CHAPTER XII - THE GENERAL'S FAMILY.

NOT always remarkable for arriving at just conclusions, Lady Loring had drawn the right inference this time. Stella had stopped the first cab that passed her, and had directed the driver to Camp's Hill, Islington.

The aspect of the miserable little street, closed at one end, and swarming with dirty children quarreling over their play, daunted her for the moment. Even the cabman, drawing up at the entrance to the street, expressed his opinion that it was a queer sort of place for a young lady to venture into alone. Stella thought of Romayne. Her firm persuasion that she was helping him to perform an act of mercy, which was (to his mind) an act of atonement as well, roused her courage. She boldly approached the open door of No. 10, and knocked on it with her parasol.

The tangled gray hair and grimy face of a hideous old woman showed themselves slowly at the end of the passage, rising from the strong-smelling obscurity of the kitchen regions. "What do you want?" said the half-seen witch of the London slums. "Does Madame Marillac live here?" Stella asked. "Do you mean the foreigner?" "Yes." "Second door." With those instructions the upper half of the witch sank and vanished. Stella gathered her skirts together, and ascended a filthy flight of stairs for the first time in her life.

Coarse voices, shameless language, gross laughter behind the closed doors of the first floor hurried her on her way to the rooms on the higher flight. Here there was a change for the better--here, at least, there was silence. She knocked at the door on the landing of the second floor. A gentle voice answered, in French; "Entrez!"--then quickly substituted the English equivalent, "Come in!" Stella opened the door.

The wretchedly furnished room was scrupulously clean. Above the truckle-bed, a cheap little image of the Virgin was fastened to the wall, with some faded artificial flowers arranged above it in the form of a wreath. Two women, in dresses of coarse black stuff, sat at a small round table, working at the same piece of embroidery. The elder of the two rose when the visitor entered the room. Her worn and weary face still showed the remains of beauty in its finely proportioned parts--her dim eyes rested on Stella with an expression of piteous entreaty. "Have you come for the work, madam?" she asked, in English, spoken with a strong foreign accent. "Pray forgive me; I have not finished it yet."

The second of the two workwomen suddenly looked up.

She, too, was wan and frail; but her eyes were bright; her movements still preserved the elasticity of youth. Her likeness to the elder woman proclaimed their relationship, even before she spoke. "Ah! it's my fault!" she burst out passionately in French. "I was hungry and tired, and I slept hours longer than I ought. My mother was too kind to wake me and set me to work. I am a selfish wretch--and my mother is an angel!" She dashed away the tears gathering in her eyes, and proudly, fiercely, resumed her work.

Stella hastened to reassure them, the moment she could make herself heard. "Indeed, I have nothing to do with the work," she said, speaking in French, so that they might the more readily understand her. "I came here, Madame Marillac--if you will not be offended with me, for plainly owning it--to offer you some little help."

"Charity?" asked the daughter, looking up again sternly from her needle.

"Sympathy," Stella answered gently.

The girl resumed her work. "I beg your pardon," she said; "I shall learn to submit to my lot in time."

The quiet long-suffering mother placed a chair for Stella. "You have a kind beautiful face, miss," she said; "and I am sure you will make allowances for my poor girl. I remember the time when I was as quick to feel as she is. May I ask how you came to hear of us?"

"I hope you will excuse me," Stella replied. "I am not at liberty to answer that question."

The mother said nothing. The daughter asked sharply, "Why not?"

Stella addressed her answer to the mother. "I come from a person who desires to be of service to you as an unknown friend," she said.

The wan face of the widow suddenly brightened. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "has my brother heard of the General's death? and has he forgiven me my marriage at last?"

"No, no!" Stella interposed; "I must not mislead you. The person whom I represent is no relation of yours."

Even in spite of this positive assertion, the poor woman held desperately to the hope that had been roused in her. "The name by which you know me may mislead you," she suggested anxiously. "My late husband assumed the name in his exile here. Perhaps, if I told you--"

The daughter stopped her there. "My dear mother, leave this to me." The widow sighed resignedly, and resumed her work. "Madame Marillac will

do very well as a name," the girl continued, turning to Stella, "until we know something more of each other. I suppose you are well acquainted with the person whom you represent?"

"Certainly, or I should not be here."

"You know the person's family connections, in that case? and you can say for certain whether they are French connections or not?"

"I can say for certain," Stella answered, "that they are English connections. I represent a friend who feels kindly toward Madame Marillac; nothing more."

