

Chapter III. Mrs. Presty Changes Her Mind.

The two ladies were alone.

Widely as the lot in life of one differed from the lot in life of the other, they presented a contrast in personal appearance which was more remarkable still. In the prime of life, tall and fair--the beauty of her delicate complexion and her brilliant blue eyes rivaled by the charm of a figure which had arrived at its mature perfection of development--Mrs. Linley sat side by side with a frail little dark-eyed creature, thin and pale, whose wasted face bore patient witness to the three cruelest privations under which youth can suffer--want of fresh air, want of nourishment, and want of kindness. The gentle mistress of the house wondered sadly if this lost child of misfortune was capable of seeing the brighter prospect before her that promised enjoyment of a happier life to come.

"I was afraid to disturb you while you were resting," Mrs. Linley said. "Let me hope that my housekeeper has done what I might have done myself, if I had seen you when you arrived."

"The housekeeper has been all that is good and kind to me, madam."

"Don't call me 'madam'; it sounds so formal--call me 'Mrs. Linley.' You must not think of beginning to teach Kitty till you feel stronger and better. I see but too plainly that you have not been happy. Don't think of your past life, or speak of your past life."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Linley; my past life is my one excuse for having ventured to come into this house."

"In what way, my dear?"

At the moment when that question was put, the closed curtains which separated the breakfast-room from the library were softly parted in the middle. A keen old face, strongly marked by curiosity and distrust, peeped through--eyed the governess with stern scrutiny--and retired again into hiding.

The introduction of a stranger (without references) into the intimacy of the family circle was, as Mrs. Presty viewed it, a crisis in domestic history. Conscience, with its customary elasticity, adapted itself to the emergency,

and Linley's mother-in-law stole information behind the curtain--in Linley's best interests, it is quite needless to say.

The talk of the two ladies went on, without a suspicion on either side that it was overheard by a third person.

Sydney explained herself.

"If I had led a happier life," she said, "I might have been able to resist Mr. Linley's kindness. I concealed nothing from him. He knew that I had no friends to speak for me; he knew that I had been dismissed from my employment at the school. Oh, Mrs. Linley, everything I said which would have made other people suspicious of me made him feel for me! I began to wonder whether he was an angel or a man. If he had not prevented it, I should have fallen on my knees before him. Hard looks and hard words I could have endured patiently, but I had not seen a kind look, I had not heard a kind word, for more years than I can reckon up. That is all I can say for myself; I leave the rest to your mercy."

"Say my sympathy," Mrs. Linley answered, "and you need say no more.. But there is one thing I should like to know. You have not spoken to me of your mother. Have you lost both your parents?"

"No."

"Then you were brought up by your mother?"

"Yes."

"You surely had some experience of kindness when you were a child?"

A third short answer would have been no very grateful return for Mrs. Linley's kindness. Sydney had no choice but to say plainly what her experience of her mother had been.

"Are there such women in the world!" Mrs. Linley exclaimed. "Where is your mother now?"

"In America--I think."

"You think?"

"My mother married again," said Sydney. "She went to America with her

husband and my little brother, six years ago."

"And left you behind?"

"Yes."

"And has she never written to you?"

"Never."

This time, Mrs. Linley kept silence; not without an effort. Thinking of Sydney's mother--and for one morbid moment seeing her own little darling in Sydney's place--she was afraid to trust herself to speak while the first impression was vividly present to her mind.

"I will only hope," she replied, after waiting a little, "that some kind person pitied and helped you when you were deserted. Any change must have been for the better after that. Who took charge of you?"

"My mother's sister took charge of me, an elder sister, who kept a school. The time when I was most unhappy was the time when my aunt began to teach me. 'If you don't want to be beaten, and kept on bread and water,' she said, 'learn, you ugly little wretch, and be quick about it.'"

"Did she speak in that shameful way to the other girls?"

"Oh, no! I was taken into her school for nothing, and, young as I was, I was expected to earn my food and shelter by being fit to teach the lowest class. The girls hated me. It was such a wretched life that I hardly like to speak of it now. I ran away, and I was caught, and severely punished. When I grew older and wiser, I tried to find some other employment for myself. The elder girls bought penny journals that published stories. They were left about now and then in the bedrooms. I read the stories when I had the chance. Even my ignorance discovered how feeble and foolish they were. They encouraged me to try if I could write a story myself; I couldn't do worse, and I might do better. I sent my manuscript to the editor. It was accepted and printed--but when I wrote and asked him if he would pay me something for it, he refused. Dozens of ladies, he said, wrote stories for him for nothing. It didn't matter what the stories were. Anything would do for his readers, so long as the characters were lords and ladies, and there was plenty of love in it. My next attempt to get away from the school ended in another disappointment. A poor old man, who had once been an actor, used to come to us twice a week, and get a few shillings by teaching the girls to read aloud. He was called

'Professor of English Literature,' and he taught out of a ragged book of verses which smelled of his pipe. I learned one of the pieces and repeated it to him, and asked if there was any hope of my being able to go on the stage. He was very kind; he told me the truth. 'My dear, you have no dramatic ability; God forbid you should go on the stage.' I went back again to the penny journals, and tried a new editor. He seemed to have more money than the other one; or perhaps he was kinder. I got ten shillings from him for my story. With that money I made my last attempt--I advertised for a situation as governess. If Mr. Linley had not seen my advertisement, I might have starved in the streets. When my aunt heard of it, she insisted on my begging her pardon before the whole school. Do girls get half maddened by persecution? If they do, I think I must have been one of those girls. I refused to beg pardon; and I was dismissed from my situation without a character. Will you think me very foolish? I shut my eyes again, when I woke in my delicious bed to-day. I was afraid that the room, and everything in it, was a dream." She looked round, and started to her feet. "Oh, here's a lady! Shall I go away?"

