

CHAPTER XIV. HELENA'S DIARY.

To-day I went as usual to the Scripture-class for girls. It was harder work than ever, teaching without Eunice to help me. Indeed, I felt lonely all day without my sister. When I got home, I rather hoped that some friend might have come to see us, and have been asked to stay to tea. The housemaid opened the door to me. I asked Maria if anybody had called.

"Yes, miss; a lady, to see the master."

"A stranger?"

"Never saw her before, miss, in all my life." I put no more questions. Many ladies visit my father. They call it consulting the Minister. He advises them in their troubles, and guides them in their religious difficulties, and so on. They come and go in a sort of secrecy. So far as I know, they are mostly old maids, and they waste the Minister's time.

When my father came in to tea, I began to feel some curiosity about the lady who had called on him. Visitors of that sort, in general, never appear to dwell on his mind after they have gone away; he sees too many of them, and is too well accustomed to what they have to say. On this particular evening, however, I perceived appearances that set me thinking; he looked worried and anxious.

"Has anything happened, father, to vex you?" I said.

"Yes."

"Is the lady concerned in it?"

"What lady, my dear?"

"The lady who called on you while I was out."

"Who told you she had called on me?"

"I asked Maria--"

"That will do, Helena, for the present."

He drank his tea and went back to his study, instead of staying a while, and talking pleasantly as usual. My respect submitted to his want of confidence in me; but my curiosity was in a state of revolt. I sent for Maria, and proceeded to make my own discoveries, with this result:

No other person had called at the house. Nothing had happened, except the visit of the mysterious lady. "She looked between young and old. And, oh dear me, she was certainly not pretty. Not dressed nicely, to my mind; but they do say dress is a matter of taste."

Try as I might, I could get no more than that out of our stupid young housemaid.

Later in the evening, the cook had occasion to consult me about supper. This was a person possessing the advantages of age and experience. I asked if she had seen the lady. The cook's reply promised something new: "I can't say I saw the lady; but I heard her."

"Do you mean that you heard her speaking?"

"No, miss--crying."

"Where was she crying?"

"In the master's study."

"How did you come to hear her?"

"Am I to understand, miss, that you suspect me of listening?"

Is a lie told by a look as bad as a lie told by words? I looked shocked at the bare idea of suspecting a respectable person of listening. The cook's sense of honor was satisfied; she readily explained herself: "I was passing the door, miss, on my way upstairs."

Here my discoveries came to an end. It was certainly possible that an afflicted member of my father's congregation might have called on him to be comforted. But he sees plenty of afflicted ladies, without looking worried and anxious after they leave him. Still suspecting something out of the ordinary course of events, I waited hopefully for our next meeting at supper-time. Nothing came of it. My father left me by myself again, when the meal was over. He is always courteous to his daughters; and he made an apology: "Excuse me, Helena, I want to think."

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I went to bed in a vile humor, and slept badly; wondering, in the long wakeful hours, what new rebuff I should meet with on the next day.

At breakfast this morning I was agreeably surprised. No signs of anxiety showed themselves in my father's face. Instead of retiring to his study when we rose from the table, he proposed taking a turn in the garden: "You are looking pale, Helena, and you will be the better for a little fresh air. Besides, I have something to say to you."

Excitement, I am sure, is good for young women. I saw in his face, I heard in his last words, that the mystery of the lady was at last to be revealed. The sensation of languor and fatigue which follows a disturbed night left me directly.

My father gave me his arm, and we walked slowly up and down the lawn.

"When that lady called on me yesterday," he began, "you wanted to know who she was, and you were surprised and disappointed when I refused to gratify your curiosity. My silence was not a selfish silence, Helena. I was thinking of you and your sister; and I was at a loss how to act for the best. You shall hear why my children were in my mind, presently. I must tell you first that I have arrived at a decision; I hope and believe on reasonable grounds. Ask me any questions you please; my silence will be no longer an obstacle in your way."

This was so very encouraging that I said at once: "I should like to know who the lady is."

"The lady is related to me," he answered. "We are cousins."

