

Chapter X. Kitty Mentions Her Birthday.

A clever old lady, possessed of the inestimable advantages of worldly experience, must submit nevertheless to the laws of Nature. Time and Sleep together--powerful agents in the small hours of the morning--had got the better of Mrs. Presty's resolution to keep awake. Free from discovery, Sydney ascended the stairs. Free from discovery, Sydney entered her own room.

Half-an-hour later, Linley opened the door of his dressing-room. His wife was still sleeping. His mother-in-law woke two hours later; looked at her watch; and discovered that she had lost her opportunity. Other old women, under similar circumstances, might have felt discouraged. This old woman believed in her own suspicions more devoutly than ever. When the breakfast-bell rang, Sydney found Mrs. Presty in the corridor, waiting to say good morning.

"I wonder what you were doing last night, when you ought to have been in bed?" the old lady began, with a treacherous amiability of manner. "Oh, I am not mistaken! your door was open, my dear, and I looked in."

"Why did you look in, Mrs. Presty?"

"My young friend, I was naturally anxious about you. I am anxious still. Were you in the house? or out of the house?"

"I was walking in the garden," Sydney replied.

"Admiring the moonlight?"

"Yes; admiring the moonlight."

"Alone, of course?" Sydney's friend suggested.

And Sydney took refuge in prevarication. "Why should you doubt it?" she said.

Mrs. Presty wasted no more time in asking questions. She was pleasantly reminded of the words of worldly wisdom which she had addressed to her daughter on the day of Sydney's arrival at Mount Morven. "The good qualities of that unfortunate young creature" (she had said) "can not have always resisted the horrid temptations and contaminations about her.

Hundreds of times she must have lied through ungovernable fear." Elevated a little higher than ever in her own estimation, Mrs. Presty took Sydney's arm, and led her down to breakfast with motherly familiarity. Linley met them at the foot of the stairs. His mother-in-law first stole a look at Sydney, and then shook hands with him cordially. "My dear Herbert, how pale you are! That horrid smoking. You look as if you had been up all night."

Mrs. Linley paid her customary visit to the schoolroom that morning.

The necessary attention to her guests had left little leisure for the exercise of observation at the breakfast-table; the one circumstance which had forced itself on her notice had been the boisterous gayety of her husband. Too essentially honest to practice deception of any kind cleverly, Linley had overacted the part of a man whose mind was entirely at ease. The most unsuspecting woman living, his wife was simply amused "How he does enjoy society!" she thought. "Herbert will be a young man to the end of his life."

In the best possible spirits--still animated by her successful exertions to entertain her friends--Mrs. Linley opened the schoolroom door briskly. "How are the lessons getting on?" she began--and checked herself with a start, "Kitty!" she exclaimed, "Crying?"

The child ran to her mother with tears in her eyes. "Look at Syd! She sulks; she cries; she won't talk to me--send for the doctor."

"You tiresome child, I don't want the doctor. I'm not ill."

"There, mamma!" cried Kitty. "She never scolded me before to-day."

In other words, here was a complete reversal of the usual order of things in the schoolroom. Patient Sydney was out of temper; gentle Sydney spoke bitterly to the little friend whom she loved. Mrs. Linley drew a chair to the governess's side, and took her hand. The strangely altered girl tore her hand away and burst into a violent fit of crying. Puzzled and frightened, Kitty (to the best of a child's ability) followed her example. Mrs. Linley took her daughter on her knee, and gave Sydney's outbreak of agitation time to subside. There were no feverish appearances in her face, there was no feverish heat in her skin when their hands had touched each other for a moment. In all probability the mischief was nervous mischief, and the outburst of weeping was an hysterical effort at relief.

"I am afraid, my dear, you have had a bad night," Mrs. Linley said.

"Bad? Worse than bad!"

Sydney stopped; looked at her good mistress and friend in terror; and made a confused effort to explain away what she had just said. As sensibly and kindly self-possessed as ever, Mrs. Linley told her that she only wanted rest and quiet. "Let me take you to my room," she proposed. "We will have the sofa moved into the balcony, and you will soon go to sleep in the delicious warm air. You may put away your books, Kitty; this is a holiday. Come with me, and be petted and spoiled by the ladies in the morning-room."

Neither the governess nor the pupil was worthy of the sympathy so frankly offered to them. Still strangely confused, Sydney made commonplace apologies and asked leave to go out and walk in the park. Hearing this, Kitty declared that where her governess went she would go too. Mrs. Linley smoothed her daughter's pretty auburn hair, and said, playfully: "I think I ought to be jealous." To her surprise, Sydney looked up as if the words had been addressed to herself "You mustn't be fonder, my dear, of your governess," Mrs. Linley went on, "than you are of your mother." She kissed the child, and, rising to go, discovered that Sydney had moved to another part of the room. She was standing at the piano, with a page of music in her hand. The page was upside down--and she had placed herself in a position which concealed her face. Slow as Mrs. Linley was to doubt any person (more especially a person who interested her), she left the room with a vague fear of something wrong, and with a conviction that she would do well to consult her husband.

