

CHAPTER XVII. HELENA'S DIARY.

Miss Jillgall joined us at the dinner-table, in a state of excitement, carrying a book in her hand.

I am inclined, on reflection, to suspect that she is quite clever enough to have discovered that I hate her--and that many of the aggravating things she says and does are assumed, out of retaliation, for the purpose of making me angry. That ugly face is a double face, or I am much mistaken.

To return to the dinner-table, Miss Jillgall addressed herself, with an air of playful penitence, to my father.

"Dear cousin, I hope I have not done wrong. Helena left me all by myself. When I had finished darning the curtain, I really didn't know what to do. So I opened all the bedroom doors upstairs and looked into the rooms. In the big room with two beds--oh, I am so ashamed--I found this book. Please look at the first page."

My father looked at the title-page: "Doctor Watts's Hymns. Well, Selina, what is there to be ashamed of in this?"

"Oh, no! no! It's the wrong page. Do look at the other page--the one that comes first before that one."

My patient father turned to the blank page.

"Ah," he said quietly, "my other daughter's name is written in it--the daughter whom you have not seen. Well?"

Miss Jillgall clasped her hands distractedly. "It's my ignorance I'm so ashamed of. Dear cousin, forgive me, enlighten me. I don't know how to pronounce your other daughter's name. Do you call her Euneece?"

The dinner was getting cold. I was provoked into saying: "No, we don't."

She had evidently not forgiven me for leaving her by herself. "Pardon me, Helena, when I want information I don't apply to you: I sit, as it were, at the feet of your learned father. Dear cousin, is it--"

Even my father declined to wait for his dinner any longer. "Pronounce it as

you like, Selina. Here we say Euni'ce--with the accent on the 'i' and with the final 'e' sounded: Eu-ni'-see. Let me give you some soup."

Miss Jillgall groaned. "Oh, how difficult it seems to be! Quite beyond my poor brains! I shall ask the dear girl's leave to call her Eunece. What very strong soup! Isn't it rather a waste of meat? Give me a little more, please."

I discovered another of Miss Jillgall's peculiarities. Her appetite was enormous, and her ways were greedy. You heard her eat her soup. She devoured the food on her plate with her eyes before she put it into her mouth; and she criticised our English cookery in the most impudent manner, under pretense of asking humbly how it was done. There was, however, some temporary compensation for this. We had less of her talk while she was eating her dinner.

With the removal of the cloth, she recovered the use of her tongue; and she hit on the one subject of all others which proves to be the sorest trial to my father's patience.

"And now, dear cousin, let us talk of your other daughter, our absent Eunece. I do so long to see her. When is she coming back?"

"In a few days more."

"How glad I am! And do tell me--which is she? Your oldest girl or your youngest?"

"Neither the one nor the other, Selina."

"Oh, my head! my head! This is even worse than the accent on the 'i' and the final 'e.' Stop! I am cleverer than I thought I was. You mean that the girls are twins. Are they both so exactly like each other that I shan't know which is which? What fun!"

When the subject of our ages was unluckily started at Mrs. Staveley's, I had slipped out of the difficulty easily by assuming the character of the eldest sister--an example of ready tact which my dear stupid Eunice doesn't understand. In my father's presence, it is needless to say that I kept silence, and left it to him. I was sorry to be obliged to do this. Owing to his sad state of health, he is easily irritated--especially by inquisitive strangers.

"I must leave you," he answered, without taking the slightest notice of what Miss Jillgall had said to him. "My work is waiting for me."

She stopped him on his way to the door. "Oh, tell me--can't I help you?"

"Thank you; no."

"Well--but tell me one thing. Am I right about the twins?"

"You are wrong."

Miss Jillgall's demonstrative hands flew up into the air again, and expressed the climax of astonishment by quivering over her head. "This is positively maddening," she declared. "What does it mean?"

"Take my advice, cousin. Don't attempt to find out what it means."

He left the room. Miss Jillgall appealed to me. I imitated my father's wise brevity of expression: "Sorry to disappoint you, Selina; I know no more about it than you do. Come upstairs."

