

THE LITTLE OLD SECRETARY

(CONTINUED)

CHAPTER XVIII.

Season and scene come back again, And outward things unchanged remain; The road we cannot re-instate, Ourselves we cannot re-create, Nor set our souls to the same key Of the remembered harmony.

As soon as Kathleen set her foot again on Irish soil, all other impressions faded away before the one great anxiety, of how she should find her father.

Her buoyant hopes had never let her really imagine it would be all to late to bring him consolation. But as they drove through Glenmore, the look upon the faces of her old friends and the greetings that met her everywhere made her heart sink.

Home was reached at last; and there, standing in the antique door-way was that dear mother whose words, whose love, whose strength, had been all in all to her during those long weeks of separation.

Rose was consigned with many kind and grateful words to her proud father; and then Mrs. McDermot took her darling up-stairs, saying: "I have got your tea ready in the room next your father's. I must see your dear face quietly, and he does not want me just now.

Kathleen's anxious eyes asked the question she dared not put in words. "He is very, very ill, my child," her mother answered to that inquiring look. "He lies in a sort of unconscious state, without taking notice of him, but somehow I have hope still. I cannot give him up. I have watched him so long, and I think now that it is intense depression which is quenching all vital power. I look forward to your return rousing him a little."

"Oh! mother, mother," cried Kathleen, "things have turned out so wonderfully; I do bring back some joy with me to the nest."

Then the whole pent-up stream flowed forth, with such a mingling of tears and smiles and heartfelt thankfulness to the tender Providence which had so wonderfully guided the blind workers of its will, that the hearts of mother and daughter grew stronger together in the faith to cast their burden upon the Lord, and to trust in His help.

"Ewan will never rest," she affirmed, "till he has got yours and his father's forgiveness. "Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands together, "pray God he may come before it is too late."

It was decided that Kathleen should only tell her father that £500 had come to them through Lord Melton, as it would be dangerous to the sick man, in his present feeble state, to risk rousing inquiries about Ewan.

Kathleen went up to the bedside with a beating heart, feeling keenly how worthless the comfort she had brought would seem, if it had come too late to bring health back to that dear father. She was shocked at the change in him. He was much more wasted, and was lying with a statue-like fixedness about the features which was unlike anything she had seen before.

"Your Kathleen has come home," she said, "and she has brought the olive branch, dearst father. God has been so good. You will have no more anxieties about Dermot Hill. I have brought five hundred pounds back with me, and more is to come later. Will you look at your own child and bless her?"

There was no movement in the face; not the shadow of a smile passed over the still lips; Kathleen fancied there was a slight movement in the cold hand on which her burning ones lay; that was all. She was most bitterly disappointed, and over-wearied with her long journey and all its excitement, she sobbed aloud. Then her mother carried her off to her own room, and insisted on her going to bed.

"I do not feel at all sure he did not hear you, my dearest child," she said, as she kissed Kathleen tenderly before leaving her. "If I see any sign of consciousness later in the night, I will call you again; but you must rest now, that you may be brave and bright when he wants you."

Kathleen threw her arms around her mother's neck and strained her to her heart.

"I will do my best to rest, darling mother, and I promise you I will not break down again. It was the sudden shock of seeing my poor father so greatly changed that upset me."

Another fond embrace, and then her mother left her, and returned to her sick husband's bedside.

But Kathleen was too anxious to sleep, too restless even to be still, and after half-an-hour's honest but ineffectual effort to close her eyes, she rose from her bed, and wrapping her dressing-gown around her, she sank down in an easy chair that stood close by the window. She was too utterly worn out to put into words the cry for help that rang through her soul. "I will trust in the Lord," she murmured; then leaning her aching head against the window she looked out into the still, silent moonlight, and allowed her thoughts to wander unrestrained. The days of her childhood passed in review before her, spent in this home, gay with the joyous companionship of her darling brother, cherished by the untiring love and care of her tender parents. This beloved home was secure to them now—but with Ewan gone, and her father dying, of what value would it be? All the light and brightness of her life appeared to be fading out of it, and she sighed. Though the quiet of the silent room seemed to come the echo of her whispering words—"Trust in the Lord." A moment afterwards a little shower of sand was thrown up against the window.

Kathleen imagined it was some one anxious to know how her father was; for she had heard the people had been hectoring about the house day and night, with inquiries and offers of assistance. She rose from her chair, and threw up the sash.

"Who is there?" she asked in a soft voice.

A pebble with a little piece of paper tied to it came up, and fell at her feet.

Though the moon was shining brightly, she could decipher nothing but the words: "For God's sake, get me secretly to my father."

Her heart seemed to stand still. She had been certain he would come; but now that he was here, the reality came upon her with an overpowering shock. The feeling was mastered, however, instantly and her course decided upon. Leaning out, she whispered: "Can not you get up to my window the old way? You will be quite safe here."

A fir tree grew close by the window, and Ewan's "old way" was to swing himself up by it from one branch to another, and up on the window-sill. It was done in a few moments, and the long-parted brother and sister were locked in each other's arms.

Only for an instant, however; then he pushed her from him, and with anguish working in every feature he exclaimed:

"They say he will die to-night. I have been hiding here two days, trying in vain to get speech of my mother. I must see my father. He must not die until he has forgiven me. But oh! you don't know what it will be for others and myself if I am recognized."

"You shall see him, and no one but ourselves shall know you are here," replied Kathleen soothingly, seeing the best way to quiet his morbid agitation was to agree to all he asked. "I will lock the door, and then you will be quite safe."