Here was a disclosure that I had not anticipated. In the little that I have seen of the world, I have observed that cousins--when they happen to be brought together under interesting circumstances--can remember their relationship, and forget their relationship, just as it suits them. "Is your cousin a married lady?" I ventured to inquire.

"No."

Short as it was, that reply might perhaps mean more than appeared on the surface. The cook had heard the lady crying. What sort of tender agitation

was answerable for those tears? Was it possible, barely possible, that Eunice and I might go to bed, one night, a widower's daughters, and wake up the next day to discover a stepmother?

"Have I or my sister ever seen the lady?" I asked.

"Never. She has been living abroad; and I have not seen her myself since we were both young people."

My excellent innocent father! Not the faintest idea of what I had been thinking of was in his mind. Little did he suspect how welcome was the relief that he had afforded to his daughter's wicked doubts of him. But he had not said a word yet about his cousin's personal appearance. There might be remains of good looks which the housemaid was too stupid to discover.

"After the long interval that has passed since you met," I said, "I suppose she has become an old woman?"

"No, my dear. Let us say, a middle-aged woman."

"Perhaps she is still an attractive person?"

He smiled. "I am afraid, Helena, that would never have been a very accurate description of her."

I now knew all that I wanted to know about this alarming person, excepting one last morsel of information which my father had strangely forgotten.

"We have been talking about the lady for some time," I said; "and you have not yet told me her name."

Father looked a little embarrassed "It's not a very pretty name," he answered. "My cousin, my unfortunate cousin, is--Miss Jillgall."

I burst out with such a loud "Oh!" that he laughed. I caught the infection, and laughed louder still. Bless Miss Jillgall! The interview promised to become an easy one for both of us, thanks to her name. I was in good spirits, and I made no attempt to restrain them. "The next time Miss Jillgall honors you with a visit," I said, "you must give me an opportunity of being presented to her."

He made a strange reply: "You may find your opportunity, Helena, sooner than you anticipate."

Did this mean that she was going to call again in a day or two? I am afraid I spoke flippantly. I said: "Oh, father, another lady fascinated by the popular preacher?"

The garden chairs were near us. He signed to me gravely to be seated by his side, and said to himself: "This is my fault."

"What is your fault?" I asked.

"I have left you in ignorance, my dear, of my cousin's sad story. It is soon told; and, if it checks your merriment, it will make amends by deserving your sympathy. I was indebted to her father, when I was a boy, for acts of kindness which I can never forget. He was twice married. The death of his first wife left him with one child--once my playfellow; now the lady whose visit has excited your curiosity. His second wife was a Belgian. She persuaded him to sell his business in London, and to invest the money in a partnership with a brother of hers, established as a sugar-refiner at Antwerp. The little daughter accompanied her father to Belgium. Are you attending to me, Helena?"

I was waiting for the interesting part of the story, and was wondering when he would get to it.

"As time went on," he resumed, "the new partner found that the value of the business at Antwerp had been greatly overrated. After a long struggle with adverse circumstances, he decided on withdrawing from the partnership before the whole of his capital was lost in a failing commercial speculation. The end of it was that he retired, with his daughter, to a small town in East Flanders; the wreck of his property having left him with an income of no more than two hundred pounds a year."

I showed my father that I was attending to him now, by inquiring what had become of the Belgian wife. Those nervous quiverings, which Eunice has mentioned in her diary, began to appear in his face.

"It is too shameful a story," he said, "to be told to a young girl. The marriage was dissolved by law; and the wife was the person to blame. I am sure, Helena, you don't wish to hear any more of this part of the story."

I did wish. But I saw that he expected me to say No--so I said it.