Every step of the way up to the drawing-room was marked by a protest or an inquiry. Did I expect her to believe that I couldn't say which of us was the elder of the two? that I didn't really know what my father's motive was for this extraordinary mystification? that my sister and I had submitted to be robbed, as it were, of our own ages, and had not insisted on discovering which of us had come into the world first? that our friends had not put an end to this sort of thing by comparing us personally, and discovering which was the elder sister by investigation of our faces? To all this I replied: First, that I did certainly expect her to believe whatever I might say: Secondly, that what she was pleased to call the "mystification" had begun when we were both children; that habit had made it familiar to us in the course of years; and above all, that we were too fond of our good father to ask for explanations which we knew by experience would distress him: Thirdly, that friends did try to discover, by personal examination, which was the elder sister, and differed perpetually in their conclusions; also that we had amused ourselves by trying the same experiment before our looking-glasses, and that Eunice thought Helena was the oldest, and Helena thought Eunice was the oldest: Fourthly (and finally), that the Reverend Mr. Gracedieu's cousin had better drop the subject, unless she was bent on making her presence in the house unendurable to the Reverend Mr. Gracedieu himself.

I write it with a sense of humiliation; Miss Jillgall listened attentively to all I had to say--and then took me completely by surprise. This inquisitive, meddlesome, restless, impudent woman suddenly transformed herself into a

perfect model of amiability and decorum. She actually said she agreed with me, and was much obliged for my good advice!

A stupid young woman, in my place, would have discovered that this was not natural, and that Miss Jillgall was presenting herself to me in disguise, to reach some secret end of her own. I am not a stupid young woman; I ought to have had at my service penetration enough to see through and through Cousin Selina. Well! Cousin Selina was an impenetrable mystery to me.

The one thing to be done was to watch her. I was at least sly enough to take up a book, and pretend to be reading it. How contemptible!

She looked round the room, and discovered our pretty writing-table; a present to my father from his congregation. After a little consideration, she sat down to write a letter.

"When does the post go out?" she asked.

I mentioned the hour; and she began her letter. Before she could have written more than the first two or three lines, she turned round on her seat, and began talking to me.

"Do you like writing letters, my dear?"

"Yes--but then I have not many letters to write."

"Only a few friends, Helena, but those few worthy to be loved? My own case exactly. Has your father told you of my troubles? Ah, I am glad of that. It spares me the sad necessity of confessing what I have suffered. Oh, how good my friends, my new friends, were to me in that dull little Belgian town! One of them was generosity personified--ah, she had suffered, too! A vile husband who had deceived and deserted her. Oh, the men! When she heard of the loss of my little fortune, that noble creature got up a subscription for me, and went round herself to collect. Think of what I owe to her! Ought I to let another day pass without writing to my benefactress? Am I not bound in gratitude to make her happy in the knowledge of my happiness--I mean the refuge opened to me in this hospitable house?"

She twisted herself back again to the writing-table, and went on with her letter.

I have not attempted to conceal my stupidity. Let me now record a partial

recovery of my intelligence.

It was not to be denied that Miss Jillgall had discovered a good reason for writing to her friend; but I was at a loss to understand why she should have been so anxious to mention the reason. Was it possible--after the talk which had passed between us--that she had something mischievous to say in her letter, relating to my father or to me? Was she afraid I might suspect this? And had she been so communicative for the purpose of leading my suspicions astray? These were vague guesses; but, try as I might, I could arrive at no clearer view of what was passing in Miss Jillgall's mind. What would I not have given to be able to look over her shoulder, without discovery!

She finished her letter, and put the address, and closed the envelope. Then she turned round toward me again.

"Have you got a foreign postage stamp, dear?"

If I could look at nothing else, I was resolved to look at her envelope. It was only necessary to go to the study, and to apply to my father. I returned with the foreign stamp, and I stuck it on the envelope with my own hand.

There was nothing to interest me in the address, as I ought to have foreseen, if I had not been too much excited for the exercise of a little common sense. Miss Jillgall's wonderful friend was only remarkable by her ugly foreign name--MRS. TENBRUGGEN.