"You see, mother, you were mistaken. Bear it as bravely, dear, as you have borne other trials." Saying this very tenderly, she addressed herself once more to Stella, without attempting to conceal the accompanying change in her manner to coldness and distrust. "One of us must speak plainly," she said. "Our few friends are nearly as poor as we are, and they are all French. I tell you positively that we have no English friends. How has this anonymous benefactor been informed of our poverty? You are a stranger to us--you cannot have given the information?"

Stella's eyes were now open to the awkward position in which she had placed herself. She met the difficulty boldly, still upheld by the conviction that she was serving a purpose cherished by Romayne. "You had good reasons, no doubt, mademoiselle, when you advised your mother to conceal her true name," she rejoined. "Be just enough to believe that your 'anonymous benefactor' has good reasons for concealment too."

It was well said, and it encouraged Madame Marillac to take Stella's part. "My dear Blanche, you speak rather harshly to this good young lady," she

said to her daughter. "You have only to look at her, and to see that she means well."

Blanche took up her needle again, with dogged submission. "If we are to accept charity, mother, I should like to know the hand that gives it," she answered. "I will say no more."

"When you are as old as I am, my dear," rejoined Madame Marillac, "you will not think quite so positively as you think now. I have learned some hard lessons," she proceeded, turning to Stella, "and I hope I am the better for them. My life has not been a happy one--"

"Your life has been a martyrdom!" said the girl, breaking out again in spite of herself. "Oh, my father! my father!" She pushed aside the work and hid her face in her hands.

The gentle mother spoke severely for the first time. "Respect your father's memory!" she said. Blanche trembled and kept silence. "I have no false pride," Madame Marillac continued. "I own that we are miserably poor; and I thank you, my dear young lady, for your kind intentions toward us, without embarrassing you by any inquiries. We manage to live. While my eyes last, our work helps to support us. My good eldest daughter has some employment as a teacher of music, and contributes her little share to assist our poor household. I don't distrust you--I only say, let us try a little longer if we cannot help ourselves."

She had barely pronounced the last words, when a startling interruption led to consequences which the persons present had not foreseen. A shrill, wailing voice suddenly pierced through the flimsy partition which divided the front room and the back room. "Bread!" cried the voice in French; "I'm hungry. Bread! bread!"

The daughter started to her feet. "Think of his betraying us at this moment!" she exclaimed indignantly. The mother rose in silence, and opened a cupboard. Its position was opposite to the place in which Stella was sitting. She saw two or three knives and forks, some cups and saucers and plates, and a folded table-cloth. Nothing else appeared on the shelves; not even the stray crust of bread for which the poor woman had been looking. "Go, my dear, and quiet your brother," she said--and closed the cupboard door again as patiently as ever.

Stella opened her pocketbook when Blanche had left the room. "For God's sake, take something!" she cried. "I offer it with the sincerest respect--I offer it as a loan."

Madame Marillac gently signed to Stella to close the pocketbook again. "That kind heart of yours must not be distressed about trifles," she said. "The baker will trust us until we get the money for our work--and my daughter knows it. If you can tell me nothing else, my dear, will you tell me your Christian name? It is painful to me to speak to you quite as a stranger."

Stella at once complied with the request. Madame Marillac smiled as she repeated the name.

"There is almost another tie between us," she said. "We have your name in France--it speaks with a familiar sound to me in this strange place. Dear Miss Stella, when my poor boy startled you by that cry for food, he recalled to me the saddest of all my anxieties. When I think of him, I should be tempted if my better sense did not restrain me--No! no! put back the pocketbook. I am incapable of the shameless audacity of borrowing a sum of money which I could never repay. Let me tell you what my trouble is, and you will understand that I am in earnest. I had two sons, Miss Stella. The elder--the most lovable, the most affectionate of my children--was killed in a duel."

The sudden disclosure drew a cry of sympathy from Stella, which she was not mistress enough of herself to repress. Now for the first time she understood the remorse that tortured Romayne, as she had not understood it when Lady Loring had told her the terrible story of the duel. Attributing the effect produced on her to the sensitive nature of a young woman, Madame Marillac innocently added to Stella's distress by making excuses.

"I am sorry to have frightened you, my dear," she said. "In your happy country such a dreadful death as my son's is unknown. I am obliged to mention it, or you might not understand what I have still to say. Perhaps I had better not go on?"

Stella roused herself. "Yes! yes!" she answered, eagerly. "Pray go on!"

"My son in the next room," the widow resumed, "is only fourteen years old. It has pleased God sorely to afflict a harmless creature. He has not been in his right mind since--since the miserable day when he followed the duelists, and saw his brother's death. Oh! you are turning pale! How thoughtless, how cruel of me! I ought to have remembered that such horrors as these have never overshadowed your happy life!"

