

CHAPTER XXV. HELENA'S DIARY.

They all notice at home that I am looking worn and haggard. That hideous old maid, Miss Jillgall, had her malicious welcome ready for me when we met at breakfast this morning: "Dear Helena, what has become of your beauty? One would think you had left it in your room!" Poor deluded Eunice showed her sisterly sympathy: "Don't joke about it, Selina: can't you see that Helena is ill?"

I have been ill; ill of my own wickedness.

But the recovery to my tranquillity will bring with it the recovery of my good looks. My fatal passion for Philip promises to be the utter destruction of everything that is good in me. Well! what is good in me may not be worth keeping. There is a fate in these things. If I am destined to rob Eunice of the one dear object of her love and hope--how can I resist? The one kind thing I can do is to keep her in ignorance of what is coming, by acts of affectionate deceit.

Besides, if she suffers, I suffer too. In the length and breadth of England, I doubt if there is a much more wicked young woman to be found than myself. Is it nothing to feel that, and to endure it as I do?

Upon my word, there is no excuse for me!

Is this sheer impudence? No; it is the bent of my nature. I have a tendency to self-examination, accompanied by one merit--I don't spare myself.

There are excuses for Eunice. She lives in a fools' paradise; and she sees in her lover a radiant creature, shining in the halo thrown over him by her own self-delusion. Nothing of this sort is to be said for me. I see Philip as he is. My penetration looks into the lowest depths of his character--when I am not in his company. There seems to be a foundation of good, somewhere in his nature. He despises and hates himself (he has confessed it to me), when Eunice is with him--still believing in her false sweetheart. But how long do these better influences last? I have only to show myself, in my sister's absence, and Philip is mine body and soul. His vanity and his weakness take possession of him the moment he sees my face. He is one of those men--even in my little experience I have met with them--who are born to be led by women. If Eunice had possessed my strength of character, he would have been true to her for life.

Ought I not, in justice to myself, to have lifted my heart high above the reach of such a creature as this? Certainly I ought! I know it, I feel it. And yet, there is some fascination in having him which I am absolutely unable to resist.

What, I ask myself, has fed the new flame which is burning in me? Did it begin with gratified pride? I might well feel proud when I found myself admired by a man of his beauty, set off by such manners and such accomplishments as his. Or, has the growth of this masterful feeling been encouraged by the envy and jealousy stirred in me, when I found Eunice (my inferior in every respect) distinguished by the devotion of a handsome lover, and having a brilliant marriage in view--while I was left neglected, with no prospect of changing my title from Miss to Mrs.? Vain inquiries! My wicked heart seems to have secrets of its own, and to keep them a mystery to me.

What has become of my excellent education? I don't care to inquire; I have got beyond the reach of good books and religious examples. Among my other blamable actions there may now be reckoned disobedience to my father. I have been reading novels in secret.

At first I tried some of the famous English works, published at a price within the reach of small purses. Very well written, no doubt--but with one unpardonable drawback, so far as I am concerned. Our celebrated native authors address themselves to good people, or to penitent people who want to be made good; not to wicked readers like me.

Arriving at this conclusion, I tried another experiment. In a small bookseller's shop I discovered some cheap translations of French novels. Here, I found what I wanted--sympathy with sin. Here, there was opened to me a new world inhabited entirely by unrepentant people; the magnificent women diabolically beautiful; the satanic men dead to every sense of virtue, and alive--perhaps rather dirtily alive--to the splendid fascinations of crime. I know now that Love is above everything but itself. Love is the one law that we are bound to obey. How deep! how consoling! how admirably true! The novelists of England have reason indeed to hide their heads before the novelists of France. All that I have felt, and have written here, is inspired by these wonderful authors.

I have relieved my mind, and may now return to the business of my diary--the record of domestic events.

An overwhelming disappointment has fallen on Eunice. Our dinner-party

has been put off.

The state of father's health is answerable for this change in our arrangements. That wretched scene at the school, complicated by my sister's undutiful behavior at the time, so seriously excited him that he passed a sleepless night, and kept his bedroom throughout the day. Eunice's total want of discretion added, no doubt, to his sufferings: she rudely intruded on him to express her regret and to ask his pardon. Having carried her point, she was at leisure to come to me, and to ask (how amazingly simple of her!) what she and Philip were to do next.

"We had arranged it all so nicely," the poor wretch began. "Philip was to have been so clever and agreeable at dinner, and was to have chosen his time so very discreetly, that papa would have been ready to listen to anything he said. Oh, we should have succeeded; I haven't a doubt of it! Our only hope, Helena, is in you. What are we to do now?"

"Wait," I answered.

"Wait?" she repeated, hotly. "Is my heart to be broken? and, what is more cruel still, is Philip to be disappointed? I expected something more sensible, my dear, from you. What possible reason can there be for waiting?"

The reason--if I could only have mentioned it--was beyond dispute. I wanted time to quiet Philip's uneasy conscience, and to harden his weak mind against outbursts of violence, on Eunice's part, which would certainly exhibit themselves when she found that she had lost her lover, and lost him to me. In the meanwhile, I had to produce my reason for advising her to wait. It was easily done. I reminded her of the irritable condition of our father's nerves, and gave it as my opinion that he would certainly say No, if she was unwise enough to excite him on the subject of Philip, in his present frame of mind.

These unanswerable considerations seemed to produce the right effect on her. "I suppose you know best," was all she said. And then she left me.

I let her go without feeling any distrust of this act of submission on her part; it was such a common experience, in my life, to find my sister guiding herself by my advice. But experience is not always to be trusted. Events soon showed that I had failed to estimate Eunice's resources of obstinacy and cunning at their true value.

Half an hour later I heard the street door closed, and looked out of the

window. Miss Jillgall was leaving the house; no one was with her. My dislike of this person led me astray once more. I ought to have suspected her of being bent on some mischievous errand, and to have devised some means of putting my suspicions to the test. I did nothing of the kind. In the moment when I turned my head away from the window, Miss Jillgall was a person forgotten--and I was a person who had made a serious mistake.