

Chapter XIII. Kitty Keeps Her Birthday.

They were all assembled as usual at the breakfast-table.

Preferring the request suggested to her by Mrs. Presty, Kitty had hastened the presentation of the birthday gifts, by getting into her mother's bed in the morning, and exacting her mother's promise before she would consent to get out again. By her own express wish, she was left in ignorance of what the presents would prove to be. "Hide them from me," said this young epicure in pleasurable sensations, "and make me want to see them until I can bear it no longer." The gifts had accordingly been collected in an embrasure of one of the windows; and the time had now arrived when Kitty could bear it no longer.

In the procession of the presents, Mrs. Linley led the way.

She had passed behind the screen which had thus far protected the hidden treasures from discovery, and appeared again with a vision of beauty in the shape of a doll. The dress of this wonderful creature exhibited the latest audacities of French fashion. Her head made a bow; her eyes went to sleep and woke again; she had a voice that said two words--more precious than two thousand in the mouth of a mere living creature. Kitty's arms opened and embraced her gift with a scream of ecstasy. That fervent pressure found its way to the right spring. The doll squeaked: "Mamma!"--and creaked--and cried again--and said: "Papa!" Kitty sat down on the floor; her legs would support her no longer. "I think I shall faint," she said quite seriously.

In the midst of the general laughter, Sydney silently placed a new toy (a pretty little imitation of a jeweler's casket) at Kitty's side, and drew back before the child could look at her. Mrs. Presty was the only person present who noticed her pale face and the trembling of her hands as she made the effort which preserved her composure.

The doll's necklace, bracelets, and watch and chain, riveted Kitty's attention on the casket. Just as she thought of looking round for her dear Syd, her father produced a new outburst of delight by presenting a perambulator worthy of the doll. Her uncle followed with a parasol, devoted to the preservation of the doll's complexion when she went out for an airing. Then there came a pause. Where was the generous grandmother's gift? Nobody remembered it; Mrs. Presty herself discovered the inestimable sixpenny picture-book cast away and forgotten on a distant window-seat. "I have a

great mind to keep this," she said to Kitty, "till you are old enough to value it properly." In the moment of her absence at the window, Linley's mother-in-law lost the chance of seeing him whisper to Sydney. "Meet me in the shrubbery in half an hour," he said. She stepped back from him, startled by the proposal. When Mrs. Presty was in the middle of the room again, Linley and the governess were no longer near each other.

Having by this time recovered herself, Kitty got on her legs. "Now," the spoiled child declared, addressing the company present, "I'm going to play."

The doll was put into the perambulator, and was wheeled about the room, while Mrs. Linley moved the chairs out of the way, and Randal attended with the open parasol--under orders to "pretend that the sun was shining." Once more the sixpenny picture-book was neglected. Mrs. Presty picked it up from the floor, determined by this time to hold it in reserve until her ungrateful grandchild reached years of discretion. She put it in the bookcase between Byron's "Don Juan" and Butler's "Lives of the Saints." In the position which she now occupied, Linley was visible approaching Sydney again. "Your own interests are seriously concerned," he whispered, "in something that I have to tell you."

Incapable of hearing what passed between them, Mrs. Presty could see that a secret understanding united her son-in-law and the governess. She looked round cautiously at Mrs. Linley.

Kitty's humor had changed; she was now eager to see the doll's splendid clothes taken off and put on again. "Come and look at it," she said to Sydney; "I want you to enjoy my birthday as much as I do." Left by himself, Randal got rid of the parasol by putting it on a table near the door. Mrs. Presty beckoned to him to join her at the further end of the room.

"I want you to do me a favor," she began.

Glancing at Linley before she proceeded, Mrs. Presty took up a newspaper, and affected to be consulting Randal's opinion on a passage which had attracted her attention. "Your brother is looking our way," she whispered: "he mustn't suspect that there is a secret between us."

False pretenses of any kind invariably irritated Randal. "What do you want me to do?" he asked sharply.

The reply only increased his perplexity.

"Observe Miss Westerfield and your brother. Look at them now."

Randal obeyed.

"What is there to look at?" he inquired.

"Can't you see?"

"I see they are talking to each other."

"They are talking confidentially; talking so that Mrs. Linley can't hear them. Look again."

Randal fixed his eyes on Mrs. Presty, with an expression which showed his dislike of that lady a little too plainly. Before he could answer what she had just said to him, his lively little niece hit on a new idea. The sun was shining, the flowers were in their brightest beauty--and the doll had not yet been taken into the garden! Kitty at once led the way out; so completely preoccupied in steering the perambulator in a straight course that she forgot her uncle and the parasol. Only waiting to remind her husband and Sydney that they were wasting the beautiful summer morning indoors, Mrs. Linley followed her daughter--and innocently placed a fatal obstacle in Mrs. Presty's way by leaving the room. Having consulted each other by a look, Linley and the governess went out next. Left alone with Randal, Mrs. Presty's anger, under the complete overthrow of her carefully-laid scheme, set restraint at defiance.

"My daughter's married life is a wreck," she burst out, pointing theatrically to the door by which Linley and Sydney Westerfield had retired. "And Catherine has the vile creature whom your brother picked up in London to thank for it! Now do you understand me?"

"Less than ever," Randal answered--"unless you have taken leave of your senses."

Mrs. Presty recovered the command of her temper.

On that fine morning her daughter might remain in the garden until the luncheon-bell rang. Linley had only to say that he wished to speak with his wife; and the private interview which he had so rudely insisted on as his sole privilege, would assuredly take place. The one chance left of still defeating him on his own ground was to force Randal to interfere by convincing him of his brother's guilt. Moderation of language and composure of manner offered

the only hopeful prospect of reaching this end. Mrs. Presty assumed the disguise of patient submission, and used the irresistible influence of good humor and good sense.

