

CHAPTER XXVI. HELENA'S DIARY.

The event of to-day began with the delivery of a message summoning me to my father's study. He had decided--too hastily, as I feared--that he was sufficiently recovered to resume his usual employments. I was writing to his dictation, when we were interrupted. Maria announced a visit from Mr. Dunboyne.

Hitherto Philip had been content to send one of the servants of the hotel to make inquiry after Mr. Gracedieu's health. Why had he now called personally? Noticing that father seemed to be annoyed, I tried to make an opportunity of receiving Philip myself. "Let me see him," I suggested; "I can easily say you are engaged."

Very unwillingly, as it was easy to see, my father declined to allow this. "Mr. Dunboyne's visit pays me a compliment," he said; "and I must receive him." I made a show of leaving the room, and was called back to my chair. "This is not a private interview, Helena; stay where you are."

Philip came in--handsomer than ever, beautifully dressed--and paid his respects to my father with his customary grace. He was too well-bred to allow any visible signs of embarrassment to escape him. But when he shook hands with me, I felt a little trembling in his fingers, through the delicate gloves which fitted him like a second skin. Was it the true object of his visit to try the experiment designed by Eunice and himself, and deferred by the postponement of our dinner-party? Impossible surely that my sister could have practiced on his weakness, and persuaded him to return to his first love! I waited, in breathless interest, for his next words. They were not worth listening to. Oh, the poor commonplace creature!

"I am glad, Mr. Gracedieu, to see that you are well enough to be in your study again," he said. The writing materials on the table attracted his attention. "Am I one of the idle people," he asked, with his charming smile, "who are always interrupting useful employment?"

He spoke to my father, and he was answered by my father. Not once had he addressed a word to me--no, not even when we shook hands. I was angry enough to force him into taking some notice of me, and to make an attempt to confuse him at the same time.

"Have you seen my sister?" I asked.

"No."

It was the shortest reply that he could choose. Having flung it at me, he still persisted in looking at my father and speaking to my father: "Do you think of trying change of air, Mr. Gracedieu, when you feel strong enough to travel?"

"My duties keep me here," father answered; "and I cannot honestly say that I enjoy traveling. I dislike manners and customs that are strange to me; I don't find that hotels reward me for giving up the comforts of my own house. How do you find the hotel here?"

"I submit to the hotel, sir. They are sad savages in the kitchen; they put mushroom ketchup into their soup, and mustard and cayenne pepper into their salads. I am half-starved at dinner-time, but I don't complain."

Every word he said was an offense to me. With or without reason, I attacked him again.

"I have heard you acknowledge that the landlord and landlady are very obliging people," I said. "Why don't you ask them to let you make your own soup and mix your own salad?"

I wondered whether I should succeed in attracting his notice, after this. Even in these private pages, my self-esteem finds it hard to confess what happened. I succeeded in reminding Philip that he had his reasons for requesting me to leave the room.

"Will you excuse me, Miss Helena," he said, "if I ask leave to speak to Mr. Gracedieu in private?"

The right thing for me to do was, let me hope, the thing that I did. I rose, and waited to see if my father would interfere. He looked at Philip with suspicion in his face, as well as surprise. "May I ask," he said, coldly, "what is the object of the interview?"

"Certainly," Philip answered, "when we are alone." This cool reply placed my father between two alternatives; he must either give way, or be guilty of an act of rudeness to a guest in his own house. The choice reserved for me was narrower still--I had to decide between being told to go, or going of my own accord. Of course, I left them together.

The door which communicated with the next room was pulled to, but not closed. On the other side of it, I found Eunice.

"Listening!" I said, in a whisper.

"Yes," she whispered back. "You listen, too!"

I was so indignant with Philip, and so seriously interested in what was going on in the study, that I yielded to temptation. We both degraded ourselves. We both listened.

Eunice's base lover spoke first. Judging by the change in his voice, he must have seen something in my father's face that daunted him. Eunice heard it, too. "He's getting nervous," she whispered; "he'll forget to say the right thing at the right time."

"Mr. Gracedieu," Philip began, "I wish to speak to you--"

Father interrupted him: "We are alone now, Mr. Dunboyne. I want to know why you consult me in private?"

"I am anxious to consult you, sir, on a subject--"

"On what subject? Any religious difficulty?"

"No."

"Anything I can do for you in the town?"

"Not at all. If you will only allow me--"

"I am still waiting, sir, to know what it is about."

Philip's voice suddenly became an angry voice. "Once for all, Mr. Gracedieu," he said, "will you let me speak? It's about your daughter--"

"No more of it, Mr. Dunboyne!" (My father was now as loud as Philip.) "I don't desire to hold a private conversation with you on the subject of my daughter."

"If you have any personal objection to me, sir, be so good as to state it plainly."

"You have no right to ask me to do that."

"You refuse to do it?"

"Positively."

"You are not very civil, Mr. Gracedieu."

"If I speak without ceremony, Mr. Dunboyne, you have yourself to thank for it."

Philip replied to this in a tone of savage irony. "You are a minister of religion, and you are an old man. Two privileges--and you presume on them both. Good-morning."

I drew back into a corner, just in time to escape discovery in the character of a listener. Eunice never moved. When Philip dashed into the room, banging the door after him, she threw herself impulsively on his breast: "Oh, Philip! Philip! what have you done? Why didn't you keep your temper?"

"Did you hear what your father said to me?" he asked.

"Yes, dear; but you ought to have controlled yourself--you ought, indeed, for my sake."

Her arms were still round him. It struck me that he felt her influence. "If you wish me to recover myself," he said, gently, "you had better let me go."

"Oh, how cruel, Philip, to leave me when I am so wretched! Why do you want to go?"

"You told me just now what I ought to do," he answered, still restraining himself. "If I am to get the better of my temper, I must be left alone."

"I never said anything about your temper, darling."

"Didn't you tell me to control myself?"

"Oh, yes! Go back to Papa, and beg him to forgive you."

"I'll see him damned first!"

If ever a stupid girl deserved such an answer as this, the girl was my sister. I

had hitherto (with some difficulty) refrained from interfering. But when Eunice tried to follow Philip out of the house, I could hesitate no longer; I held her back. "You fool," I said; "haven't you made mischief enough already?"

"What am I to do?" she burst out, helplessly.

"Do what I told you to do yesterday--wait."

Before she could reply, or I could say anything more, the door that led to the landing was opened softly and slyly, and Miss Jillgall peeped in. Eunice instantly left me, and ran to the meddling old maid. They whispered to each other. Miss Jillgall's skinny arm encircled my sister's waist; they disappeared together.

I was only too glad to get rid of them both, and to take the opportunity of writing to Philip. I insisted on an explanation of his conduct while I was in the study--to be given within an hour's time, at a place which I appointed. "You are not to attempt to justify yourself in writing," I added in conclusion. "Let your reply merely inform me if you can keep the appointment. The rest, when we meet."

Maria took the letter to the hotel, with instructions to wait.

Philip's reply reached me without delay. It pledged him to justify himself as I had desired, and to keep the appointment. My own belief is that the event of to-day will decide his future and mine.