

THE LITTLE OLD SECRETARY

(CONTINUED.) CHAPTER IX.

'My soul doth tell me Hero is belied; And that shall Claudio know, so shall the prince, And all of them, that thus dishonor her; On my honor, she was charged with nothing But what was true and very full of proof.'

It had been agreed to start earlier than usual, Mr. Everard having to do all the extra letter-writing. About half-an-hour before the appointed time, the young people of the party were collected in the morning room amusing themselves with drawing lots as to the places in the carriages which each should occupy. In the midst of their fun and laughter, to their great surprise, Lord Melton, whose shadow was never before seen till twelve o'clock, entered the room, carrying in his hand a Russian leather box, which looked like a jewel case.

"I want to show you these diamonds by daylight," he said, smiling as he looked round upon the merry party. "They were a present, long years ago, from an Indian Rajah to an ancestor of the Melton family who had done him a service. They are called the 'Baptist diamonds,' and are reputed some of the most valuable jewels not belonging to the Crown."

Lord Melton seated himself at the table, Dora instantly establishing herself on his knee, while the rest of the party crowded round to look at the exquisite stars of brilliants flashing back the morning light in jets of living color, and to listen to the history of their coming into the hands of their present owner's great uncle. They were all thus charmingly absorbed when the carriages were announced, and the ladies flitted away to put on their out-door gear.

"I should like your uncle just to see the diamonds," said Lord Melton, as he rose from his chair, to cousin Jack, "and I will ask Mr. Everard to put them away. No, no, Dora; there is nothing there today," he continued, shaking his hand merrily at the roguish child, whose hand was making a dive for sugar-plums in his pocket, "but come with me to Mr. Everard and see if he has got anything for us." He left the room, the little one following close to his heels, while Jack went off to fetch his uncle, and for a moment or two the apartment was left empty, with the diamond collar lying open on the table.

Meantime Rose, who had got her bonnet to go down to the poor woman in Kathleen's place, came, as her young mistress had directed her, to the morning room, for the bunch of white flowers she was to lay in the little angel's coffin.

Attracted by the gorgeous display of jewelry, far exceeding in beauty anything she had ever before seen, she went up to the table to admire it. So she was found, lost in a rapture of delight at the glories of the flashing gems, when Mr. Fitzgerald came in. His entrance brought to her the sudden consciousness that she was out of her place, that she had yielded thoughtlessly to her curiosity; and she colored as she curtsied and left the room. At the door Kathleen met her with a bouquet of beautiful flowers, and bid her hasten away at once, as she feared the poor mother might be fretting.

The picnic party had just finished arranging themselves in the carriages as Kathleen joined them, and directly she had taken the seat allotted to her, they drove off in high spirits to spend a long day in the woods near Fernleigh.

The weather was perfect. There was that bright exhilaration in the air which always enabled Kathleen to throw off cares, in the bounding hopefulness of a childlike heart.

The carriage in which she found herself contained Mary Fitzgerald, Cousin Jack and Miss Lavinia Plumtree. Jack, who very often had been left to bear the infliction of the latter lady's company, was delighted at the presence of Kathleen, and began immediately:

"Now just see how they have left me with three of you to look after! They take good care the great man should only have one lady to hand out of the carriage, and how is an unlucky fellow to do his devoir when he is in the proportion of one to three! Why are there so many, too many, women in the world?"

"Because," said Mary, solemnly, "the Scotch proverb says, 'There's always moast soun o' the good crop!'"

There was a general laugh except from Jack, who persisted that was "no go at all. The lords of creation get on without the women, but what could the women do without the men?"

"Indeed," exclaimed Kathleen, the fun sparkling in her eyes, "our friend, Mrs. O'Leary, would tell you there is Scripture authority quite the other way."

"As how?" inquired Jack, composing his face to listen.

