

CHAPTER XVI. HELENA'S DIARY.

When I reached the foot of the stairs, my father called me into his study.

I found him at his writing-table, with such a heap of torn-up paper in his waste-basket that it overflowed on to the floor. He explained to me that he had been destroying a large accumulation of old letters, and had ended (when his employment began to grow wearisome) in examining his correspondence rather carelessly. The result was that he had torn up a letter, and a copy of the reply, which ought to have been set aside as worthy of preservation. After collecting the fragments, he had heaped them on the table. If I could contrive to put them together again on fair sheets of paper, and fasten them in their right places with gum, I should be doing him a service, at a time when he was too busy to set his mistake right for himself.

Here was the best excuse that I could desire for keeping out of Miss Jillgall's way. I cheerfully set to work on the restoration of the letters, while my father went on with his writing.

Having put the fragments together--excepting a few gaps caused by morsels that had been lost--I was unwilling to fasten them down with gum, until I could feel sure of not having made any mistakes; especially in regard to some of the lost words which I had been obliged to restore by guess-work. So I copied the letters, and submitted them, in the first place, to my father's approval. He praised me in the prettiest manner for the care that I had taken. But, when he began, after some hesitation, to read my copy, I noticed a change. The smile left his face, and the nervous quiverings showed themselves again.

"Quite right, my child," he said, in low sad tones.

On returning to my side of the table, I expected to see him resume his writing. He crossed the room to the window and stood (with his back to me) looking out.

When I had first discovered the sense of the letters, they failed to interest me. A tiresome woman, presuming on the kindness of a good-natured man to beg a favor which she had no right to ask, and receiving a refusal which she had richly deserved, was no remarkable event in my experience as my father's secretary and copyist. But the change in his face, while he read the correspondence, altered my opinion of the letters. There was more in them

evidently than I had discovered. I kept my manuscript copy--here it is:

From Miss Elizabeth Chance to the Rev. Abel Gracedieu.

(Date of year, 1859. Date of month, missing.)

"DEAR SIR--You have, I hope, not quite forgotten the interesting conversation that we had last year in the Governor's rooms. I am afraid I spoke a little flippantly at the time; but I am sure you will believe me when I say that this was out of no want of respect to yourself. My pecuniary position being far from prosperous, I am endeavoring to obtain the vacant situation of housekeeper in a public institution the prospectus of which I inclose. You will see it is a rule of the place that a candidate must be a single woman (which I am), and must be recommended by a clergyman. You are the only reverend gentleman whom it is my good fortune to know, and the thing is of course a mere formality. Pray excuse this application, and oblige me by acting as my reference.

"Sincerely yours,

"ELIZABETH CHANCE."

"P. S.--Please address: Miss E. Chance, Poste Restante, St. Martin's-le-Grand, London."

"From the Rev. Abel Gracedieu to Miss Chance.

(Copy.)

"MADAM--The brief conversation to which your letter alludes, took place at an accidental meeting between us. I then saw you for the first time, and I have not seen you since. It is impossible for me to assert the claim of a perfect stranger, like yourself, to fill a situation of trust. I must beg to decline acting as your reference.

"Your obedient servant,

"ABEL GRACEDIEU."

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My father was still at the window.

In that idle position he could hardly complain of me for interrupting him, if I ventured to talk about the letters which I had put together. If my curiosity displeased him, he had only to say so, and there would be an end to any allusions of mine to the subject. My first idea was to join him at the window. On reflection, and still perceiving that he kept his back turned on me, I thought it might be more prudent to remain at the table.

"This Miss Chance seems to be an impudent person?" I said.

"Yes."

"Was she a young woman, when you met with her?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a woman to look at? Ugly?"

"No."

Here were three answers which Eunice herself would have been quick enough to interpret as three warnings to say no more. I felt a little hurt by his keeping his back turned on me. At the same time, and naturally, I think, I found my interest in Miss Chance (I don't say my friendly interest) considerably increased by my father's unusually rude behavior. I was also animated by an irresistible desire to make him turn round and look at me.

"Miss Chance's letter was written many years ago," I resumed. "I wonder what has become of her since she wrote to you."

"I know nothing about her."

"Not even whether she is alive or dead?"

"Not even that. What do these questions mean, Helena?"

"Nothing, father."

I declare he looked as if he suspected me!

"Why don't you speak out?" he said. "Have I ever taught you to conceal your thoughts? Have I ever been a hard father, who discouraged you when you wished to confide in him? What are you thinking about? Do you know anything of this woman?"

"Oh, father, what a question! I never even heard of her till I put the torn letters together. I begin to wish you had not asked me to do it."

"So do I. It never struck me that you would feel such extraordinary--I had almost said, such vulgar--curiosity about a worthless letter."

This roused my temper. When a young lady is told that she is vulgar, if she has any self-conceit--I mean self-respect--she feels insulted. I said something sharp in my turn. It was in the way of argument. I do not know how it may be with other young persons, I never reason so well myself as when I am angry.

"You call it a worthless letter," I said, "and yet you think it worth preserving."

"Have you nothing more to say to me than that?" he asked.

"Nothing more," I answered.

He changed again. After having looked unaccountably angry, he now looked unaccountably relieved.

"I will soon satisfy you," he said, "that I have a good reason for preserving a worthless letter. Miss Chance, my dear, is not a woman to be trusted. If she saw her advantage in making a bad use of my reply, I am afraid she would not hesitate to do it. Even if she is no longer living, I don't know into what vile hands my letter may not have fallen, or how it might be falsified for some wicked purpose. Do you see now how a correspondence may become accidentally important, though it is of no value in itself?"

I could say "Yes" to this with a safe conscience.

But there were some perplexities still left in my mind. It seemed strange that Miss Chance should (apparently) have submitted to the severity of my father's reply. "I should have thought," I said to him, "that she would have sent you another impudent letter--or perhaps have insisted on seeing you, and using her tongue instead of her pen."

"She could do neither the one nor the other, Helena. Miss Chance will never find out my address again; I have taken good care of that."

He spoke in a loud voice, with a flushed face--as if it was quite a triumph to

have prevented this woman from discovering his address. What reason could he have for being so anxious to keep her away from him? Could I venture to conclude that there was a mystery in the life of a man so blameless, so truly pious? It shocked one even to think of it.

There was a silence between us, to which the housemaid offered a welcome interruption. Dinner was ready.

He kissed me before we left the room. "One word more, Helena," he said, "and I have done. Let there be no more talk between us about Elizabeth Chance."