

Chapter XII. Two of Them Sleep Badly.

Waiting for Sydney to come into the bedroom as usual and wish her good-night, Kitty was astonished by the appearance of her grandmother, entering on tiptoe from the corridor, with a small paper parcel in her hand.

"Whisper!" said Mrs. Presty, pointing to the open door of communication with Mrs. Linley's room. "This is your birthday present. You mustn't look at it till you wake to-morrow morning." She pushed the parcel under the pillow--and, instead of saying good-night, took a chair and sat down.

"May I show my present," Kitty asked, "when I go to mamma in the morning?"

The present hidden under the paper wrapper was a sixpenny picture-book. Kitty's grandmother disapproved of spending money lavishly on birthday gifts to children. "Show it, of course; and take the greatest care of it," Mrs. Presty answered gravely. "But tell me one thing, my dear, wouldn't you like to see all your presents early in the morning, like mine?"

Still smarting under the recollection of her interview with her son-in-law, Mrs. Presty had certain ends to gain in putting this idea into the child's head. It was her special object to raise domestic obstacles to a private interview between the husband and wife during the earlier hours of the day. If the gifts, usually presented after the nursery dinner, were produced on this occasion after breakfast, there would be a period of delay before any confidential conversation could take place between Mr. and Mrs. Linley. In this interval Mrs. Presty saw her opportunity of setting Linley's authority at defiance, by rousing the first jealous suspicion in the mind of his wife.

Innocent little Kitty became her grandmother's accomplice on the spot. "I shall ask mamma to let me have my presents at breakfast-time," she announced.

"And kind mamma will say Yes," Mrs. Presty chimed in. "We will breakfast early, my precious child. Good-night."

Kitty was half asleep when her governess entered the room afterward, much later than usual. "I thought you had forgotten me," she said, yawning and stretching out her plump little arms.

Sydney's heart ached when she thought of the separation that was to come with the next day; her despair forced its way to expression in words.

"I wish I could forget you," she answered, in reckless wretchedness.

The child was still too drowsy to hear plainly. "What did you say?" she asked. Sydney gently lifted her in the bed, and kissed her again and again. Kitty's sleepy eyes opened in surprise. "How cold your hands are!" she said; "and how often you kiss me. What is it you have come to say to me--good-night or good-by?"

Sydney laid her down again on the pillow, gave her a last kiss, and ran out of the room.

In the corridor she heard Linley's voice on the lower floor. He was asking one of the servants if Miss Westerfield was in the house or in the garden. Her first impulse was to advance to the stairs and to answer his question. In a moment more the remembrance of Mrs. Linley checked her. She went back to her bed-chamber. The presents that she had received, since her arrival at Mount Morven, were all laid out so that they could be easily seen by any person entering the room, after she had left the house. On the sofa lay the pretty new dress which she had worn at the evening party. Other little gifts were arranged on either side of it. The bracelet, resting on the pedestal of a statue close by, kept a morsel of paper in its place--on which she had written a few penitent words of farewell addressed to Mrs. Linley. On the toilet-table three photographic portraits showed themselves among the brushes and combs. She sat down, and looked first at the likenesses of Mrs. Linley and Kitty.

Had she any right to make those dear faces her companions in the future?

She hesitated; her tears dropped on the photographs. "They're as good as spoiled now," she thought; "they're no longer fit for anybody but me." She paused, and abruptly took up the third and last photograph--the likeness of Herbert Linley.

Was it an offense, now, even to look at his portrait? No idea of leaving it behind her was in her mind. Her resolution vibrated between two miseries--the misery of preserving her keep-sake after she had parted from him forever, and the misery of destroying it. Resigned to one more sacrifice, she took the card in both hands to tear it up. It would have been scattered in pieces on the floor, but for the chance which had turned the portrait side of the card toward her instead of the back. Her longing eyes stole a last look at

him--a frenzy seized her--she pressed her lips to the photograph in a passion of hopeless love. "What does it matter?" she asked herself. "I'm nothing but the ignorant object of his kindness--the poor fool who could see no difference between gratitude and love. Where is the harm of having him with me when I am starving in the streets, or dying in the workhouse?" The fervid spirit in her that had never known a mother's loving discipline, never thrilled to the sympathy of a sister-friend, rose in revolt against the evil destiny which had imbittered her life. Her eyes still rested on the photograph. "Come to my heart, my only friend, and kill me!" As those wild words escaped her, she thrust the card furiously into the bosom of her dress--and threw herself on the floor. There was something in the mad self-abandonment of that action which mocked the innocent despair of her childhood, on the day when her mother left her at the cruel mercy of her aunt.

That night was a night of torment in secret to another person at Mount Morven.

Wandering, in his need of self-isolation, up and down the dreary stone passages in the lower part of the house, Linley counted the hours, inexorably lessening the interval between him and the ordeal of confession to his wife. As yet, he had failed to find the opportunity of addressing to Sydney the only words of encouragement he could allow to pass his lips: he had asked for her earlier in the evening, and nobody could tell him where she was. Still in ignorance of the refuge which she might by bare possibility hope to find in Mrs. MacEdwin's house, Sydney was spared the torturing doubts which now beset Herbert Linley's mind. Would the noble woman whom they had injured allow their atonement to plead for them, and consent to keep their miserable secret? Might they still put their trust in that generous nature a few hours hence? Again and again those questions confronted Linley; and again and again he shrank from attempting to answer them.