"She was complaining to my mother that 'Pat,' her husband, wouldn't put his strength out on some cleaning that had to be done; it was always the same," she declared, indignantly, "men never would." "Well, you see, Mrs. O'Leary," said my mother, soothingly, "we can't expect them to be like us. 'Like us!' she rejoined. 'Like us! I should think not, indeed! Why, we have got Almighty God's own word for it. He hadn't made the first man ten minutes before He looked at him and said, 'You're a poor creature to do by yourself; I must make a woman to take care of you.'"

This story, told with Kathleen's dancing eyes and racy touch of the brogue, sent them into such fits of laughter that Jack protested he was quite weak with laughing, and entreated her not to go on killing them till they had some dinner; whereupon she and Mary assured him that they would have the greatest pleasure in helping him out of the carriage and teased him till he vowed to hold his tongue about womankind forevermore.

It was one of the brightest, merriest days of Kathleen's English visit. Lord Melton was exceedingly kind and attentive to her during the picnic; and she returned home feeling worlds the better for the day spent in the green woods of beautiful Fernleigh. Alas! for the dark shadows which so often seem set as foils to the lights in our picture of life. She came home to find the whole house in commotion. The emerald clasp, belonging to the diamond collar, was missing when Mr. Everard came to pack up the jewel-case.

The room had only been left empty for the few minutes it had taken to call Mr. Fitzgerald to look at the diamonds. During those few minutes Rose had entered, had been found looking at them, and had colored and seen confused when Mr. Fitzgerald entered. Directly the absence of the clasp was discovered, she was sent for, but had gone out on Kathleen's errand to the poor woman, and did not return till late in the afternoon.

Meantime the servant's hall was in an uproar.

An unguarded word let fall by Mr. Fitzgerald had been caught up; a complete case made out against Rose, and to strengthen it, a story has been got up that she had involved herself in debt to procure a magnificent evening dress for Miss McDermot, and had stolen the clasp in order to free herself. One footman, in particular, whose forward manner Rose had invariably

repelled, was foremost in volunteering information which might seem to fasten the theft upon her.

Things had not been mended by the proud, agitated way in which Rose had met the questions that had been asked her directly she returned. She indignantly denied having touched the clasp, but offered no clue to its mysterious disappearance. Furthermore, when at tea-time nurse had gone to her room, she was nowhere to be found and her bonnet and cloak had disappeared with her. Neither could anyone tell where to seek for her. It seemed probable that, in her trouble, she had taken refuge in the cottage of the poor Irishwoman to whom Kathleen had sent her in the morning; but then no one knew where that was, and Mr. Fitzgerald was compelled to wait for the return of the picnic party, to learn from Kathleen the direction of the cottage. Meantime, by his command, the house had been searched from top to bottom, the police had been set on the alert, and every means of discovering the missing jewel had been resorted to.

Kathleen felt almost overwhelmed as her uncle put before her the whole of this astonishing occurrence, and the strong circumstantial evidence which unhappily appeared to admit of but one solution. She gave the direction to Mrs. Swinnerton's cottage, writing a little pencil note to Rose, telling her "not to be afraid, but to come back immediately to her young mistress and friend, who would as soon think of doubting herself as of doubting her."

"I beseech you, dear uncle," she said, as she put the note into his hand, "deal with Rose as though you were sure she is innocent, for that she is so, I am perfectly certain you will find out ere long. She is a girl whose sense of honor is as sensitive as our own, and if you suffer her to be stung to death by these poisonous tongues, believe me your kind heart will regret it."

"Give me the note, and I will take it and bring her back myself," said Mr. Everard, who was much struck with the earnestness of Kathleen's tone and manner. "That will insure her not being insulted."

Kathleen's heart was too full for her to reply; she could only thank him with a most grateful smile. When he was gone, she could do nothing but to pace up and down before the front door waiting for her, pondering meanwhile over every possibility or probability that could account for this most unfortunate affair. The only remembrance that rankled in her mind with a distress akin to pain, though it did not shake her faith in Rose's honesty, was the girl's absolute refusal to tell her who had given her the Indian muslin she had made up for her on the second day of Lord Melton's arrival.