The curtains hanging over the entrance to the library were opened for the second time. With composure and dignity, the lady who had startled Sydney entered the room.

"Have you been reading in the library?" Mrs. Linley asked. And Mrs. Presty answered: "No, Catherine; I have been listening."

Mrs. Linley looked at her mother; her lovely complexion reddened with a deep blush.

"Introduce me to Miss Westerfield," Mrs. Presty proceeded, as coolly as ever.

Mrs. Linley showed some hesitation. What would the governess think of her mother? Perfectly careless of what the governess might think, Mrs. Presty crossed the room and introduced herself.

"Miss Westerfield, I am Mrs. Linley's mother. And I am, in one respect, a remarkable person. When I form an opinion and find it's the opinion of a fool, I am not in the least ashamed to change my mind. I have changed my mind about you. Shake hands."

Sydney respectfully obeyed.

"Sit down again." Sydney returned to her chair.

"I had the worst possible opinion of you," Mrs. Presty resumed, "before I had the pleasure of listening on the other side of the curtain. It has been my good fortune--what's your Christian name? Did I hear it? or have I forgotten it? 'Sydney,' eh? Very well. I was about to say, Sydney, that it has been my good fortune to be intimately associated, in early life, with two remarkable characters. Husbands of mine, in short, whose influence over me has, I am proud to say, set death and burial at defiance. Between them they have made my mind the mind of a man. I judge for myself. The opinions of others (when they don't happen to agree with mine) I regard as chaff to be scattered to the winds. No, Catherine, I am not wandering. I am pointing out to a young person, who has her way to make in the world, the vast importance, on certain occasions, of possessing an independent mind. If I had been ashamed to listen behind those curtains, there is no injury that my stupid prejudices might not have inflicted on this unfortunate girl. As it is, I have heard her story, and I do her justice. Count on me, Sydney, as your friend, and now get up again. My grandchild (never accustomed to wait for anything since the day when she was born) is waiting dinner for you. She is at this moment shouting for her governess, as King Richard (I am a great reader of Shakespeare) once shouted for his horse. The maid (you will recognize her as a stout person suffering under tight stays) is waiting outside to show you the way to the nursery. Au revoir. Stop! I should like to judge the purity of your French accent. Say 'au revoir' to me. Thank you.--Weak in her French, Catherine," Mrs. Presty pronounced, when the door had closed on the governess; "but what can you expect, poor wretch, after such a life as she has led? Now we are alone, I have a word of advice for your private ear. We have much to anticipate from Miss Westerfield that is pleasant and encouraging. But I don't conceal it from myself or from you, we have also something to fear."

"To fear?" Mrs. Linley repeated. "I don't understand you."

"Never mind, Catherine, whether you understand me or not. I want more information. Tell me what your husband said to you about this young lady?"

Wondering at the demon of curiosity which appeared to possess her mother, Mrs. Linley obeyed. Listening throughout with the closest attention, Mrs. Presty reckoned up the items of information, and pointed the moral to be drawn from them by worldly experience.

"First obstacle in the way of her moral development, her father--tried, found guilty, and dying in prison. Second obstacle, her mother--an unnatural wretch who neglected and deserted her own flesh and blood. Third obstacle, her mother's sister--being her mother over again in an aggravated form.

People who only look at the surface of things might ask what we gain by investigating Miss Westerfield's past life. We gain this: we know what to expect of Miss Westerfield in the future."

"I for one," Mrs. Linley interposed, "expect everything that is good and true."

"Say she's naturally an angel," Mrs. Presty answered; "and I won't contradict you. But do pray hear how my experience looks at it. I remember what a life she has led, and I ask myself if any human creature could have suffered as that girl has suffered without being damaged by it. Among those damnable people--I beg your pardon, my dear; Mr. Norman sometimes used strong language, and it breaks out of me now and then--the good qualities of that unfortunate young person can not have always resisted the horrid temptations and contaminations about her. Hundreds of times she must have had deceit forced on her; she must have lied, through ungovernable fear; she must have been left (at a critical time in her life, mind!) with no more warning against the insidious advances of the passions than--than--I'm repeating what Mr. Presty said of a niece of his own, who went to a bad school at Paris; and I don't quite remember what comparisons that eloquent man used when he was excited. But I know what I mean. I like Miss Westerfield; I believe Miss Westerfield will come out well in the end. But I don't forget that she is going to lead a new life here--a life of luxury, my dear; a life of ease and health and happiness--and God only knows what evil seed sown in her, in her past life, may not spring up under new influences. I tell you we must be careful; I tell you we must keep our eyes open. And so much the better for Her. And so much the better for Us."

Mrs. Presty's wise and wary advice (presented unfavorably, it must be owned, through her inveterately quaint way of expressing herself) failed to produce the right impression on her daughter's mind. Mrs. Linley replied in the tone of a person who was unaffectedly shocked.

"Oh, mamma, I never knew you so unjust before! You can't have heard all that Miss Westerfield said to me. You don't know her, as I know her. So patient, so forgiving, so grateful to Herbert."

"So grateful to Herbert." Mrs. Presty looked at her daughter in silent surprise. There could be no doubt about it; Mrs. Linley failed entirely to see any possibilities of future danger in the grateful feeling of her sensitive governess toward her handsome husband. At this exhibition of simplicity, the old lady's last reserves of endurance gave way: she rose to go. "You have an excellent heart, Catherine," she remarked; "but as for your head--"

"Well, and what of my head?"

"It's always beautifully dressed, my dear, by your maid." With that parting shot, Mrs. Presty took her departure by way of the library. Almost at the same moment, the door of the breakfast-room was opened. A young man advanced, and shook hands cordially with Mrs. Linley.