

## CHAPTER XXI. HELENA'S DIARY.

The day of my return marks an occasion which I am not likely to forget. Hours have passed since I came home--and my agitation still forbids the thought of repose.

As I sit at my desk I see Eunice in bed, sleeping peacefully, except when she is murmuring enjoyment in some happy dream. To what end has my sister been advancing blindfold, and (who knows?) dragging me with her, since that disastrous visit to our friends in London? Strange that there should be a leaven of superstition in my nature! Strange that I should feel fear of something--I hardly know what!

I have met somewhere (perhaps in my historical reading) with the expression: "A chain of events." Was I at the beginning of that chain, when I entered the railway carriage on my journey home?

Among the other passengers there was a young gentleman, accompanied by a lady who proved to be his sister. They were both well-bred people. The brother evidently admired me, and did his best to make himself agreeable. Time passed quickly in pleasant talk, and my vanity was flattered--and that was all. My fellow-travelers were going on to London. When the train reached our station the young lady sent her brother to buy some fruit, which she saw in the window of the refreshment-room. The first man whom he encountered on the platform was one of his friends; to whom he said something which I failed to hear. When I handed my traveling bag and my wraps to the porter, and showed myself at the carriage door, I heard the friend say: "What a charming creature!" Having nothing to conceal in a journal which I protect by a lock, I may own that the stranger's personal appearance struck me, and that what I felt this time was not flattered vanity, but gratified pride. He was young, he was remarkably handsome, he was a distinguished-looking man.

All this happened in one moment. In the moment that followed, I found myself in Eunice's arms. That odious person, Miss Jillgall, insisted on embracing me next. And then I was conscious of an indescribable feeling of surprise. Eunice presented the distinguished-looking gentleman to me as a friend of hers--Mr. Philip Dunboyne.

"I had the honor of meeting your sister," he said, "in London, at Mr. Staveley's house." He went on to speak easily and gracefully of the journey I

had taken, and of his friend who had been my fellow-traveler; and he attended us to the railway omnibus before he took his leave. I observed that Eunice had something to say to him confidentially, before they parted. This was another example of my sister's childish character; she is instantly familiar with new acquaintances, if she happens to like them. I anticipated some amusement from hearing how she had contrived to establish confidential relations with a highly-cultivated man like Mr. Dunboyne. But, while Miss Jillgall was with us, it was just as well to keep within the limits of commonplace conversation.

Before we got out of the omnibus I had, however, observed one undesirable result of my absence from home. Eunice and Miss Jillgall--the latter having, no doubt, finely flattered the former--appeared to have taken a strong liking to each other.

Two curious circumstances also caught my attention. I saw a change to, what I call self-assertion, in my sister's manner; something seemed to have raised her in her own estimation. Then, again, Miss Jillgall was not like her customary self. She had delightful moments of silence; and when Eunice asked how I liked Mr. Dunboyne, she listened to my reply with an appearance of interest in her ugly face which was quite a new revelation in my experience of my father's cousin.

These little discoveries (after what I had already observed at the railway-station) ought perhaps to have prepared me for what was to come, when my sister and I were alone in our room. But Eunice, whether she meant to do it or not, baffled my customary penetration. She looked as if she had plenty of news to tell me--with some obstacle in the way of doing it, which appeared to amuse instead of annoying her. If there is one thing more than another that I hate, it is being puzzled. I asked at once if anything remarkable had happened during Eunice's visit to London.

She smiled mischievously. "I have got a delicious surprise for you, my dear; and I do so enjoy prolonging it. Tell me, Helena, what did you propose we should both do when we found ourselves at home again?"

My memory was at fault. Eunice's good spirits became absolutely boisterous. She called out: "Catch!" and tossed her journal into my hands, across the whole length of the room. "We were to read each other's diaries," she said. "There is mine to begin with."

Innocent of any suspicion of the true state of affairs, I began the reading of Eunice's journal. If I had not seen the familiar handwriting, nothing would

have induced me to believe that a girl brought up in a pious household, the well-beloved daughter of a distinguished Congregational Minister, could have written that shameless record of passions unknown to young ladies in respectable English life. What to say, what to do, when I had closed the book, was more than I felt myself equal to decide. My wretched sister spared me the anxiety which I might otherwise have felt. It was she who first opened her lips, after the silence that had fallen on us while I was reading. These were literally the words that she said:

"My darling, why don't you congratulate me?"

