

Chapter XIV. Kitty Feels the Heartache.

Linley advanced a few steps--and stopped.

His wife, hurrying eagerly to meet him, checked herself. It might have been distrust, or it might have been unreasoning fear--she hesitated on the point of approaching him.

"I have something to say, Catherine, which I'm afraid will distress you."

His voice faltered, his eyes rested on her--then looked away again. He said no more.

He had spoken a few commonplace words--and yet he had said enough. She saw the truth in his eyes, heard the truth in his voice. A fit of trembling seized her. Linley stepped forward, in the fear that she might fall. She instantly controlled herself, and signed to him to keep back. "Don't touch me!" she said. "You come from Miss Westerfield!"

That reproach roused him.

"I own that I come from Miss Westerfield," he answered. "She addresses a request to you through me."

"I refuse to grant it."

"Hear it first."

"No!"

"Hear it--in your own interest. She asks permission to leave the house, never to return again. While she is still innocent--"

His wife eyed him with a look of unutterable contempt. He submitted to it, but not in silence.

"A man doesn't lie, Catherine, who makes such a confession as I am making now. Miss Westerfield offers the one atonement in her power, while she is still innocent of having wronged you--except in thought."

"Is that all?" Mrs. Linley asked.

"It rests with you," he replied, "to say if there is any other sacrifice of herself which will be more acceptable to you."

"Let me understand first what the sacrifice means. Does Miss Westerfield make any conditions?"

"She has positively forbidden me to make conditions."

"And goes out into the world, helpless and friendless?"

"Yes."

Even under the terrible trial that wrung her, the nobility of the woman's nature spoke in her next words.

"Give me time to think of what you have said," she pleaded. "I have led a happy life; I am not used to suffer as I am suffering now."

They were both silent. Kitty's voice was audible on the stairs that led to the picture-gallery, disputing with the maid. Neither her father nor her mother heard her.

"Miss Westerfield is innocent of having wronged me, except in thought," Mrs. Linley resumed. "Do you tell me that on your word of honor?"

"On my word of honor."

So far his wife was satisfied. "My governess," she said, "might have deceived me--she has not deceived me. I owe it to her to remember that. She shall go, but not helpless and not friendless."

Her husband forgot the restraints he had imposed on himself.

"Is there another woman in the world like you!" he exclaimed.

"Many other women," she answered, firmly. "A vulgar termagant, feeling a sense of injury, finds relief in an outburst of jealousy and a furious quarrel. You have always lived among ladies. Surely you ought to know that a wife in my position, who respects herself, restrains herself. I try to remember what I owe to others as well as what they owe to me."

She approached the writing table, and took up a pen.

Feeling his position acutely, Linley refrained from openly admiring her generosity. Until he had deserved to be forgiven, he had forfeited the right to express an opinion on her conduct. She misinterpreted his silence. As she understood it, he appreciated an act of self-sacrifice on Miss Westerfield's side--but he had no word of encouragement for an act of self-sacrifice on his wife's side. She threw down the pen, with the first outbreak of anger that had escaped her yet.

"You have spoken for the governess," she said to him. "I haven't heard yet, sir, what you have to say for yourself. Is it you who tempted her? You know how gratefully she feels toward you--have you perverted her gratitude, and led her blindfold to love? Cruel, cruel, cruel! Defend yourself if you can."

He made no reply.

"Is it not worth your while to defend yourself?" she burst out, passionately. "Your silence is an insult!"

"My silence is a confession," he answered, sadly. "She may accept your mercy--I may not even hope for it."

Something in the tone of his voice reminded her of past days--the days of perfect love and perfect confidence, when she had been the one woman in the world to him. Dearly treasured remembrances of her married life filled her heart with tenderness, and dimmed with tears the angry light that had risen in her eyes. There was no pride, no anger, in his wife when she spoke to him now.

"Oh, my husband, has she taken your love from me?"

"Judge for yourself, Catherine, if there is no proof of my love for you in what I have resisted--and no remembrance of all that I owe to you in what I have confessed."

She ventured a little nearer to him. "Can I believe you?"

"Put me to the test."

She instantly took him at his word. "When Miss Westerfield has left us, promise not to see her again."

"I promise."