Struggling to recover her self-control, Stella tried to reassure Madame Marillac by a gesture. The voice which she had heard in the next room was--as she now knew--the voice that haunted Romayne. Not the words that had pleaded hunger and called for bread--but those other words, "Assassin! assassin! where are you?"--rang in her ears. She entreated Madame Marillac to break the unendurable interval of silence. The widow's calm voice had a soothing influence which she was eager to feel. "Go on!" she repeated. "Pray go on!"

"I ought not to lay all the blame of my boy's affliction on the duel," said Madame Marillac. "In childhood, his mind never grew with his bodily

growth. His brother's death may have only hurried the result which was sooner or later but too sure to come. You need feel no fear of him. He is never violent--and he is the most beautiful of my children. Would you like to see him?"

"No! I would rather hear you speak of him. Is he not conscious of his own misfortune?"

"For weeks together, Stella--I am sure I may call you Stella?--he is quite calm; you would see no difference outwardly between him and other boys. Unhappily, it is just at those times that a spirit of impatience seems to possess him. He watches his opportunity, and, however careful we may be, he is cunning enough to escape our vigilance."

"Do you mean that he leaves you and his sisters?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. For nearly two months past he has been away from us. Yesterday only, his return relieved us from a state of suspense which I cannot attempt to describe. We don't know where he has been, or in the company of what persons he has passed the time of his absense. No persuasion will induce him to speak to us on the subject. This morning we listened while he was talking to himself."

"Was it part of the boy's madness to repeat the words which still tormented Romayne?" Stella asked if he ever spoke of the duel.

"Never! He seems to have lost all memory of it. We only heard, this morning, one or two unconnected words--something about a woman, and then more that appeared to allude to some person's death. Last night I was with him when he went to bed, and I found that he had something to conceal from me. He let me fold all his clothes, as usual, except his waistcoat--and that he snatched away from me, and put it under his

pillow. We have no hope of being able to examine the waistcoat without his knowledge. His sleep is like the sleep of a dog; if you only approach him, he wakes instantly. Forgive me for troubling you with these trifling details, only interesting to ourselves. You will at least understand the constant anxiety that we suffer."

"In your unhappy position," said Stella, "I should try to resign myself to parting with him--I mean to placing him under medical care."

The mother's face saddened. "I have inquired about it," she answered. "He must pass a night in the workhouse before he can be received as a pauper lunatic in a public asylum. Oh, my dear, I am afraid there is some pride still left in me! He is my only son now; his father was a General in the French army; I was brought up among people of good blood and breeding--I can't take my own boy to the workhouse!"

Stella understood her. "I feel for you with all my heart," she said. "Place him privately, dear Madame Marillac, under skillful and kind control--and let me, do let me, open the pocketbook again."

The widow steadily refused even to look at the pocketbook. "Perhaps," Stella persisted, "you don't know of a private asylum that would satisfy you?"

"My dear, I do know of such a place! The good doctor who attended my husband in his last illness told me of it. A friend of his receives a certain number of poor people into his house, and charges no more than the cost of maintaining them. An unattainable sum to me! There is the temptation that I spoke of. The help of a few pounds I might accept, if I fell ill, because I might afterward pay it back. But a larger sum--never!"

She rose, as if to end the interview. Stella tried every means of persuasion that she could think of, and tried in vain. The friendly dispute between them might have been prolonged, if they had not both been silenced by another interruption from the next room.

This time, it was not only endurable, it was even welcome. The poor boy was playing the air of a French vaudeville on a pipe or flageolet. "Now he is happy!" said the mother. "He is a born musician; do come and see him!" An idea struck Stella. She overcame the inveterate reluctance in her to see the boy so fatally associated with the misery of Romayne's life. As Madame Marillac led the way to the door of communication between the rooms, she quickly took from her pocketbook the bank-notes with which she had provided herself, and folded them so that they could be easily concealed in her hand.

She followed the widow into the little room.

The boy was sitting on his bed. He laid down his flageolet and bowed to Stella. His long silky hair flowed to his shoulders. But one betrayal of a deranged mind presented itself in his delicate face--his large soft eyes had the glassy, vacant look which it is impossible to mistake. "Do you like music, mademoiselle?" he asked, gently. Stella asked him to play his little vaudeville air again. He proudly complied with the request. His sister seemed to resent the presence of a stranger. "The work is at a standstill," she said--and passed into the front room. Her mother followed her as far as the door, to give her some necessary directions. Stella seized her opportunity. She put the bank-notes into the pocket of the boy's jacket, and whispered to him: "Give them to your mother when I have gone away." Under those circumstances, she felt sure that Madame Marillac would yield to the temptation. She could resist much--but she could not resist her son.