His teeth were chattering and he looked so haggard that Kathleen felt sure he had had little or nothing to eat during the two days he had been hanging about afraid to discover himself. Yet she did not dare to leave him whilst she went to fetch some food, lest a sudden panic should seize him and he should make his escape. Fortunately there were some remains of her dinner in her travelling bag. She put the sandwiches into his trembling hands and held the wine and water to his pale lips, while slowly, bit by bit, as she thought he would bear it, she told the history of her acquaintance with Lord Melton, and its results. She showed him the Royal Guarantee for the safety of himself and for those who had aided him in his escape. Then, finally, putting her arm fondly round his throat, she placed in his hands the money sent by Captain Cochrane.

"This, my dear brother," she said, as she tenderly kissed his forehead, "will enable you to make restitution to our dear parents for the injury your extravagance has inflicted on them; it will more than pay all your debts."

Poor Ewan shook in every limb as his sister related to him all that had passed between herself and Lord Melton: when she finished by placing the money in his hands, he burst into tears of mingled gratitude and remorse.

"Oh! Kathleen," he said in a tone of anguish, when at last he had recovered his self-control, "you do not know how terribly retribution haunts me, step by step, action for action, word for word. In my mad passion I swore I would not return under this roof while my father lived; and oh! I feel as though the curse was working now, and he will go without a blessing for me; and I shall have killed him. Oh! God! I shall have killed him! Will he die to-night, Kathleen? Is there no hope? Oh! why were you not at home to let me in earlier."

The words broke in an agony from him; he buried his face on his sister's shoulder, and great shuddering sobs shook his whole frame.

Kathleen felt quite frightened at the violence of her unhappy brother's grief, and a chilling dread came over her, as she remembered the state in which her father was lying. But putting a strong restraint on her own feelings, she soothed the poor broken-hearted fellow to the best of her power, impressing upon him the absolute necessity of calmness if he wanted to see his father.

"I will go now and inquire if you can come at once to his bedside," she said, as Ewan's sobs grew fewer and gentler.

She crept quietly into the sick-room, intending to call her mother out to speak to Ewan first. But she was obliged to wait some minutes, for Mrs. McDermot was engaged in raising the sick man's head, while a faithful old nurse, who had come to her in that extremity, was trying to get some drops of cordial between his lips. The effort was unsuccessful, and as they laid him back gently on the pillow, the old nurse ejaculated, "It's all over, I fear, ma'am. If he cannot swallow, there's no more hope."

Meanwhile Ewan, to whose agonized impatience even the few minutes of Kathleen's absence seemed an age, had followed her to the door, where he caught a glimpse of the statue-like fixity of his father's countenance, and heard the nurse's words, which sounded in his ears the old knell, "Too late—too late—"

Wild with the despair of his regrets, firmly believing his father had breathed his last, he rushed in, regardless of all beside, and flinging himself on his knees by the bed, he broke out into an exceedingly loud and bitter cry:

"Oh! father! father! You cannot go and leave me, unforgiven and unblest! Oh! my father, bless me!"

The terrified women held their breath for fear; and with their eyes fixed on the still face, waited, expecting the end. But the sudden shock of that agonized embrace, the force of that cry of filial sorrow, had power to break the seal which the extremity of prostration had set upon the senses. The eyes opened with a clear, conscious look, the feeble hand was raised as though seeking for something, and as Mr. McDermot laid it on the bowed, stricken head by his side, the lips of the father murmured—"My son! my first born!"

CHAPTER XIX.

The self-same moment I could pray: And from my neck so free The Albatross fell off and sank, Like lead into the sea!

"After these voices there was peace," is a complete epitome of that midnight hour in the home of the McDermots. Ewan's agonized sobs subsided under the touch of that paternal blessing. No one spoke again. The cordial was administered without difficulty, and when Kathleen, at a sign from her mother, look her father's other hand, he opened his eyes once more and smiled a welcome full of peace and love. Half-an-hour afterwards the group of loving watchers perceived with joy, by the regularity of his breathing, that he had fallen into a quiet sleep.

Then the mother's heart went out to her beloved prodigal, and she slipped away to prepare a welcome for him. And never did any prodigal's return so literally resemble the circumstances of the exquisite original picture. A comfortable bed was got ready, linen and clothes from his father's wardrobe put out, a bath provided, and the tea and food she thought best suited to quiet his

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evered nerves a mother's hand. ing to the sick r her son gently a bedside and fol heart, and the perfectly worn emotions, laying faithful heart, r ther would not l ministered to his hands, while she what she had p and at last, wh bed that had h happy boyhood, tuck him up as s the old childi stroking the hai brow, while she last kiss, she tol sleep well for h father needed a nursing, and she of her son's stro her. She did no without any dir said, he felt rei home—forgiven, miserable past h Mrs. McDermot that the doctor. the sick man slo recovered streng seen the springs ed by the repea trial, and had a the hope that, i could be lifted vitality within h raise him up, g gates of the grav sat beside his E ters and sending gradually clear his liabilities, h pains were gra off one by one days after he h up both by hurse and Kathleen w cret conference Mrs. McDermot cluded, and wh give him unbo tion. Kathleen's i a great stay to critical time; fo he carefully tr ther's sake to e of the poverty which he had l upon his face a ing which his E stances had no greatest delight ance on his fat he was always ing to banish al in trying to be him. Over and ov leen was requi late her advent and to tell the Melton, the "litt secretary;" and ly he offended so unrestrain Idyll of the Sea he dashed thro vatory glass to being burnt. T would joke at h her such a goo tion, and said she wanted a would send daughter to gi Kathleen dance light, saying: "And yet, a seemed to be turbances and Mr. McDermot valry could no satisfied at the meeting Eva H andria. A very son who had l tiol nurse and to travel, had spatched with at Alexandria ton until they about their ow Mr. McDerm at the thought ly, and said h would save hi tide over one climate. But i it would be so before he w enough to t thought it lool