"And not even to write to her."

"I promise."

She went back to the writing-table. "My heart is easier," she said, simply. "I can be merciful to her now."

After writing a few lines, she rose and handed the paper to him. He looked up from it in surprise. "Addressed to Mrs. MacEdwin!" he said.

"Addressed," she answered, "to the only person I know who feels a true interest in Miss Westerfield. Have you not heard of it?"

"I remember," he said--and read the lines that followed:

"I recommend Miss Westerfield as a teacher of young children, having had ample proof of her capacity, industry, and good temper while she has been governess to my child. She leaves her situation in my service under circumstances which testify to her sense of duty and her sense of gratitude."

"Have I said," she asked, "more than I could honorably and truly say--even after what has happened?"

He could only look at her; no words could have spoken for him as his silence spoke for him at that moment. When she took back the written paper there was pardon in her eyes already.

The last worst trial remained to be undergone; she faced it resolutely. "Tell Miss Westerfield that I wish to see her."

On the point of leaving the room, Herbert was called back. "If you happen to meet with my mother," his wife added, "will you ask her to come to me?"

Mrs. Presty knew her daughter's nature; Mrs. Presty had been waiting near at hand, in expectation of the message which she now received.

Tenderly and respectfully, Mrs. Linley addressed herself to her mother. "When we last met, I thought you spoke rashly and cruelly. I know now that there was truth--some truth, let me say--in what offended me at the time. If you felt strongly, it was for my sake. I wish to beg your pardon; I was hasty, I was wrong."

On an occasion when she had first irritated and then surprised him, Randal Linley had said to Mrs. Presty, "You have got a heart, after all!" Her reply to her daughter showed that view of her character to be the right one. "Say no more, my dear," she answered "I was hasty; I was wrong."

The words had barely fallen from her lips, before Herbert returned. He was followed by Sydney Westerfield.

The governess stopped in the middle of the room. Her head sank on her breast; her quick convulsive breathing was the only sound that broke the silence. Mrs. Linley advanced to the place in which Sydney stood. There was something divine in her beauty as she looked at the shrinking girl, and held out her hand.

Sydney fell on her knees. In silence she lifted that generous hand to her lips. In silence, Mrs. Linley raised her--took the writing which testified to her character from the table--and presented it. Linley looked at his wife, looked at the governess. He waited--and still neither the one nor the other uttered a word. It was more than he could endure. He addressed himself to Sydney first.

"Try to thank Mrs. Linley," he said.

She answered faintly: "I can't speak!"

He appealed to his wife next. "Say a last kind word to her," he pleaded.

She made an effort, a vain effort to obey him. A gesture of despair answered for her as Sydney had answered: "I can't speak!"

True, nobly true, to the Christian virtue that repents, to the Christian virtue that forgives, those three persons stood together on the brink of separation, and forced their frail humanity to suffer and submit.

In mercy to the woman, Linley summoned the courage to part them. He turned to his wife first.

"I may say, Catherine, that she has your good wishes for happier days to come?"

Mrs. Linley pressed his hand.

He approached Sydney, and gave his wife's message. It was in his heart to

add something equally kind on his own part. He could only say what we have all said--how sincerely, how sorrowfully, we all know--the common word, "Good-by!"--the common wish, "God bless you!"

At that last moment the child ran into the room, in search of her mother.

There was a low murmur of horror at the sight of her. That innocent heart, they had all hoped, might have been spared the misery of the parting scene!

She saw that Sydney had her hat and cloak on. "You're dressed to go out," she said. Sydney turned away to hide her face. It was too late; Kitty had seen the tears. "Oh, my darling, you're not going away!" She looked at her father and mother. "Is she going away?" They were afraid to answer her. With all her little strength, she clasped her beloved friend and play-fellow round the waist. "My own dear, you're not going to leave me!" The dumb misery in Sydney's face struck Linley with horror. He placed Kitty in her mother's arms. The child's piteous cry, "Oh, don't let her go! don't let her go!" followed the governess as she suffered her martyrdom, and went out. Linley's heart ached; he watched her until she was lost to view. "Gone!" he murmured to himself--"gone forever!"

Mrs. Presty heard him, and answered him:--"She'll come back again!"