"The father and daughter," he went on, "never so much as thought of

returning to their own country. They were too poor to live comfortably in England. In Belgium their income was sufficient for their wants. On the father's death, the daughter remained in the town. She had friends there, and friends nowhere else; and she might have lived abroad to the end of her days, but for a calamity to which we are all liable. A long and serious illness completely prostrated her. Skilled medical attendance, costing large sums of money for the doctors' traveling expenses, was imperatively required. Experienced nurses, summoned from a distant hospital, were in attendance night and day. Luxuries, far beyond the reach of her little income, were absolutely required to support her wasted strength at the time of her tedious recovery. In one word, her resources were sadly diminished, when the poor creature had paid her debts, and had regained her hold on life. At that time, she unhappily met with the man who has ruined her."

It was getting interesting at last. "Ruined her?" I repeated. "Do you mean that he robbed her?"

"That, Helena, is exactly what I mean--and many and many a helpless woman has been robbed in the same way. The man of whom I am now speaking was a lawyer in large practice. He bore an excellent character, and was highly respected for his exemplary life. My cousin (not at all a discreet person, I am bound to admit) was induced to consult him on her pecuniary affairs. He expressed the most generous sympathy--offered to employ her little capital in his business--and pledged himself to pay her double the interest for her money, which she had been in the habit of receiving from the sound investment chosen by her father."

"And of course he got the money, and never paid the interest?" Eager to hear the end, I interrupted the story in those inconsiderate words. My father's answer quietly reproved me.

"He paid the interest regularly as long as he lived."

"And what happened when he died?"

"He died a bankrupt; the secret profligacy of his life was at last exposed. Nothing, actually nothing, was left for his creditors. The unfortunate creature, whose ugly name has amused you, must get help somewhere, or must go to the workhouse."

If I had been in a state of mind to attend to trifles, this would have explained the reason why the cook had heard Miss Jillgall crying. But the prospect before me--the unendurable prospect of having a strange woman in the

house--had showed itself too plainly to be mistaken. I could think of nothing else. With infinite difficulty I assumed a momentary appearance of composure, and suggested that Miss Jillgall's foreign friends might have done something to help her.

My father defended her foreign friends. "My dear, they were poor people, and did all they could afford to do. But for their kindness, my cousin might not have been able to return to England."

"And to cast herself on your mercy," I added, "in the character of a helpless woman."

"No, Helena! Not to cast herself on my mercy--but to find my house open to her, as her father's house was open to me in the bygone time. I am her only surviving relative; and, while I live, she shall not be a helpless woman."

I began to wish that I had not spoken out so plainly. My father's sweet temper--I do so sincerely wish I had inherited it!--made the kindest allowances for me.

"I understand the momentary bitterness of feeling that has escaped you," he said; "I may almost say that I expected it. My only hesitation in this matter has been caused by my sense of what I owe to my children. It was putting your endurance, and your sister's endurance, to a trial to expect you to receive a stranger (and that stranger not a young girl like yourselves) as one of the household, living with you in the closest intimacy of family life. The consideration which has decided me does justice, I hope, to you and Eunice, as well as to myself. I think that some allowance is due from my daughters to the father who has always made loving allowance for them. Am I wrong in believing that my good children have not forgotten this, and have only waited for the occasion to feel the pleasure of rewarding me?"

It was beautifully put. There was but one thing to be done--I kissed him. And there was but one thing to be said. I asked at what time we might expect to receive Miss Jillgall. "She is staying, Helena, at a small hotel in the town. I have already sent to say that we are waiting to see her. Perhaps you will look at the spare bedroom?"

"It shall be got ready, father, directly."

I ran into the house; I rushed upstairs into the room that is Eunice's and mine; I locked the door, and then I gave way to my rage, before it stifled me. I stamped on the floor, I clinched my fists, I cast myself on the bed, I reviled

that hateful woman by every hard word that I could throw at her. Oh, the luxury of it! the luxury of it!

Cold water and my hairbrush soon made me fit to be seen again.

As for the spare room, it looked a great deal too comfortable for an incubus from foreign parts. The one improvement that I could have made, if a friend of mine had been expected, was suggested by the window-curtains. I was looking at a torn place in one of them, and determined to leave it unrepaired, when I felt an arm slipped round my waist from behind. A voice, so close that it tickled my neck, said: "Dear girl, what friends we shall be!" I turned round, and confronted Miss Jillgall.