

CHAPTER XXIV. EUNICE'S DIARY.

On entering the schoolroom we lost our gayety, all in a moment. Something unpleasant had evidently happened.

Two of the eldest girls were sitting together in a corner, separated from the rest, and looking most wickedly sulky. The teachers were at the other end of the room, appearing to be ill at ease. And there, standing in the midst of them, with his face flushed and his eyes angry--there was papa, sadly unlike his gentle self in the days of his health and happiness. On former occasions, when the exercise of his authority was required in the school, his forbearing temper always set things right. When I saw him now, I thought of what the doctor had said of his health, on my way home from the station.

Papa advanced to us the moment we showed ourselves at the door.

He shook hands--cordially shook hands--with Philip. It was delightful to see him, delightful to hear him say: "Pray don't suppose, Mr. Dunboyne, that you are intruding; remain with us by all means if you like." Then he spoke to Helena and to me, still excited, still not like himself: "You couldn't have come here, my dears, at a time when your presence was more urgently needed." He turned to the teachers. "Tell my daughters what has happened; tell them why they see me here--shocked and distressed, I don't deny it."

We now heard that the two girls in disgrace had broken the rules, and in such a manner as to deserve severe punishment.

One of them had been discovered hiding a novel in her desk. The other had misbehaved herself more seriously still--she had gone to the theater. Instead of expressing any regret, they had actually dared to complain of having to learn papa's improved catechism. They had even accused him of treating them with severity, because they were poor girls brought up on charity. "If we had been young ladies," they were audacious enough to say, "more indulgence would have been shown to us; we should have been allowed to read stories and to see plays."

All this time I had been asking myself what papa meant, when he told us we could not have come to the schoolroom at a better time. His meaning now appeared. When he spoke to the offending girls, he pointed to Helena and to me.

"Here are my daughters," he said. "You will not deny that they are young ladies. Now listen. They shall tell you themselves whether my rules make any difference between them and you. Helena! Eunice! do I allow you to read novels? do I allow you to go to the play?"

We said, "No"--and hoped it was over. But he had not done yet. He turned to Helena.

"Answer some of the questions," he went on, "from my Manual of Christian Obligation, which the girls call my catechism." He asked one of the questions: "If you are told to do unto others as you would they should do unto you, and if you find a difficulty in obeying that Divine Precept, what does your duty require?"

It is my belief that Helena has the materials in her for making another Joan of Arc. She rose, and answered without the slightest sign of timidity: "My duty requires me to go to the minister, and to seek for advice and encouragement."

"And if these fail?"

"Then I am to remember that my pastor is my friend. He claims no priestly authority or priestly infallibility. He is my fellow-Christian who loves me. He will tell me how he has himself failed; how he has struggled against himself; and what a blessed reward has followed his victory--a purified heart, a peaceful mind."

Then papa released my sister, after she had only repeated two out of all the answers in Christian Obligation, which we first began to learn when we were children. He then addressed himself again to the girls.

"Is what you have just heard a part of my catechism? Has my daughter been excused from repeating it because she is a young lady? Where is the difference between the religious education which is given to my own child, and that given to you?"

The wretched girls still sat silent and obstinate, with their heads down. I tremble again as I write of what happened next. Papa fixed his eyes on me. He said, out loud: "Eunice!"--and waited for me to rise and answer, as my sister had done.

It was entirely beyond my power to get on my feet.

Philip had (innocently, I am sure) discouraged me; I saw displeasure, I saw contempt in his face. There was a dead silence in the room. Everybody looked at me. My heart beat furiously, my hands turned cold, the questions and answers in Christian Obligation all left my memory together. I looked imploringly at papa.

For the first time in his life, he was hard on me. His eyes were as angry as ever; they showed me no mercy. Oh, what had come to me? what evil spirit possessed me? I felt resentment; horrid, undutiful resentment, at being treated in this cruel way. My fists clinched themselves in my lap, my face felt as hot as fire. Instead of asking my father to excuse me, I said: "I can't do it." He was astounded, as well he might be. I went on from bad to worse. I said: "I won't do it."

He stooped over me; he whispered: "I am going to ask you something; I insist on your answering, Yes or No." He raised his voice, and drew himself back so that they could all see me.

"Have you been taught like your sister?" he asked. "Has the catechism that has been her religious lesson, for all her life, been your religious lesson, for all your life, too?"

I said: "Yes"--and I was in such a rage that I said it out loud. If Philip had handed me his cane, and had advised me to give the young hussies who were answerable for this dreadful state of things a good beating, I believe I should have done it. Papa turned his back on me and offered the girls a last chance: "Do you feel sorry for what you have done? Do you ask to be forgiven?"

Neither the one nor the other answered him. He called across the room to the teachers: "Those two pupils are expelled the school."

Both the women looked horrified. The elder of the two approached him, and tried to plead for a milder sentence. He answered in one stern word: "Silence!"--and left the schoolroom, without even a passing bow to Philip. And this, after he had cordially shaken hands with my poor dear, not half an hour before.

I ought to have made affectionate allowance for his nervous miseries; I ought to have run after him, and begged his pardon. There must be something wrong, I am afraid, in girls loving anybody but their fathers. When Helena led the way out by another door, I ran after Philip; and I asked him to forgive me.

I don't know what I said; it was all confusion. The fear of having forfeited his fondness must, I suppose, have shaken my mind. I remember entreating Helena to say a kind word for me. She was so clever, she had behaved so well, she had deserved that Philip should listen to her. "Oh," I cried out to him desperately, "what must you think of me?"

"I will tell you what I think of you," he said. "It is your father who is in fault, Eunice--not you. Nothing could have been in worse taste than his management of that trumpery affair in the schoolroom; it was a complete mistake from beginning to end. Make your mind easy; I don't blame You."

"Are you, really and truly, as fond of me as ever?"

"Yes, to be sure!"

Helena seemed to be hardly as much interested in this happy ending of my anxieties as I might have anticipated. She walked on by herself. Perhaps she was thinking of poor papa's strange outbreak of excitement, and grieving over it.

We had only a little way to walk, before we passed the door of Philip's hotel. He had not yet received the expected letter from his father--the cruel letter which might recall him to Ireland. It was then the hour of delivery by our second post; he went to look at the letter-rack in the hall. Helena saw that I was anxious. She was as kind again as ever; she consented to wait with me for Philip, at the door.

He came out to us with an open letter in his hand.

"From my father, at last," he said--and gave me the letter to read. It only contained these few lines:

"Do not be alarmed, my dear boy, at the change for the worse in my handwriting. I am suffering for my devotion to the studious habits of a lifetime: my right hand is attacked by the malady called Writer's Cramp. The doctor here can do nothing. He tells me of some foreign woman, mentioned in his newspaper, who cures nervous derangements of all kinds by hand-rubbing, and who is coming to London. When you next hear from me, I may be in London too."--There the letter ended.

Of course I knew who the foreign woman, mentioned in the newspaper, was.

But what does Miss Jillgall's friend matter to me? The one important thing is, that Philip has not been called back to Ireland. Here is a fortunate circumstance, which perhaps means more good luck. I may be Mrs. Philip Dunboyne before the year is out.