

CHAPTER XXVI

DOLORES

Mr. Sewell's letter ran as follows:--

MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,--It has always been my intention when you arrived at years of maturity to acquaint you with some circumstances which have given me reason to conjecture your true parentage, and to let you know what steps I have taken to satisfy my own mind in relation to these conjectures. In order to do this, it will be necessary for me to go back to the earlier years of my life, and give you the history of some incidents which are known to none of my most intimate friends. I trust I may rely on your honor that they will ever remain as secrets with you.

I graduated from Harvard University in ----. At the time I was suffering somewhat from an affection of the lungs, which occasioned great alarm to my mother, many of whose family had died of consumption. In order to allay her uneasiness, and also for the purpose of raising funds for the pursuit of my professional studies, I accepted a position as tutor in the family of a wealthy gentleman at St. Augustine, in Florida.

I cannot do justice to myself,--to the motives which actuated me in the events which took place in this family, without speaking with the most undisguised freedom of the character of all the parties with whom I was

connected.

Don José Mendoza was a Spanish gentleman of large property, who had emigrated from the Spanish West Indies to Florida, bringing with him an only daughter, who had been left an orphan by the death of her mother at a very early age. He brought to this country a large number of slaves;--and shortly after his arrival, married an American lady: a widow with three children. By her he had four other children. And thus it will appear that the family was made up of such a variety of elements as only the most judicious care could harmonize. But the character of the father and mother was such that judicious care was a thing not to be expected of either.

Don José was extremely ignorant and proud, and had lived a life of the grossest dissipation. Habits of absolute authority in the midst of a community of a very low moral standard had produced in him all the worst vices of despots. He was cruel, overbearing, and dreadfully passionate. His wife was a woman who had pretensions to beauty, and at times could make herself agreeable, and even fascinating, but she was possessed of a temper quite as violent and ungoverned as his own.

Imagine now two classes of slaves, the one belonging to the mistress, and the other brought into the country by the master, and each animated by a party spirit and jealousy;--imagine children of different marriages, inheriting from their parents violent tempers and stubborn wills, flattered and fawned on by slaves, and alternately petted or

stormed at, now by this parent and now by that, and you will have some idea of the task which I undertook in being tutor in this family.

I was young and fearless in those days, as you are now, and the difficulties of the position, instead of exciting apprehension, only awakened the spirit of enterprise and adventure.

The whole arrangements of the household, to me fresh from the simplicity and order of New England, had a singular and wild sort of novelty which was attractive rather than otherwise. I was well recommended in the family by an influential and wealthy gentleman of Boston, who represented my family, as indeed it was, as among the oldest and most respectable of Boston, and spoke in such terms of me, personally, as I should not have ventured to use in relation to myself. When I arrived, I found that two or three tutors, who had endeavored to bear rule in this tempestuous family, had thrown up the command after a short trial, and that the parents felt some little apprehension of not being able to secure the services of another,--a circumstance which I did not fail to improve in making my preliminary arrangements. I assumed an air of grave hauteur, was very exacting in all my requisitions and stipulations, and would give no promise of doing more than to give the situation a temporary trial. I put on an air of supreme indifference as to my continuance, and acted in fact rather on the assumption that I should confer a favor by remaining.

In this way I succeeded in obtaining at the outset a position of more

respect and deference than had been enjoyed by any of my predecessors. I had a fine apartment, a servant exclusively devoted to me, a horse for riding, and saw myself treated among the servants as a person of consideration and distinction.

Don José and his wife both had in fact a very strong desire to retain my services, when after the trial of a week or two, it was found that I really could make their discordant and turbulent children to some extent obedient and studious during certain portions of the day; and in fact I soon acquired in the whole family that ascendancy which a well-bred person who respects himself, and can keep his temper, must have over passionate and undisciplined natures.

I became the receptacle of the complaints of all, and a sort of confidential adviser. Don José imparted to me with more frankness than good taste his chagrins with regard to his wife's indolence, ill-temper, and bad management, and his wife in turn omitted no opportunity to vent complaints against her husband for similar reasons. I endeavored, to the best of my ability, to act a friendly part by both. It never was in my nature to see anything that needed to be done without trying to do it, and it was impossible to work at all without becoming so interested in my work as to do far more than I had agreed to do. I assisted Don José about many of his affairs; brought his neglected accounts into order; and suggested from time to time arrangements which relieved the difficulties which had been brought on by disorder and neglect. In fact, I became, as he said, quite a necessary of life to

him.