Hearing the door close, Sydney looked round. She and Kitty were alone again; and Kitty was putting away her books without showing any pleasure at the prospect of a holiday.

Sydney took the child fondly in her arms. "Would you be very sorry," she asked, "if I was obliged to go away, some day, and leave you?" Kitty turned pale with terror at the dreadful prospect which those words presented. "There! there! I am only joking," Sydney said, shocked at the effect which her attempt to suggest the impending separation had produced. "You shall come with me, darling; we will walk in the park together."

Kitty's face brightened directly. She proposed extending their walk to the paddock, and feeding the cows. Sydney readily consented. Any amusement was welcome to her which diverted the child's attention from herself.

They had been nearly an hour in the park, and were returning to the house through a clump of trees, when Sydney's companion, running on before her, cried: "Here's papa!" Her first impulse was to draw back behind a tree, in the hope of escaping notice. Linley sent Kitty away to gather a nosegay of daisies, and joined Sydney under the trees.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," he said. "My wife--"

Sydney interrupted him. "Discovered!" she exclaimed.

"There is nothing that need alarm you," he replied. "Catherine is too good and too true herself to suspect others easily. She sees a change in you that she doesn't understand--she asks if I have noticed it--and that is all. But her mother has the cunning of the devil. There is a serious reason for controlling yourself."

He spoke so earnestly that he startled her. "Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"Angry! Does the man live who could be angry with you?"

"It might be better for both of us if you were angry with me. I have to control myself; I will try again. Oh, if you only knew what I suffer when Mrs. Linley is kind to me!"

He persisted in trying to rouse her to a sense of the danger that threatened them, while the visitors remained in the house. "In a few days, Sydney, there will be no more need for the deceit that is now forced on us. Till that time comes, remember--Mrs. Presty suspects us."

Kitty ran back to them with her hands full of daisies before they could say more.

"There is your nosegay, papa. No; I don't want you to thank me--I want to know what present you are going to give me." Her father's mind was preoccupied; he looked at her absently. The child's sense of her own importance was wounded: she appealed to her governess. "Would you believe it?" she asked. "Papa has forgotten that next Tuesday is my birthday!"

"Very well, Kitty; I must pay the penalty of forgetting. What present would you like to have?"

"I want a doll's perambulator."

"Ha! In my time we were satisfied with a doll."

They all three looked round. Another person had suddenly joined in the talk. There was no mistaking the person's voice: Mrs. Presty appeared among the trees, taking a walk in the park. Had she heard what Linley and the governess had said to each other while Kitty was gathering daisies?

"Quite a domestic scene!" the sly old lady remarked. "Papa, looking like a saint in a picture, with flowers in his hand. Papa's spoiled child always wanting something, and always getting it. And papa's governess, so sweetly fresh and pretty that I should certainly fall in love with her, if I had the advantage of being a man. You have no doubt remarked Herbert--I think I hear the bell; shall we go to lunch?--you have no doubt, I say, remarked what curiously opposite styles Catherine and Miss Westerfield present; so charming, and yet such complete contrasts. I wonder whether they occasionally envy each other's good looks? Does my daughter ever regret that she is not Miss Westerfield? And do you, my dear, some times wish you were Mrs. Linley?"

"While we are about it, let me put a third question," Linley interposed. "Are you ever aware of it yourself, Mrs. Presty, when you are talking nonsense?"

He was angry, and he showed it in that feeble reply. Sydney felt the implied insult offered to her in another way. It roused her to the exercise of self-control as nothing had roused her yet. She ignored Mrs. Presty's irony with a composure worthy of Mrs. Presty herself. "Where is the woman," she said, "who would not wish to be as beautiful as Mrs. Linley--and as good?"

"Thank you, my dear, for a compliment to my daughter: a sincere compliment, no doubt. It comes in very neatly and nicely," Mrs. Presty acknowledged, "after my son-in-law's little outbreak of temper. My poor Herbert, when will you understand that I mean no harm? I am an essentially humorous person; my wonderful spirits are always carrying me away. I do assure you, Miss Westerfield, I don't know what worry is. My troubles--deaths in the family, and that sort of thing--seem to slip off me in a most remarkable manner. Poor Mr. Norman used to attribute it to my excellent digestion. My second husband would never hear of such an explanation as that. His high ideal of women shrank from allusions to stomachs. He used to speak so nicely (quoting some poet) of the sunshine of my breast. Vague, perhaps," said Mrs. Presty, modestly looking down at the ample prospect of a personal nature which presented itself below her throat,

"but so flattering to one's feelings. There's the luncheon bell again, I declare! I'll run on before and tell them you are coming. Some people might say they wished to be punctual. I am truth itself, and I own I don't like to be helped to the underside of the fish. Au revoir! Do you remember, Miss Westerfield, when I asked you to repeat au revoir as a specimen of your French? I didn't think much of your accent. Oh, dear me, I didn't think much of your accent!"

Kitty looked after her affluent grandmother with eyes that stared respectfully in ignorant admiration. She pulled her father's coat-tail, and addressed herself gravely to his private ear. "Oh, papa, what noble words grandmamma has!"