

CHAPTER XV. HELENA'S DIARY.

If I am not a good girl, where is a good girl to be found? This is in Eunice's style. It sometimes amuses me to mimic my simple sister.

I have just torn three pages out of my diary, in deference to the expression of my father's wishes. He took the first opportunity which his cousin permitted him to enjoy of speaking to me privately; and his object was to caution me against hastily relying on first impressions of anybody--especially of Miss Jillgall. "Wait for a day or two," he said; "and then form your estimate of the new member of our household."

The stormy state of my temper had passed away, and had left my atmosphere calm again. I could feel that I had received good advice; but unluckily it reached me too late.

I had formed my estimate of Miss Jillgall, and had put it in writing for my own satisfaction, at least an hour before my father found himself at liberty to speak to me. I don't agree with him in distrusting first impressions; and I had proposed to put my opinion to the test, by referring to what I had written about his cousin at a later time. However, after what he had said to me, I felt bound in filial duty to take the pages out of my book, and to let two days pass before I presumed to enjoy the luxury of hating Miss Jillgall. On one thing I am determined: Eunice shall not form a hasty opinion, either. She shall undergo the same severe discipline of self-restraint to which her sister is obliged to submit. Let us be just, as somebody says, before we are generous. No more for to-day.

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I open my diary again--after the prescribed interval has elapsed. The first impression produced on me by the new member of our household remains entirely unchanged.

Have I already made the remark that, when one removes a page from a book, it does not necessarily follow that one destroys the page afterward? or did I leave this to be inferred? In either case, my course of proceeding was the same. I ordered some paste to be made. Then I unlocked a drawer, and found my poor ill-used leaves, and put them back in my Journal. An act of justice is surely not the less praiseworthy because it is an act of justice done to one's self.

My father has often told me that he revises his writings on religious subjects. I may harmlessly imitate that good example, by revising my restored entry. It is now a sufficiently remarkable performance to be distinguished by a title. Let me call it:

Impressions of Miss Jillgall. My first impression was a strong one--it was produced by the state of this lady's breath. In other words, I was obliged to let her kiss me. It is a duty to be considerate toward human infirmity. I will only say that I thought I should have fainted.

My second impression draws a portrait, and produces a striking likeness.

Figure, little and lean--hair of a dirty drab color which we see in string--small light gray eyes, sly and restless, and deeply sunk in the head--prominent cheekbones, and a florid complexion--an inquisitive nose, turning up at the end--a large mouth and a servile smile--raw-looking hands, decorated with black mittens--a misfitting white jacket and a limp skirt--manners familiar--temper cleverly hidden--voice too irritating to be mentioned. Whose portrait is this? It is the portrait of Miss Jillgall, taken in words.

Her true character is not easy to discover; I suspect that it will only show itself little by little. That she is a born meddler in other people's affairs, I think I can see already. I also found out that she trusted to flattery as the easiest means of making herself agreeable. She tried her first experiment on myself.

"You charming girl," she began, "your bright face encourages me to ask a favor. Pray make me useful! The one aspiration of my life is to be useful. Unless you employ me in that way, I have no right to intrude myself into your family circle. Yes, yes, I know that your father has opened his house and his heart to me. But I dare not found any claim--your name is Helena, isn't it? Dear Helena, I dare not found any claim on what I owe to your father's kindness."

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because your father is not a man--"

I was rude enough to interrupt her: "What is he, then?"

"An angel," Miss Jillgall answered, solemnly. "A destitute earthly creature

like me must not look up as high as your father. I might be dazzled."

This was rather more than I could endure patiently. "Let us try," I suggested, "if we can't understand each other, at starting."

Miss Jillgall's little eyes twinkled in their bony caverns. "The very thing I was going to propose!" she burst out.

"Very well," I went on; "then, let me tell you plainly that flattery is not relished in this house."

"Flattery?" She put her hand to her head as she repeated the word, and looked quite bewildered. "Dear Helena, I have lived all my life in East Flanders, and my own language is occasionally strange to me. Can you tell me what flattery is in Flemish?"

"I don't understand Flemish."

"How very provoking! You don't understand Flemish, and I don't understand Flattery. I should so like to know what it means. Ah, I see books in this lovely room. Is there a dictionary among them?" She darted to the bookcase, and discovered a dictionary. "Now I shall understand Flattery," she remarked--"and then we shall understand each other. Oh, let me find it for myself!" She ran her raw red finger along the alphabetical headings at the top of each page. "'FAD.' That won't do. 'FIE.' Further on still. 'FLE.' Too far the other way. 'FLA.' Here we are! 'Flattery: False praise. Commendation bestowed for the purpose of gaining favor and influence.' Oh, Helena, how cruel of you!" She dropped the book, and sank into a chair--the picture, if such a thing can be, of a broken-hearted old maid.