No argument could have persuaded me, as this persuaded me, that all sisterly remonstrance on my part would be completely thrown away.

"My dear Eunice," I said, "let me beg you to excuse me. I am waiting--"

There she interrupted me--and, oh, in what an impudent manner! She took my chin between her finger and thumb, and lifted my downcast face, and looked at me with an appearance of eager expectation which I was quite at a loss to understand.

"You have been away from home, too," she said. "Do I see in this serious face some astonishing news waiting to overpower me? Have you found a sweetheart? Are you engaged to be married?"

I only put her hand away from me, and advised her to return to her chair. This perfectly harmless proceeding seemed absolutely to frighten her.

"Oh, my dear," she burst out, "surely you are not jealous of me?"

There was but one possible reply to this: I laughed at it. Is Eunice's head turned? She kissed me!

"Now you laugh," she said, "I begin to understand you again; I ought to have known that you are superior to jealousy. But, do tell me, would it be so very wonderful if other girls found something to envy in my good luck? Just think of it! Such a handsome man, such an agreeable man, such a clever man, such a rich man--and, not the least of his merits, by-the-by, a man who admires You. Come! if you won't congratulate me, congratulate yourself on having such a brother-in-law in prospect!"

Her head was turned. I drew the poor soul's attention compassionately to what I had said a moment since.

"Pardon me, dear, for reminding you that I have not yet refused to offer my congratulations. I only told you I was waiting."

"For what?"

"Waiting, of course, to hear what my father thinks of your wonderful good luck."

This explanation, offered with the kindest intentions, produced another change in my very variable sister. I had extinguished her good spirits as I might have extinguished a light. She sat down by me, and sighed in the saddest manner. The heart must be hard indeed which can resist the distress of a person who is dear to us. I put my arm round her; she was becoming once more the Eunice whom I so dearly loved.

"My poor child," I said, "don't distress yourself by speaking of it; I understand. Your father objects to your marrying Mr. Dunboyne."

She shook her head. "I can't exactly say, Helena, that papa does that. He only behaves very strangely."

"Am I indiscreet, dear, if I ask in what way father's behavior has surprised you?"

She was quite willing to enlighten me. It was a simple little story which, to my mind, sufficiently explained the strange behavior that had puzzled my unfortunate sister.

There could indeed be no doubt that my father considered Eunice far too childish in character, as yet, to undertake the duties of matrimony. But, with his customary delicacy, and dread of causing distress to others, he had deferred the disagreeable duty of communicating his opinion to Mr. Dunboyne. The adverse decision must, however, be sooner or later announced; and he had arranged to inflict disappointment, as tenderly as might be, at his own table.

Considerately leaving Eunice in the enjoyment of any vain hopes which she may have founded on the event of the dinner-party, I passed the evening until supper-time came in the study with my father.

Our talk was mainly devoted to the worthy people with whom I had been staying, and whose new schools I had helped to found. Not a word was said

relating to my sister, or to Mr. Dunboyne. Poor father looked so sadly weary and ill that I ventured, after what the doctor had said to Eunice, to hint at the value of rest and change of scene to an overworked man. Oh, dear me, he frowned, and waved the subject away from him impatiently, with a wan, pale hand.

After supper, I made an unpleasant discovery. Not having completely finished the unpacking of my boxes, I left Miss Jillgall and Eunice in the drawing-room, and went upstairs. In half an hour I returned, and found the room empty. What had become of them? It was a fine moonlight night; I stepped into the back drawing-room, and looked out of the window. There they were, walking arm-in-arm with their heads close together, deep in talk. With my knowledge of Miss Jillgall, I call this a bad sign.

An odd thought has just come to me. I wonder what might have happened, if I had been visiting at Mrs. Staveley's, instead of Eunice, and if Mr. Dunboyne had seen me first.

Absurd! if I was not too tired to do anything more, those last lines should be scratched out.