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CHAPTER XVII.

The Beginning of the Great Surprises.

And now followed days in which I seemed to make little or no progress. Mr. Clavering, disturbed perhaps by my presence, forsook his usual haunts, thus depriving me of all opportunity of making his acquaintance in any natural manner, while the evenings spent at Miss Leavenworth's were productive of little else than constant suspense and uneasiness.

The manuscript required less revision than I supposed. Mr. Leavenworth being one of the men who believe in finishing as you go, but in the course of making such few changes as were necessary, I had ample opportunity of studying the character of Mr. Harwell. I found him to be neither more nor less than an excellent amanuensis. Stiff, unbending, and sombre, but true to his duty and reliable in its performance, I learned to respect him, and even to like him; and this, too, though I saw the liking was not reciprocated, whatever the respect may have been. He never spoke of Eleanore Leavenworth, or, indeed, mentioned the family or its troubles in any way, till I began to feel that all this reticence had a cause deeper than the nature of the man, and that if he did speak, it would be to some purpose.

This continual beating against a stone wall, for thus I felt it to be, became at last almost unendurable. Clavering shy, and the secretary unapproachable, how was I to gain anything? The short interviews I had on this subject with Mary did not help matters. Haughty, constrained, feverish, pettish, grateful, appealing, everything at once and never twice the same, I learned to dread even while I coveted an interview. She appeared to be passing through some crisis which occasioned her the keenest suffering. I have seen her, when she thought herself alone, throw up her hands with the gesture which we use to ward off a coming evil, or shut out some hideous vision. I have likewise beheld her standing with her proud head abased, her whole form sinking and inert, as if the pressure of a weight she could neither upbear nor cast aside had robbed her even of the show of resistance. But that was only once. Ordinarily she was at least stately in her trouble. Even when the softest appeal came into her eyes she stood erect, and retained her expression of conscious power. Even the night she met me in the hall with feverish cheeks, and lips trembling with eagerness, only to turn and fly again without giving utterance to what she had to say, she comported herself with a fiery dignity that was well-nigh imposing.

That all this means something I was sure, and so I kept my patience alive with the hope that some day she would make a revelation. Those quivering lips would not always remain closed; the secret involving Eleanore's honor and happiness would be divulged by this restless being, if by no one else. Nor was the memory of that extraordinary if not cruel accusation I had heard her make, enough to destroy this hope—for hope it had grown to be so that I found myself insensibly shortening my time with Mr. Harwell in the library, and extending my tete-a-tete visits with Mary in the reception-room, till the imperturbable secretary was forced to complain that he was often left for hours without work.

But, as I say, days passed and a second Monday evening came round without seeing me any further advanced upon the problem I had set myself to solve, than I was two weeks before.

But when upon nearing the reception-room, I saw Mary pacing the floor with the air of one who is restlessly awaiting something or somebody, I took a sudden resolution, and advancing toward her, said: "Do I see you alone, Miss Leavenworth?"

She paused in her hurried action, blushed and bowed, but contrary to her usual custom, did not bid me enter.

"Will it be too great an intrusion on my part if I venture to come in?" I asked.

Her glance flashed uneasily to the clock, and she seemed about to excuse herself, but suddenly yielded, and drawing up a chair before the fire, motioned me toward it. Though she endeavored to appear calm, I vaguely felt that I had

chanced upon her in one of her most agitated moods, and that I had only to broach the subject I had in mind to behold that haughty aspect disappear before me like melting snow. I also felt that I had but few moments in which to do it. I accordingly plunged immediately into the subject.

"Miss Leavenworth," said I, "in intruding upon you to-night I have a purpose other than that of giving pleasure. I have come to make an appeal."

Instantly I saw that in some way I had started wrong. "An appeal to make to me?" she asked, breathing coldness from every feature of her face.

"Yes," I went on with passionate recklessness. "Balked in every other endeavor to learn the truth, I have come to you, whom I believe to be noble at the core, for that help which seems likely to fail us in every other direction; for the word which, if it does not absolutely save your cousin, will at least put us upon the track of what will."

"I do not understand what you mean," returned she, slightly shrinking.

"Miss Leavenworth," pursued I, "it is needless for me to tell you in what position your cousin stands. You who remember both the form and the drift of the questions put to her at the inquest, comprehend it all without an explanation from me. But what you may not know is this, that unless she is speedily relieved from the suspicion which justly or not has attached itself to her name, the consequences which such suspicion entails, must fall upon her, and —"

"Good God!" she cried, "you do not mean that she will be —"

"Subject to arrest?" Yes.

It was a blow. Shame, horror, and anguish were in every line of her white face. "And all because of that key!" she murmured.

"Key? How did you know anything about a key?"

"Why," said she, flushing painfully, "I cannot say; didn't you tell me?"

"No," returned I.

"The papers, then?"

"The papers have never mentioned it."