In regard to the children, I had a more difficult task. The children of Don José by his present wife had been systematically stimulated by the negroes into a chronic habit of dislike and jealousy toward her children by a former husband. On the slightest pretext, they were constantly running to their father with complaints; and as the mother warmly espoused the cause of her first children, criminations and recriminations often convulsed the whole family.

In ill-regulated families in that region, the care of the children is from the first in the hands of half-barbarized negroes, whose power of moulding and assimilating childish minds is peculiar, so that the teacher has to contend constantly with a savage element in the children which seems to have been drawn in with the mother's milk. It is, in a modified way, something the same result as if the child had formed its manners in Dahomey or on the coast of Guinea. In the fierce quarrels which were carried on between the children of this family, I had frequent occasion to observe this strange, savage element, which sometimes led to expressions and actions which would seem incredible in civilized society.

The three children by Madame Mendoza's former husband were two girls of sixteen and eighteen and a boy of fourteen. The four children of the second marriage consisted of three boys and a daughter,--the eldest being not more than thirteen.

The natural capacity of all the children was good, although, from self-will and indolence, they had grown up in a degree of ignorance which could not have been tolerated except in a family living an isolated plantation life in the midst of barbarized dependents. Savage and untaught and passionate as they were, the work of teaching them was not without its interest to me. A power of control was with me a natural gift; and then that command of temper which is the common attribute of well-trained persons in the Northern states, was something so singular in this family as to invest its possessor with a certain awe; and my calm, energetic voice, and determined manner, often acted as a charm on their stormy natures.

But there was one member of the family of whom I have not yet spoken,--and yet all this letter is about her,--the daughter of Don José by his first marriage. Poor Dolores! poor child! God grant she may have entered into his rest!

I need not describe her. You have seen her picture. And in the wild, rude, discordant family, she always reminded me of the words, "a lily among thorns." She was in her nature unlike all the rest, and, I may say, unlike any one I ever saw. She seemed to live a lonely kind of life in this disorderly household, often marked out as the object of the spites and petty tyrannies of both parties. She was regarded with bitter hatred and jealousy by Madame Mendoza, who was sure to visit her with unsparing bitterness and cruelty after the occasional demonstrations of

fondness she received from her father. Her exquisite beauty and the gentle softness of her manners made her such a contrast to her sisters as constantly excited their ill-will. Unlike them all, she was fastidiously neat in her personal habits, and orderly in all the little arrangements of life.

She seemed to me in this family to be like some shy, beautiful pet creature in the hands of rude, unappreciated owners, hunted from quarter to quarter, and finding rest only by stealth. Yet she seemed to have no perception of the harshness and cruelty with which she was treated. She had grown up with it; it was the habit of her life to study peaceable methods of averting or avoiding the various inconveniences and annoyances of her lot, and secure to herself a little quiet.

It not unfrequently happened, amid the cabals and storms which shook the family, that one party or the other took up and patronized Dolores for a while, more, as it would appear, out of hatred for the other than any real love to her. At such times it was really affecting to see with what warmth the poor child would receive these equivocal demonstrations of good-will--the nearest approaches to affection which she had ever known--and the bitterness with which she would mourn when they were capriciously withdrawn again. With a heart full of affection, she reminded me of some delicate, climbing plant trying vainly to ascend the slippery side of an inhospitable wall, and throwing its neglected tendrils around every weed for support.

Her only fast, unfailing friend was her old negro nurse, or Mammy, as the children called her. This old creature, with the cunning and subtlety which had grown up from years of servitude, watched and waited upon the interests of her little mistress, and contrived to carry many points for her in the confused household. Her young mistress was her one thought and purpose in living. She would have gone through fire and water to serve her; and this faithful, devoted heart, blind and ignorant though it were, was the only unfailing refuge and solace of the poor hunted child.

Dolores, of course, became my pupil among the rest. Like the others, she had suffered by the neglect and interruptions in the education of the family, but she was intelligent and docile, and learned with a surprising rapidity. It was not astonishing that she should soon have formed an enthusiastic attachment to me, as I was the only intelligent, cultivated person she had ever seen, and treated her with unvarying consideration and delicacy. The poor thing had been so accustomed to barbarous words and manners that simple politeness and the usages of good society seemed to her cause for the most boundless gratitude.