The boy nodded, to show that he understood her. The moment after he laid down his flageolet with an expression of surprise.

"You are trembling!" he said. "Are you frightened?"

She was frightened. The mere sense of touching him had made her shudder. Did she feel a vague presentiment of some evil to come from that momentary association with him?

Madame Marillac, turning away again from her daughter, noticed Stella's agitation. "Surely, my poor boy doesn't alarm you?" she said. Before Stella could answer, some one outside knocked at the door. Lady Loring's servant appeared, charged with a carefully-worded message. "If you please, miss, a friend is waiting for you below." Any excuse for departure was welcome to Stella at that moment. She promised to call at the house again in a few days. Madame Marillac kissed her on the forehead as she took leave. Her nerves were still shaken by that momentary contact with the boy. Descending the stairs, she trembled so that she was obliged to hold by the servant's arm. She was not naturally timid. What did it mean?

Lady Loring's carriage was waiting at the entrance of the street, with all the children in the neighborhood assembled to admire it. She impulsively forestalled the servant in opening the carriage door. "Come in!" she cried. "Oh, Stella, you don't know how you have frightened me! Good heavens, you look frightened yourself! From what wretches have I rescued you? Take my smelling bottle, and tell me all about it."

The fresh air, and the reassuring presence of her old friend, revived Stella. She was able to describe her interview with the General's family, and to answer the inevitable inquiries which the narrative called forth. Lady Loring's last question was the most important of the series: "What are you going to do about Romayne?"

"I am going to write to him the moment we get home."

The answer seemed to alarm Lady Loring. "You won't betray me?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You won't let Romayne discover that I have told you about the duel?"

"Certainly not. You shall see my letter before I send it to be forwarded."

Tranquilized so far, Lady Loring bethought herself next of Major Hynd. "Can we tell him what you have done?" her ladyship asked.

"Of course we can tell him," Stella replied. "I shall conceal nothing from Lord Loring, and I shall beg your good husband to write to the Major. He need only say that I have made the necessary inquiries, after being informed of the circumstances by you, and that I have communicated the favorable result to Mr. Romayne."

"It's easy enough to write the letter, my dear. But it's not so easy to say what Major Hynd may think of you."

"Does it matter to me what Major Hynd thinks?"

Lady Loring looked at Stella with a malicious smile. "Are you equally indifferent," she said, "to what Romayne's opinion of your conduct may be?"

Stella's color rose. "Try to be serious, Adelaide, when you speak to me of Romayne," she answered, gravely. "His good opinion of me is the breath of my life."

An hour later, the important letter to Romayne was written. Stella scrupulously informed him of all that had happened--with two necessary omissions. In the first place, nothing was said of the widow's reference to her son's death, and of the effect produced by it on his younger brother. The boy was simply described as being of weak intellect, and as requiring to be kept under competent control. In the second place, Romayne was left to infer that ordinary motives of benevolence were the only motives, on his part, known to Miss Eyrecourt.

The letter ended in these lines:

"If I have taken an undue liberty in venturing, unasked, to appear as your representative, I can only plead that I meant well. It seemed to me to be hard on these poor people, and not just to you in your absence, to interpose any needless delays in carrying out those kind intentions of yours, which had no doubt been properly considered beforehand. In forming your opinion of my conduct, pray remember that I have been careful not to compromise you in any way. You are only known to Madame Marillac as a compassionate person who offers to help her, and who wishes to give that help anonymously. If, notwithstanding this, you disapprove of what I have done, I must not conceal that it will grieve and humiliate me--I have been so eager to be of use to you, when others appeared to hesitate. I must find my consolation in remembering that I have become acquainted with one of the sweetest and noblest of women, and that I have helped to preserve her afflicted son from dangers in the future which I cannot presume to estimate. You will complete what I have only begun. Be forbearing and kind to me if I have innocently offended in this matter--and I shall gratefully remember the day when I took it on myself to be Mr. Romayne's almoner."

Lady Loring read these concluding sentences twice over.

"I think the end of your letter will have its effect on him," she said.

"If it brings me a kind letter in reply," Stella answered, "it will have all the effect I hope for."

"If it does anything," Lady Loring rejoined, "it will do more than that."

"What more can it do?"

"My dear, it can bring Romayne back to you."

Those hopeful words seemed rather to startle Stella than to encourage her.

"Bring him back to me?" she repeated "Oh, Adelaide, I wish I could think as you do!"

"Send the letter to the post," said Lady Loring, "and we shall see."