"I don't complain, dear Randal, of what you have said to me," she replied. "My indiscretion has deserved it. I ought to have produced my proofs, and have left it to you to draw the conclusion. Sit down, if you please. I won't detain you for more than a few minutes."

Randal had not anticipated such moderation as this; he took the chair that was nearest to Mrs. Presty. They were both now sitting with their backs turned to the entrance from the library to the drawing-room.

"I won't trouble you with my own impressions," Mrs. Presty went on. "I will be careful only to mention what I have seen and heard. If you refuse to believe me, I refer you to the guilty persons themselves."

She had just got to the end of those introductory words when Mrs. Linley returned, by way of the library, to fetch the forgotten parasol.

Randal insisted on making Mrs. Presty express herself plainly. "You speak of guilty persons," he said. "Am I to understand that one of those guilty persons is my brother?"

Mrs. Linley advanced a step and took the parasol from the table. Hearing what Randal said, she paused, wondering at the strange allusion to her husband. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Presty answered the question that had been addressed to her.

"Yes," she said to Randal; "I mean your brother, and your brother's mistress--Sydney Westerfield."

Mrs. Linley laid the parasol back on the table, and approached them.

She never once looked at her mother; her face, white and rigid, was turned toward Randal. To him, and to him only, she spoke.

"What does my mother's horrible language mean?" she asked.

Mrs. Presty triumphed inwardly; chance had decided in her favor, after all! "Don't you see," she said to her daughter, "that I am here to answer for myself?"

Mrs. Linley still looked at Randal, and still spoke to him. "It is impossible for me to insist on an explanation from my mother," she proceeded. "No matter what I may feel, I must remember that she is my mother. I ask you again--you who have been listening to her--what does she mean?"

Mrs. Presty's sense of her own importance refused to submit to being passed over in this way.

"However insolently you may behave, Catherine, you will not succeed in provoking me. Your mother is bound to open your eyes to the truth. You have a rival in your husband's affections; and that rival is your governess. Take your own course now; I have no more to say." With her head high in the air--looking the picture of conscious virtue--the old lady walked out.

At the same moment Randal seized his first opportunity of speaking.

He addressed himself gently and respectfully to his sister-in-law. She refused to hear him. The indignation which Mrs. Presty had roused in her made no allowances, and was blind to all sense of right.

"Don't trouble yourself to account for your silence," she said, most unjustly. "You were listening to my mother without a word of remonstrance when I came into the room. You are concerned in this vile slander, too."

Randal considerably refrained from provoking her by attempting to defend himself, while she was incapable of understanding him. "You will be sorry when you find that you have misjudged me," he said, and sighed, and left her.

She dropped into a chair. If there was any one distinct thought in her at that moment, it was the thought of her husband. She was eager to see him; she longed to say to him: "My love, I don't believe a word of it!" He was not in the garden when she had returned for the parasol; and Sydney was not in the garden. Wondering what had become of her father and her governess, Kitty had asked the nursemaid to look for them. What had happened since? Where had they been found? After some hesitation, Mrs. Linley sent for the nursemaid. She felt the strongest reluctance, when the girl appeared, to approach the very inquiries which she was interested in making.

"Have you found Mr. Linley?" she said--with an effort.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where did you find him?"

"In the shrubbery."

"Did your master say anything?"

"I slipped away, ma'am, before he saw me."

"Why?"

"Miss Westerfield was in the shrubbery, with my master. I might have been mistaken--" The girl paused, and looked confused.

Mrs. Linley tried to tell her to go on. The words were in her mind; but the capacity of giving expression to them failed her. She impatiently made a sign. The sign was understood.

"I might have been mistaken," the maid repeated--"but I thought Miss Westerfield was crying."

Having replied in those terms, she seemed to be anxious to get away. The parasol caught her eye. "Miss Kitty wants this," she said, "and wonders why you have not gone back to her in the garden. May I take the parasol?"

"Take it."

The tone of the mistress's voice was completely changed. The servant looked at her with vague misgivings. "Are you not well, ma'am?"

"Quite well."

The servant withdrew.

Mrs. Linley's chair happened to be near one of the windows, which commanded a view of the drive leading to the main entrance of the house. A carriage had just arrived bringing holiday travelers to visit that part of Mount Morven which was open to strangers. She watched them as they got out, talking and laughing, and looking about them. Still shrinking instinctively from the first doubt of Herbert that had ever entered her mind, she found a refuge from herself in watching the ordinary events of the day. One by one the tourists disappeared under the portico of the front door. The empty carriage was driven away next, to water the horses at the village inn. Solitude was all she could see from the windows; silence, horrible silence,

surrounded her out of doors and in. The thoughts from which she recoiled forced their way back into her mind; the narrative of the nursemaid's discovery became a burden on her memory once more. She considered the circumstances. In spite of herself, she considered the circumstances again. Her husband and Sydney Westerfield together in the shrubbery--and Sydney crying. Had Mrs. Presty's abominable suspicion of them reached their ears? or?--No! that second possibility might be estimated at its right value by any other woman; not by Herbert Linley's wife.

She snatched up the newspaper, and fixed her eyes on it in the hope of fixing her mind on it next. Obstinate, desperately, she read without knowing what she was reading. The lines of print were beginning to mingle and grow dim, when she was startled by the sudden opening of the door. She looked round.

Her husband entered the room.