

Chapter XXI. The Governess.

Linley had one instant left, in which he might have drawn, back into the library in time to escape Sydney's notice. He was incapable of the effort of will. Grief and suspense had deprived him of that elastic readiness of mind which springs at once from thought to action. For a moment he hesitated. In that moment she looked up and saw him.

With a faint cry of alarm she let the cloak drop from her hands. As helpless as he was, as silent as he was, she stood rooted to the spot.

He tried to control himself. Hardly knowing what he said, he made commonplace excuses, as if he had been a stranger: "I am sorry to have startled you; I had no idea of finding you in this room."

Sydney pointed to her cloak on the floor, and to her hat on a chair near it. Understanding the necessity which had brought her into the room, he did his best to reconcile her to the meeting that had followed.

"It's a relief to me to have seen you," he said, "before you leave us."

A relief to him to see her! Why? How? What did that strange word mean, addressed to her? She roused herself, and put the question to him.

"It's surely better for me," he answered, "to hear the miserable news from you than from a servant."

"What miserable news?" she asked, still as perplexed as ever.

He could preserve his self-control no longer; the misery in him forced its way outward at last. The convulsive struggles for breath which burst from a man in tears shook him from head to foot.

"My poor little darling!" he gasped. "My only child!"

All that was embarrassing in her position passed from Sydney's mind in an instant. She stepped close up to him; she laid her hand gently and fearlessly on his arm. "Oh, Mr. Linley, what dreadful mistake is this?"

His dim eyes rested on her with a piteous expression of doubt. He heard her--and he was afraid to believe her. She was too deeply distressed, too full

of the truest pity for him, to wait and think before she spoke. "Yes! yes!" she cried, under the impulse of the moment. "The dear child knew me again, the moment I spoke to her. Kitty's recovery is only a matter of time."

He staggered back--with a livid change in his face startling to see. The mischief done by Mrs. Presty's sense of injury had led already to serious results. If the thought in Linley, at that moment, had shaped itself into words, he would have said, "And Catherine never told me of it!" How bitterly he thought of the woman who had left him in suspense--how gratefully he felt toward the woman who had lightened his heart of the heaviest burden ever laid on it!

Innocent of all suspicion of the feeling that she had aroused, Sydney blamed her own want of discretion as the one cause of the change that she perceived in him. "How thoughtless, how cruel of me," she said, "not to have been more careful in telling you the good news! Pray forgive me."

"You thoughtless! you cruel!" At the bare idea of her speaking in that way of herself, his sense of what he owed to her defied all restraint. He seized her hands and covered them with grateful kisses. "Dear Sydney! dear, good Sydney!"

She drew back from him; not abruptly, not as if she felt offended. Her fine perception penetrated the meaning of those harmless kisses--the uncontrollable outburst of a sense of relief beyond the reach of expression in words. But she changed the subject. Mrs. Linley (she told him) had kindly ordered fresh horses to be put to the carriage, so that she might go back to her duties if the doctor sanctioned it.

She turned away to take up her cloak. Linley stopped her. "You can't leave Kitty," he said, positively.

A faint smile brightened her face for a moment. "Kitty has fallen asleep--such a sweet, peaceful sleep! I don't think I should have left her but for that. The maid is watching at the bedside, and Mrs. Linley is only away for a little while."

"Wait a few minutes," he pleaded; "it's so long since we have seen each other."

The tone in which he spoke warned her to persist in leaving him while her resolution remained firm. "I had arranged with Mrs. MacEdwin," she began, "if all went well--"

"Speak of yourself," he interposed. "Tell me if you are happy."

She let this pass without a reply. "The doctor sees no harm," she went on, "in my being away for a few hours. Mrs. MacEdwin has offered to send me here in the evening, so that I can sleep in Kitty's room."

"You don't look well, Sydney. You are pale and worn--you are not happy."

She began to tremble. For the second time, she turned away to take up her cloak. For the second time, he stopped her.

"Not just yet," he said. "You don't know how it distresses me to see you so sadly changed. I remember the time when you were the happiest creature living. Do you remember it, too?"

"Don't ask me!" was all she could say.

He sighed as he looked at her. "It's dreadful to think of your young life, that ought to be so bright, wasting and withering among strangers." He said those words with increasing agitation; his eyes rested on her eagerly with a wild look in them. She made a resolute effort to speak to him coldly--she called him "Mr. Linley"--she bade him good-by.

It was useless. He stood between her and the door; he disregarded what she had said as if he had not heard it. "Hardly a day passes," he owned to her, "that I don't think of you."

"You shouldn't tell me that!"

"How can I see you again--and not tell you?"

She burst out with a last entreaty. "For God's sake, let us say good-by!"

His manner became undisguisedly tender; his language changed in the one way of all others that was most perilous to her--he appealed to her pity: "Oh, Sydney, it's so hard to part with you!"

"Spare me!" she cried, passionately. "You don't know how I suffer."

"My sweet angel, I do know it--by what I suffer myself! Do you ever feel for me as I feel for you?"

"Oh, Herbert! Herbert!"

"Have you ever thought of me since we parted?"

She had striven against herself, and against him, till her last effort at resistance was exhausted. In reckless despair she let the truth escape her at last.

"When do I ever think of anything else! I am a wretch unworthy of all the kindness that has been shown to me. I don't deserve your interest; I don't even deserve your pity. Send me away--be hard on me--be brutal to me. Have some mercy on a miserable creature whose life is one long hopeless effort to forget you!" Her voice, her look, maddened him. He drew her to his bosom; he held her in his arms; she struggled vainly to get away from him. "Oh," she murmured, "how cruel you are! Remember, my dear one, remember how young I am, how weak I am. Oh, Herbert, I'm dying--dying--dying!" Her voice grew fainter and fainter; her head sank on his breast. He lifted her face to him with whispered words of love. He kissed her again and again.

The curtains over the library entrance moved noiselessly when they were parted. The footsteps of Catherine Linley were inaudible as she passed through, and entered the room.

She stood still for a moment in silent horror.

Not a sound warned them when she advanced. After hesitating for a moment, she raised her hand toward her husband, as if to tell him of her presence by a touch; drew it back, suddenly recoiling from her own first intention; and touched Sydney instead.

Then, and then only, they knew what had happened.

Face to face, those three persons--with every tie that had once united them snapped asunder in an instant--looked at each other. The man owed a duty to the lost creature whose weakness had appealed to his mercy in vain. The man broke the silence.

"Catherine--"

With immeasurable contempt looking brightly out of her steady eyes, his wife stopped him.

"Not a word!"

He refused to be silent. "It is I," he said; "I only who am to blame."

"Spare yourself the trouble of making excuses," she answered; "they are needless. Herbert Linley, the woman who was once your wife despises you."

Her eyes turned from him and rested on Sydney Westerfield.

"I have a last word to say to you. Look at me, if you can."

Sydney lifted her head. She looked vacantly at the outraged woman before her, as if she saw a woman in a dream.

With the same terrible self-possession which she had preserved from the first--standing between her husband and her governess--Mrs. Linley spoke.

"Miss Westerfield, you have saved my child's life." She paused--her eyes still resting on the girl's face. Deadly pale, she pointed to her husband, and said to Sydney: "Take him!"

She passed out of the room--and left them together.