It is due to myself, in view of what follows, to say that I was from the first aware of the very obvious danger which lay in my path in finding myself brought into close and daily relations with a young creature so confiding, so attractive, and so singularly circumstanced. I knew that it would be in the highest degree dishonorable to make the slightest advances toward gaining from her that kind of affection which might

interfere with her happiness in such future relations as her father might arrange for her. According to the European fashion, I know that Dolores was in her father's hands, to be disposed of for life according to his pleasure, as absolutely as if she had been one of his slaves. I had every reason to think that his plans on this subject were matured, and only waited for a little more teaching and training on my part, and her fuller development in womanhood, to be announced to her.

In looking back over the past, therefore, I have not to reproach myself with any dishonest and dishonorable breach of trust; for I was from the first upon my guard, and so much so that even the jealousy my other scholars never accused me of partiality. I was not in the habit of giving very warm praise, and was in my general management anxious rather to be just than conciliatory, knowing that with the kind of spirits I had to deal with, firmness and justice went farther than anything else. If I approved Dolores oftener than the rest, it was seen to be because she never failed in a duty; if I spent more time with her lessons, it was because her enthusiasm for study led her to learn longer ones and study more things; but I am sure there was never a look or a word toward her that went beyond the proprieties of my position.

But yet I could not so well guard my heart. I was young and full of feeling. She was beautiful; and more than that, there was something in her Spanish nature at once so warm and simple, so artless and yet so unconsciously poetic, that her presence was a continual charm. How well I remember her now,--all her little ways,--the movements of her pretty

little hands,--the expression of her changeful face as she recited to me,--the grave, rapt earnestness with which she listened to all my instructions!

I had not been with her many weeks before I felt conscious that it was her presence that charmed the whole house, and made the otherwise perplexing and distasteful details of my situation agreeable. I had a dim perception that this growing passion was a dangerous thing for myself; but was it a reason, I asked, why I should relinquish a position in which I felt that I was useful, and when I could do for this lovely child what no one else could do? I call her a child,--she always impressed me as such,--though she was in her sixteenth year and had the early womanly development of Southern climates. She seemed to me like something frail and precious, needing to be guarded and cared for; and when reason told me that I risked my own happiness in holding my position, love argued on the other hand that I was her only friend, and that I should be willing to risk something myself for the sake of protecting and shielding her. For there was no doubt that my presence in the family was a restraint upon the passions which formerly vented themselves so recklessly on her, and established a sort of order in which she found more peace than she had ever known before.

For a long time in our intercourse I was in the habit of looking on myself as the only party in danger. It did not occur to me that this heart, so beautiful and so lonely, might, in the want of all natural and appropriate objects of attachment, fasten itself on me unsolicited, from

the mere necessity of loving. She seemed to me so much too beautiful, too perfect, to belong to a lot in life like mine, that I could not suppose it possible this could occur without the most blameworthy solicitation on my part; and it is the saddest and most affecting proof to me how this poor child had been starved for sympathy and love, that she should have repaid such cold services as mine with such an entire devotion. At first her feelings were expressed openly toward me, with the dutiful air of a good child. She placed flowers on my desk in the morning, and made quaint little nosegays in the Spanish fashion, which she gave me, and busied her leisure with various ingenious little knick-knacks of fancy work, which she brought me. I treated them all as the offerings of a child while with her, but I kept them sacredly in my own room. To tell the truth, I have some of the poor little things now.

But after a while I could not help seeing how she loved me; and then I felt as if I ought to go; but how could I? The pain to myself I could have borne; but how could I leave her to all the misery of her bleak, ungenial position? She, poor thing, was so unconscious of what I knew,--for I was made clear-sighted by love. I tried the more strictly to keep to the path I had marked out for myself, but I fear I did not always do it; in fact, many things seemed to conspire to throw us together. The sisters, who were sometimes invited out to visit on neighboring estates, were glad enough to dispense with the presence and attractions of Dolores, and so she was frequently left at home to study with me in their absence. As to Don José, although he always treated me with civility, yet he had such an ingrained and deep-rooted idea of his

own superiority of position, that I suppose he would as soon have imagined the possibility of his daughter's falling in love with one of his horses. I was a great convenience to him. I had a knack of governing and carrying points in his family that it had always troubled and fatigued him to endeavor to arrange,--and that was all. So that my intercourse with Dolores was as free and unwatched, and gave me as many opportunities of enjoying her undisturbed society, as heart could desire.

At last came the crisis, however. After breakfast one morning, Don José called Dolores into his library and announced to her that he had concluded for her a treaty of marriage, and expected her husband to arrive in a few days. He expected that this news would be received by her with the glee with which a young girl hears of a new dress or of a ball-ticket, and was quite confounded at the grave and mournful silence in which she received it. She said no word, made no opposition, but went out from the room and shut herself up in her own apartment, and spent the day in tears and sobs.

