

Chapter XX

The proud consciousness of her trust, and the great importance she derived from it, might have advertised it to all the house if she had had to run the gauntlet of its inhabitants; but as Dolly had played in every dull room and passage many and many a time, when a child, and had ever since been the humble friend of Miss Haredale, whose foster-sister she was, she was as free of the building as the young lady herself. So, using no greater precaution than holding her breath and walking on tiptoe as she passed the library door, she went straight to Emma's room as a privileged visitor.

It was the liveliest room in the building. The chamber was sombre like the rest for the matter of that, but the presence of youth and beauty would make a prison cheerful (saving alas! that confinement withers them), and lend some charms of their own to the gloomiest scene. Birds, flowers, books, drawing, music, and a hundred such graceful tokens of feminine loves and cares, filled it with more of life and human sympathy than the whole house besides seemed made to hold. There was heart in the room; and who that has a heart, ever fails to recognise the silent presence of another!

Dolly had one undoubtedly, and it was not a tough one either, though there was a little mist of coquettishness about it, such as sometimes surrounds that sun of life in its morning, and slightly dims its lustre. Thus, when Emma rose to greet her, and kissing her affectionately on the cheek, told her, in her quiet way, that she had been very unhappy, the tears stood in Dolly's eyes, and she felt more sorry than she could tell; but next moment she happened to raise them to the glass, and really there was something there so exceedingly agreeable, that as she sighed, she smiled, and felt surprisingly consoled.

'I have heard about it, miss,' said Dolly, 'and it's very sad indeed, but when things are at the worst they are sure to mend.'

'But are you sure they are at the worst?' asked Emma with a smile.

'Why, I don't see how they can very well be more unpromising than they are; I really don't,' said Dolly. 'And I bring something to begin with.'

'Not from Edward?'

Dolly nodded and smiled, and feeling in her pockets (there were pockets in those days) with an affectation of not being able to find what she wanted, which greatly enhanced her importance, at length produced the letter. As Emma hastily broke the seal and became absorbed in its contents, Dolly's eyes, by one of those strange

accidents for which there is no accounting, wandered to the glass again. She could not help wondering whether the coach-maker suffered very much, and quite pitied the poor man.

It was a long letter - a very long letter, written close on all four sides of the sheet of paper, and crossed afterwards; but it was not a consolatory letter, for as Emma read it she stopped from time to time to put her handkerchief to her eyes. To be sure Dolly marvelled greatly to see her in so much distress, for to her thinking a love affair ought to be one of the best jokes, and the slyest, merriest kind of thing in life. But she set it down in her own mind that all this came from Miss Haredeale's being so constant, and that if she would only take on with some other young gentleman - just in the most innocent way possible, to keep her first lover up to the mark - she would find herself inexpressibly comforted.

'I am sure that's what I should do if it was me,' thought Dolly. 'To make one's sweetheart miserable is well enough and quite right, but to be made miserable one's self is a little too much!'

However it wouldn't do to say so, and therefore she sat looking on in silence. She needed a pretty considerable stretch of patience, for when the long letter had been read once all through it was read again, and when it had been read twice all through it was read again. During this tedious process, Dolly beguiled the time in the most improving manner that occurred to her, by curling her hair on her fingers, with the aid of the looking-glass before mentioned, and giving it some killing twists.

Everything has an end. Even young ladies in love cannot read their letters for ever. In course of time the packet was folded up, and it only remained to write the answer.

But as this promised to be a work of time likewise, Emma said she would put it off until after dinner, and that Dolly must dine with her. As Dolly had made up her mind to do so beforehand, she required very little pressing; and when they had settled this point, they went to walk in the garden.

They strolled up and down the terrace walks, talking incessantly - at least, Dolly never left off once - and making that quarter of the sad and mournful house quite gay. Not that they talked loudly or laughed much, but they were both so very handsome, and it was such a breezy day, and their light dresses and dark curls appeared so free and joyous in their abandonment, and Emma was so fair, and Dolly so rosy, and Emma so delicately shaped, and Dolly so plump, and - in short, there are no flowers for any garden like such flowers, let

horticulturists say what they may, and both house and garden seemed to know it, and to brighten up sensibly.

After this, came the dinner and the letter writing, and some more talking, in the course of which Miss Harecastle took occasion to charge upon Dolly certain flirtish and inconstant propensities, which accusations Dolly seemed to think very complimentary indeed, and to be mightily amused with. Finding her quite incorrigible in this respect, Emma suffered her to depart; but not before she had confided to her that important and never-sufficiently-to-be-taken-care-of answer, and endowed her moreover with a pretty little bracelet as a keepsake. Having clasped it on her arm, and again advised her half in jest and half in earnest to amend her roguish ways, for she knew she was fond of Joe at heart (which Dolly stoutly denied, with a great many haughty protestations that she hoped she could do better than that indeed! and so forth), she bade her farewell; and after calling her back to give her more supplementary messages for Edward, than anybody with tenfold the gravity of Dolly Varden could be reasonably expected to remember, at length dismissed her.