I should most assuredly have taken the opportunity of leaving her to her own devices, if I had been free to act as I pleased. But my interests as a daughter forbade me to make an enemy of my father's cousin, on the first day when she had entered the house. I made an apology, very neatly expressed.

She jumped up--let me do her justice; Miss Jillgall is as nimble as a monkey--and (Faugh!) she kissed me for the second time. If I had been a man, I am afraid I should have called for that deadly poison (we are all temperance people in this house) known by the name of Brandy.

"If you will make me love you," Miss Jillgall explained, "you must expect to be kissed. Dear girl, let us go back to my poor little petition. Oh, do make

me useful! There are so many things I can do: you will find me a treasure in the house. I write a good hand; I understand polishing furniture; I can dress hair (look at my own hair); I play and sing a little when people want to be amused; I can mix a salad and knit stockings--who is this?" The cook came in, at the moment, to consult me; I introduced her. "And, oh," cried Miss Jillgall, in ecstasy, "I can cook! Do, please, let me see the kitchen."

The cook's face turned red. She had come to me to make a confession; and she had not (as she afterward said) bargained for the presence of a stranger. For the first time in her life she took the liberty of whispering to me: "I must ask you, miss, to let me send up the cauliflower plain boiled; I don't understand the directions in the book for doing it in the foreign way."

Miss Jillgall's ears--perhaps because they are so large--possess a quickness of hearing quite unparalleled in my experience. Not one word of the cook's whispered confession had escaped her.

"Here," she declared, "is an opportunity of making myself useful! What is the cook's name? Hannah? Take me downstairs, Hannah, and I'll show you how to do the cauliflower in the foreign way. She seems to hesitate. Is it possible that she doesn't believe me? Listen, Hannah, and judge for yourself if I am deceiving you. Have you boiled the cauliflower? Very well; this is what you must do next. Take four ounces of grated cheese, two ounces of best butter, the yolks of four eggs, a little bit of glaze, lemon-juice, nutmeg--dear, dear, how black she looks. What have I said to offend her?"

The cook passed over the lady who had presumed to instruct her, as if no such person had been present, and addressed herself to me: "If I am to be interfered with in my own kitchen, miss, I will ask you to suit yourself at a month's notice."

Miss Jillgall wrung her hands in despair.

"I meant so kindly," she said; "and I seem to have made mischief. With the best intentions, Helena, I have set you and your servant at variance. I really didn't know you had such a temper, Hannah," she declared, following the cook to the door. "I'm sure there's nothing I am not ready to do to make it up with you. Perhaps you have not got the cheese downstairs? I'm ready to go out and buy it for you. I could show you how to keep eggs sweet and fresh for weeks together. Your gown doesn't fit very well; I shall be glad to improve it, if you will leave it out for me after you have gone to bed. There!" cried Miss Jillgall, as the cook majestically left the room, without even looking at her, "I have done my best to make it up, and you see how my

advances are received. What more could I have done? I really ask you, dear, as a friend, what more could I have done?"

I had it on the tip of my tongue to say: "The cook doesn't ask you to buy cheese for her, or to teach her how to keep eggs, or to improve the fit of her gown; all she wants is to have her kitchen to herself." But here again it was necessary to remember that this odious person was my father's guest.

"Pray don't distress yourself," I began; "I am sure you are not to blame, Miss Jillgall--"

"Oh, don't!"

"Don't--what?"

"Don't call me Miss Jillgall. I call you Helena. Call me Selina."

I had really not supposed it possible that she could be more unendurable than ever. When she mentioned her Christian name, she succeeded nevertheless in producing that result. In the whole list of women's names, is there any one to be found so absolutely sickening as "Selina"? I forced myself to pronounce it; I made another neatly-expressed apology; I said English servants were so very peculiar. Selina was more than satisfied; she was quite delighted.

"Is that it, indeed? An explanation was all I wanted. How good of you! And now tell me--is there no chance, in the house or out of the house, of my making myself useful? Oh, what's that? Do I see a chance? I do! I do!"

Miss Jillgall's eyes are more than mortal. At one time, they are microscopes. At another time, they are telescopes. She discovered (right across the room) the torn place in the window-curtain. In an instant, she snatched a dirty little leather case out of her pocket, threaded her needle and began darning the curtain. She sang over her work. "My heart is light, my will is free--" I can repeat no more of it. When I heard her singing voice, I became reckless of consequences, and ran out of the room with my hands over my ears.