Don José, who had rather a greater regard for Dolores than for any creature living, and who had confidently expected to give great delight by the news he had imparted, was quite confounded by this turn of things. If there had been one word of either expostulation or argument, he would have blazed and stormed in a fury of passion; but as it was, this broken-hearted submission, though vexatious, was perplexing. He sent for me, and opened his mind, and begged me to talk with Dolores

and show her the advantages of the alliance, which the poor foolish child, he said, did not seem to comprehend. The man was immensely rich, and had a splendid estate in Cuba. It was a most desirable thing.

I ventured to inquire whether his person and manners were such as would be pleasing to a young girl, and could gather only that he was a man of about fifty, who had been most of his life in the military service, and was now desirous of making an establishment for the repose of his latter days, at the head of which he would place a handsome and tractable woman, and do well by her.

I represented that it would perhaps be safer to say no more on the subject until Dolores had seen him, and to this he agreed. Madame Mendoza was very zealous in the affair, for the sake of getting clear of the presence of Dolores in the family, and her sisters laughed at her for her dejected appearance. They only wished, they said, that so much luck might happen to them. For myself, I endeavored to take as little notice as possible of the affair, though what I felt may be conjectured. I knew,--I was perfectly certain,--that Dolores loved me as I loved her. I knew that she had one of those simple and unworldly natures which wealth and splendor could not satisfy, and whose life would lie entirely in her affections. Sometimes I violently debated with myself whether honor required me to sacrifice her happiness as well as my own, and I felt the strongest temptation to ask her to be my wife and fly with me to the Northern states, where I did not doubt my ability to make for her a humble and happy home.

But the sense of honor is often stronger than all reasoning, and I felt that such a course would be the betrayal of a trust; and I determined at least to command myself till I should see the character of the man who was destined to be her husband.

Meanwhile the whole manner of Dolores was changed. She maintained a stony, gloomy silence, performed all her duties in a listless way, and occasionally, when I commented on anything in her lessons or exercises, would break into little flashes of petulance, most strange and unnatural in her. Sometimes I could feel that she was looking at me earnestly, but if I turned my eyes toward her, hers were instantly averted; but there was in her eyes a peculiar expression at times, such as I have seen in the eye of a hunted animal when it turned at bay,--a sort of desperate resistance,--which, taken in connection with her fragile form and lovely face, produced a mournful impression.

One morning I found Dolores sitting alone in the schoolroom, leaning her head on her arms. She had on her wrist a bracelet of peculiar workmanship, which she always wore,--the bracelet which was afterwards the means of confirming her identity. She sat thus some moments in silence, and then she raised her head and began turning this bracelet round and round upon her arm, while she looked fixedly before her. At last she spoke abruptly, and said,--

"Did I ever tell you that this was my mother's hair? It is my mother's

hair,--and she was the only one that ever loved me; except poor old Mammy, nobody else loves me,--nobody ever will."

"My dear Miss Dolores," I began.

"Don't call me dear," she said; "you don't care for me,--nobody does,--papa doesn't, and I always loved him; everybody in the house wants to get rid of me, whether I like to go or not. I have always tried to be good and do all you wanted, and I should think you might care for me a little, but you don't."

"Dolores," I said, "I do care for you more than I do for any one in the world; I love you more than my own soul."

These were the very words I never meant to say, but somehow they seemed to utter themselves against my will. She looked at me for a moment as if she could not believe her hearing, and then the blood flushed her face, and she laid her head down on her arms.

At this moment Madame Mendoza and the other girls came into the room in a clamor of admiration about a diamond bracelet which had just arrived as a present from her future husband. It was a splendid thing, and had for its clasp his miniature, surrounded by the largest brilliants.

The enthusiasm of the party even at this moment could not say anything in favor of the beauty of this miniature, which, though painted on

ivory, gave the impression of a coarse-featured man, with a scar across one eye.

"No matter for the beauty," said one of the girls, "so long as it is set with such diamonds."

"Come, Dolores," said another, giving her the present, "pull off that old hair bracelet, and try this on."

Dolores threw the diamond bracelet from her with a vehemence so unlike her gentle self as to startle every one.

"I shall not take off my mother's bracelet for a gift from a man I never knew," she said. "I hate diamonds. I wish those who like such things might have them."

"Was ever anything so odd?" said Madame Mendoza.

"Dolores always was odd," said another of the girls; "nobody ever could tell what she would like."