Dolly bade her good bye, and tripping lightly down the stairs arrived at the dreaded library door, and was about to pass it again on tiptoe, when it opened, and behold! there stood Mr Harecastle. Now, Dolly had from her childhood associated with this gentleman the idea of something grim and ghostly, and being at the moment conscience-stricken besides, the sight of him threw her into such a flurry that she could neither acknowledge his presence nor run away, so she gave a great start, and then with downcast eyes stood still and trembled.

'Come here, girl,' said Mr Harecastle, taking her by the hand. 'I want to speak to you.'

'If you please, sir, I'm in a hurry,' faltered Dolly, 'and - you have frightened me by coming so suddenly upon me, sir - I would rather go, sir, if you'll be so good as to let me.'

'Immediately,' said Mr Harecastle, who had by this time led her into the room and closed the door. 'You shall go directly. You have just left Emma?'

'Yes, sir, just this minute. - Father's waiting for me, sir, if you'll please to have the goodness - '

'I know. I know,' said Mr Harecastle. 'Answer me a question. What did you bring here to-day?'

'Bring here, sir?' faltered Dolly.

'You will tell me the truth, I am sure. Yes.'

Dolly hesitated for a little while, and somewhat emboldened by his manner, said at last, 'Well then, sir. It was a letter.'

'From Mr Edward Chester, of course. And you are the bearer of the answer?'

Dolly hesitated again, and not being able to decide upon any other course of action, burst into tears.

'You alarm yourself without cause,' said Mr Haredale. 'Why are you so foolish? Surely you can answer me. You know that I have but to put the question to Emma and learn the truth directly. Have you the answer with you?'

Dolly had what is popularly called a spirit of her own, and being now fairly at bay, made the best of it.

'Yes, sir,' she rejoined, trembling and frightened as she was. 'Yes, sir, I have. You may kill me if you please, sir, but I won't give it up. I'm very sorry, - but I won't. There, sir.'

'I commend your firmness and your plain-speaking,' said Mr Haredale. 'Rest assured that I have as little desire to take your letter as your life. You are a very discreet messenger and a good girl.'

Not feeling quite certain, as she afterwards said, whether he might not be 'coming over her' with these compliments, Dolly kept as far from him as she could, cried again, and resolved to defend her pocket (for the letter was there) to the last extremity.

'I have some design,' said Mr Haredale after a short silence, during which a smile, as he regarded her, had struggled through the gloom and melancholy that was natural to his face, 'of providing a companion for my niece; for her life is a very lonely one. Would you like the office? You are the oldest friend she has, and the best entitled to it.'

'I don't know, sir,' answered Dolly, not sure but he was bantering her; 'I can't say. I don't know what they might wish at home. I couldn't give an opinion, sir.'

'If your friends had no objection, would you have any?' said Mr Haredale. 'Come. There's a plain question; and easy to answer.'

'None at all that I know of sir,' replied Dolly. 'I should be very glad to be near Miss Emma of course, and always am.'

'That's well,' said Mr Haredale. 'That is all I had to say. You are anxious to go. Don't let me detain you.'

Dolly didn't let him, nor did she wait for him to try, for the words had no sooner passed his lips than she was out of the room, out of the house, and in the fields again.

The first thing to be done, of course, when she came to herself and considered what a flurry she had been in, was to cry afresh; and the next thing, when she reflected how well she had got over it, was to laugh heartily. The tears once banished gave place to the smiles, and at last Dolly laughed so much that she was fain to lean against a tree, and give vent to her exultation. When she could laugh no longer, and was quite tired, she put her head-dress to rights, dried her eyes, looked back very merrily and triumphantly at the Warren chimneys, which were just visible, and resumed her walk.

The twilight had come on, and it was quickly growing dusk, but the path was so familiar to her from frequent traversing that she hardly thought of this, and certainly felt no uneasiness at being left alone. Moreover, there was the bracelet to admire; and when she had given it a good rub, and held it out at arm's length, it sparkled and glittered so beautifully on her wrist, that to look at it in every point of view and with every possible turn of the arm, was quite an absorbing business. There was the letter too, and it looked so mysterious and knowing, when she took it out of her pocket, and it held, as she knew, so much inside, that to turn it over and over, and think about it, and wonder how it began, and how it ended, and what it said all through, was another matter of constant occupation. Between the bracelet and the letter, there was quite enough to do without thinking of anything else; and admiring each by turns, Dolly went on gaily.

As she passed through a wicket-gate to where the path was narrow, and lay between two hedges garnished here and there with trees, she heard a rustling close at hand, which brought her to a sudden stop. She listened. All was very quiet, and she went on again - not absolutely frightened, but a little quicker than before perhaps, and possibly not quite so much at her ease, for a check of that kind is startling.

She had no sooner moved on again, than she was conscious of the same sound, which was like that of a person tramping stealthily among bushes and brushwood. Looking towards the spot whence it appeared to come, she almost fancied she could make out a crouching figure. She stopped again. All was quiet as before. On she went once more - decidedly faster now - and tried to sing softly to herself. It must be the wind.

But how came the wind to blow only when she walked, and cease when she stood still? She stopped involuntarily as she made the reflection, and the rustling noise stopped likewise. She was really frightened now, and was yet hesitating what to do, when the bushes crackled and snapped, and a man came plunging through them, close before her.