complaints (always gentle complaints) of my housekeeping; sometimes my sister (I won't say the greedy sister) tells me I have not given her enough to eat. Poor father! Dear Eunice!

Dinner having reached its end, we stroll in the garden when the weather is fine. When it rains, we make flannel petticoats for poor old women. What a horrid thing old age is to look at! To be ugly, to be helpless, to be miserably unfit for all the pleasures of life--I hope I shall not live to be an old woman. What would my father say if he saw this? For his sake, to say nothing of my own feelings, I shall do well if I make it a custom to use the lock of my journal. Our next occupation is to join the Scripture class for girls, and to help the teacher. This is a good discipline for Eunice's temper, and--oh, I don't deny it!--for my temper, too. I may long to box the ears of the whole class, but it is my duty to keep a smiling face and to be a model of patience. From the Scripture class we sometimes go to my father's lecture. At other times, we may amuse ourselves as well as we can till the tea is ready. After tea, we read books which instruct us, poetry and novels being forbidden. When we are tired of the books we talk. When supper is over, we have prayers again, and we go to bed. There is our day. Oh, dear me! there is our day.

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And how has Eunice succeeded in her second attempt at keeping a diary? Here is what she has written. It has one merit that nobody can deny--it is soon read:

"I hope papa will excuse me; I have nothing to write about to-day."

Over and over again I have tried to point out to my sister the absurdity of calling her father by the infantile nickname of papa. I have reminded her that she is (in years, at least) no longer a child. "Why don't you call him father, as I do?" I asked only the other day.

She made an absurd reply: "I used to call him papa when I was a little girl."

"That," I reminded her, "doesn't justify you in calling him papa now."

And she actually answered: "Yes it does." What a strange state of mind! And what a charming girl, in spite of her mind!

THIRD DAY.

The morning post has brought with it a promise of some little variety in our lives--or, to speak more correctly, in the life of my sister.

Our new and nice friends, the Staveleys, have written to invite Eunice to pay them a visit at their house in London. I don't complain at being left at home. It would be unfilial, indeed, if we both of us forsook our father; and last year it was my turn to receive the first invitation, and to enjoy the change of scene. The Staveleys are excellent people--strictly pious members of the Methodist Connection--and exceedingly kind to my sister and me. But it was just as well for my moral welfare that I ended my visit to our friends when I did. With my fondness for music, I felt the temptation of the Evil One trying me, when I saw placards in the street announcing that the Italian Opera was open. I had no wish to be a witness of the shameful and sinful dancing which goes on (I am told) at the opera; but I did feel my principles shaken when I thought of the wonderful singers and the entrancing music. And this, when I knew what an atmosphere of wickedness people breathe who enter a theater! I reflect with horror on what might have happened if I had remained a little longer in London.

Helping Eunice to pack up, I put her journal into the box. "You will find something to write about now," I told her. "While I record everything that happens at home, you will keep your diary of all that you do in London, and

when you come back we will show each other what we have written." My sister is a dear creature. "I don't feel sure of being able to do it," she answered; "but I promise to try." Good Eunice!