

Chapter VIII. Mrs. Presty Makes a Discovery.

The dinner-party had come to an end; the neighbors had taken their departure; and the ladies at Mount Morven had retired for the night.

On the way to her room Mrs. Presty knocked at her daughter's door. "I want to speak to you, Catherine. Are you in bed?"

"No, mamma. Come in."

Robed in a dressing-gown of delicately-mingled white and blue, and luxuriously accommodated on the softest pillows that could be placed in an armchair, Mrs. Linley was meditating on the events of the evening. "This has been the most successful party we have ever given," she said to her mother. "And did you notice how charmingly pretty Miss Westerfield looked in her new dress?"

"It's about that girl I want to speak to you," Mrs. Presty answered, severely. "I had a higher opinion of her when she first came here than I have now."

Mrs. Linley pointed to an open door, communicating with a second and smaller bed-chamber. "Not quite so loud," she answered, "or you might wake Kitty. What has Miss Westerfield done to forfeit your good opinion?"

Discreet Mrs. Presty asked leave to return to the subject at a future opportunity.

"I will merely allude now," she said, "to a change for the worse in your governess, which you might have noticed when she left the drawing-room this evening. She had a word or two with Herbert at the door; and she left him looking as black as thunder."

Mrs. Linley laid herself back on her pillows and burst out laughing. "Black as thunder? Poor little Sydney, what a ridiculous description of her! I beg your pardon, mamma; don't be offended."

"On the contrary, my dear, I am agreeably surprised. Your poor father--a man of remarkable judgment on most subjects--never thought much of your intelligence. He appears to have been wrong; you have evidently inherited some of my sense of humor. However, that is not what I wanted to say; I am the bearer of good news. When we find it necessary to get rid of Miss

Westerfield--"

Mrs. Linley's indignation expressed itself by a look which, for the moment at least, reduced her mother to silence. Always equal to the occasion, however, Mrs. Presty's face assumed an expression of innocent amazement, which would have produced a round of applause on the stage. "What have I said to make you angry?" she inquired. "Surely, my dear, you and your husband are extraordinary people."

"Do you mean to tell me, mamma, that you have said to Herbert what you said just now to me?"

"Certainly. I mentioned it to Herbert in the course of the evening. He was excessively rude. He said: 'Tell Mrs. MacEdwin to mind her own business--and set her the example yourself.'"

Mrs. Linley returned her mother's look of amazement, without her mother's eye for dramatic effect. "What has Mrs. MacEdwin to do with it?" she asked.

"If you will only let me speak, Catherine, I shall be happy to explain myself. You saw Mrs. MacEdwin talking to me at the party. That good lady's head--a feeble head, as all her friends admit--has been completely turned by Miss Westerfield. 'The first duty of a governess' (this foolish woman said to me) 'is to win the affections of her pupils. My governess has entirely failed to make the children like her. A dreadful temper; I have given her notice to leave my service. Look at that sweet girl and your little granddaughter! I declare I could cry when I see how they understand each other and love each other.' I quote our charming friend's nonsense, verbatim (as we used to say when we were in Parliament in Mr. Norman's time), for the sake of what it led to. If, by any lucky chance, Miss Westerfield happens to be disengaged in the future, Mrs. MacEdwin's house is open to her--at her own time, and on her own terms. I promised to speak to you on the subject, and I perform my promise. Think over it; I strongly advise you to think over it."

Even Mrs. Linley's good nature declined to submit to this. "I shall certainly not think over what cannot possibly happen," she said. "Good-night, mamma."

"Good-night, Catherine. Your temper doesn't seem to improve as you get older. Perhaps the excitement of the party has been too much for your nerves. Try to get some sleep before Herbert comes up from the smoking-room and disturbs you."

Mrs. Linley refused even to let this pass unanswered. "Herbert is too considerate to disturb me, when his friends keep him up late," she said. "On those occasions, as you may see for yourself, he has a bed in his dressing-room."

Mrs. Presty passed through the dressing-room on her way out. "A very comfortable-looking bed," she remarked, in a tone intended to reach her daughter's ears. "I wonder Herbert ever leaves it."

The way to her own bed-chamber led her by the door of Sydney's room. She suddenly stopped; the door was not shut. This was in itself a suspicious circumstance.

Young or old, ladies are not in the habit of sleeping with their bedroom doors ajar. A strict sense of duty led Mrs. Presty to listen outside. No sound like the breathing of a person asleep was to be heard. A strict sense of duty conducted Mrs. Presty next into the room, and even encouraged her to approach the bed on tip-toe. The bed was empty; the clothes had not been disturbed since it had been made in the morning!

The old lady stepped out into the corridor in a state of excitement, which greatly improved her personal appearance. She looked almost young again as she mentally reviewed the list of vices and crimes which a governess might commit, who had retired before eleven o'clock, and was not in her bedroom at twelve. On further reflection, it appeared to be barely possible that Miss Westerfield might be preparing her pupil's exercises for the next day. Mrs. Presty descended to the schoolroom on the first floor.

No. Here again there was nothing to see but an empty room.

Where was Miss Westerfield?

Was it within the limits of probability that she had been bold enough to join the party in the smoking-room? The bare idea was absurd.

In another minute, nevertheless, Mrs. Presty was at the door, listening. The men's voices were loud: they were talking politics. She peeped through the keyhole; the smokers had, beyond all doubt, been left to themselves. If the house had not been full of guests, Mrs. Presty would now have raised an alarm. As things were, the fear of a possible scandal which the family might have reason to regret forced her to act with caution. In the suggestive retirement of her own room, she arrived at a wise and wary decision. Opening her door by a few inches, she placed a chair behind the opening in

a position which commanded a view of Sydney's room. Wherever the governess might be, her return to her bed-chamber, before the servants were astir in the morning, was a chance to be counted on. The night-lamp in the corridor was well alight; and a venerable person, animated by a sense of duty, was a person naturally superior to the seductions of sleep. Before taking the final precaution of extinguishing her candle, Mrs. Presty touched up her complexion, and resolutely turned her back on her nightcap. "This is a case in which I must keep up my dignity," she decided, as she took her place in the chair.

One man in the smoking-room appeared to be thoroughly weary of talking politics. That man was the master of the house.

Randal noticed the worn, preoccupied look in his brother's face, and determined to break up the meeting. The opportunity for which he was waiting occurred in another minute. He was asked as a moderate politician to decide between two guests, both members of Parliament, who were fast drifting into mere contradiction of each other's second-hand opinions. In plain terms, they stated the matter in dispute: "Which of our political parties deserves the confidence of the English people?" In plain terms, on his sides Randal answered: "The party that lowers the taxes." Those words acted on the discussion like water on a fire. As members of Parliament, the two contending politicians were naturally innocent of the slightest interest in the people or the taxes; they received the new idea submitted to them in helpless silence. Friends who were listening began to laugh. The oldest man present looked at his watch. In five minutes more the lights were out and the smoking-room was deserted.

Linley was the last to retire--fevered by the combined influences of smoke and noise. His mind, oppressed all through the evening, was as ill at ease as ever. Lingered, wakeful and irritable, in the corridor (just as Sydney had lingered before him), he too stopped at the open door and admired the peaceful beauty of the garden.

The sleepy servant, appointed to attend in the smoking room, asked if he should close the door. Linley answered: "Go to bed, and leave it to me." Still lingering at the top of the steps, he too was tempted by the refreshing coolness of the air. He took the key out of the lock; secured the door after he had passed through it; put the key in his pocket, and went down into the garden.