She grew more and more agitated. "I thought every one knew. No, I did not, either," exclaimed she, in a sudden burst of shame and penitence. "I knew it was a secret, but—oh, Mr. Raymond, it was Eleanore herself who told me."

"Eleanore?"

"Yes, that last evening she was here; we were together in the drawing-room."

"What did she tell?"

"That the key to the library had been seen in her possession."

I could scarcely conceal my incredulity. Eleanore, conscious of the suspicion with which her cousin regarded her, inform that cousin of a fact which seemed to give weight to her suspicion! I could not believe this.

"But you knew it," Mary went on; "I have revealed nothing that I should have kept secret?"

"No," said I; "and Miss Leavenworth, it is this thing which makes your cousin's position absolutely dangerous. It is a fact that, left unexplained, must ever link her name with infamy; a bit of circumstantial evidence no sophistry can smother, and no denial obliterate. Only her hitherto spotless reputation, and the efforts of one who, notwithstanding appearances, believes in her innocence, keeps her so long from the clutch of the officers of justice. That key and the silence preserved by her in regard to it are sinking her slowly into a pit from which the utmost endeavors of her best friends will soon be inadequate to extricate her."

"And you tell me this—"

"That you may have pity on the poor girl, who will not have pity on herself, and by the explanation of a few circumstances, which cannot be mysteries to you, assist in bringing her from under the dreadful shadow that threatens to overwhelm her."

"And would you insinuate, sir," cried she, turning upon me with a look of great anger, "that I know any more than you do of this matter? that I possess any knowledge which I have not already made public, concerning the dreadful tragedy which has transformed our existence into a lasting horror? Has the blight of suspicion fallen upon me, too; and have you come to accuse me in my own house —"

"Miss Leavenworth," I entreated, "calm yourself. I accuse you of nothing. I only desire you to enlighten me as to your cousin's probable motive for this criminating silence. You cannot

be in ignorance of it. You are her cousin, almost her sister, have been at all events her daily companion for years, and must know for whom or for what she sears her lips, and conceals facts which, if known, would direct suspicion to the real criminal—that is, if you really believe what you have hitherto stated, that your cousin is an innocent woman."

She not making any answer to this, I rose and confronted her. "Miss Leavenworth, do you believe your cousin guiltless of this crime, or not?"

"Guiltless? Eleanore? O my God, if all the world were only as innocent as she!"

"Then," said I, "you must likewise believe that if she refrains from speaking in regard to matters which to ordinary observers ought to be explained, she does it only from motives of kindness toward one less guiltless than herself."

"What? No, no, I do not say that. What made you think of any such explanation?"

"The action itself. With one of Eleanore's character, such conduct as hers admits of no other construction. Either she is mad, or she is shielding another at the expense of herself."

Mary's lip, which had trembled, slowly steadied itself. "And whom have you settled upon as the person for whom Eleanore thus sacrifices herself?"

"Ah," said I, "there is where I seek assistance from you. With your knowledge of her history—"

But Mary Leavenworth stopped me with a quiet gesture. "I beg your pardon," said she, "but you make a mistake. I know little or nothing of Eleanore's personal feelings. The mystery must be solved by someone besides me."

I changed my tactics.

"When Eleanore confessed to you that the missing key had been seen in her possession, did she likewise inform you where she obtained it, and for what reason she was hiding it?"

"No."

"Merely told you the fact without any explanation?"

"Yes."

"Was not that a strange piece of gratuitous information for her to give one who, but a few hours before, had accused her to the face of committing a deadly crime?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, her voice suddenly sinking.

"You will not deny that you were once not only ready to believe her guilty, but that you actually charged her with having perpetrated this crime?"

"Explain yourself," she cried.

"Miss Leavenworth, do you not remember what was said in that room upstairs, when you were alone with your cousin on the morning of the inquest, just before Mr. Gryce and myself entered your presence?"

Her eyes did not fall, but they filled with sudden terror. "You heard?" she whispered.

"I could not help it. I was just outside the door, and—"

"What did you hear?"

I told her.

"And Mr. Gryce?"

"He was at my side."

It seemed as if her eyes would devour my face. "Yet nothing was said when you came in?"

"No."

"You, however, have never forgotten it?"

"How could we, Miss Leavenworth!"

Her head fell forward in her hands; she seemed lost for one wild moment in a gulf of darkness. "And that is why you come here to-night," she exclaimed, desperately rousing herself, and flashing full of indignation upon me. "With that sentence written upon your heart, you invade my presence, torture me with questions—"

"Pardon me," I broke in, "are my questions such as you, with reasonable regard for the honor of one you are accustomed to associate with, should hesitate to answer? Do I derogate from my manhood in asking you how and why you came to make an accusation of so grave a nature at a time when all the circumstances of the case were freshly before you, only to insist full as strongly upon your cousin's innocence when you found there was even more cause for your imputation than you had supposed?"

She did not seem to hear me. "Oh, my cruel fate!" she murmured. "Oh, my cruel fate!"

(To be continued.)

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