"What could have possessed me," she murmured to herself, "to have been so easily contented with such an answer? how could I for a moment have supposed that such a dress as that was given to her in Ireland?"

It was a terrible trouble. At last Kathleen was obliged to go in. The dinner hour was approaching, and Mr. Everard had not as yet returned. Kathleen felt very anxious.

Lord Melton behaved admirably. He blamed nothing but his own carelessness in having left the jewels before Mr. Everard was there to take charge of them. Nevertheless he was evidently exceedingly vexed; for the loss was irreparable, the clasp was extremely valuable, and its workmanship the most unique of the whole collar. He had been aware it was loose, and had brought it to England, intending to get it perfectly rivetted by a first-rate London jeweller. So, though he deprecated throwing blame on any individual, his eyes

were on the alert in every direction, and he was inclined to be particularly suspicious of the man who was so glib in casting suspicion on Rose.

Even little Dora did not escape unquestioned, for Mr. Fitzgerald knew she was noted for tricks in hiding. She was found once putting a photograph of her father down a certain crack in the nursery floor, and when scolded for being so mischievous, she made signs that poor mamma was down there already, so lonely, and she was sending papa to keep her company." But on this occasion she seemed beyond suspicion. She showed no signs of tricks when questioned by her father about the jewels, but answered confidently, "M with the big sword had them himself." Besides, Lord Melton's testimony exonerated Dora. "The child had followed him out of the room when he went in search of Mr. Everard. He could bear witness that both her hands were empty, as he looked around to see that she was following him, and he did not lose sight of her till, on their return from Mr. Everard's room, they encountered her nurse with the child's hat and cloak seek her in a great hurry to dress her for the picnic."

The matter seemed wrapped in impenetrable mystery, unless Rose was, indeed, the guilty party.

Dinner came, but no Mr. Everard. It was very uncomfortable. Mr. Fitzgerald could not disguise his extreme annoyance at such an occurrence having happened at his house. He felt the hardship of condemning Rose on merely circumstantial evidence, and for Kathleen's sake he carefully abstained from speaking openly of his suspicions. Yet he could not conceal from his niece the conviction his own eyes had given him, and repeatedly answered her representations of Rose's superior character and antecedents by, "My dear, who else could have done it?"

The door-bell rang at last, and Kathleen hastily leaving the table, went to the hall-door to receive poor Rose from Mr. Everard's hands.

"Here is your young mistress waiting for you," said Mr. Everard in a cheerful voice to Rose, "it will soon be all right now, you are with her." Then as he passed Rose he said in French, in a low tone, "I have not spoken a word to her on the subject, she is in too excited a state, but I believe with you in her innocence;" and with a sympathizing smile he disappeared quickly in the dining-room. How Kathleen blessed him in her heart for his trust in her, and his kindness to Rose!

Kathleen was inexpressibly shocked to see the havoc a few hours of wretchedness had made upon the poor girl. She had a burning fever-spot upon her cheek, her eyes looked wild and bloodshot, and she talked incoherently. It seemed quite a relief for her to see her young mistress, and she threw herself into Kathleen's arms, weeping bitterly.

Kathleen got her to bed, gave her a cooling drink, and kept wet cloths upon her burning forehead. Then she sat by her side soothing her, and assuring her that the truth would soon come out, and that she must be brave and patient till this trial had passed. Kathleen was, however, too anxious on one point to keep quiet longer than necessary, and as soon therefore as Rose had calmed a little, she ventured to ask the question which was weighing so heavily on her mind: "Who had given her the Indian muslin dress, and why she had promised never to tell?" Then Rose became very much excited again, exclaimed wildly that "that was closing in upon her too, but that she had promised and would be put into prison rather than break her word." Then she went off again into incoherent talk

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