

THE LITTLE OLD SECRETARY

(CONTINUED.)
CHAPTER XI.

"He fastened thanks to Heaven for life Redeemed, unhop'd, from desperate strife."
—Sir Walter Scott.

Mr. Everard continued his kindness to Kathleen the next day. He brought his writing to the morning-room, where, from a very early hour, she had established herself to finish the painting of the scenery for the tableaux, and during the morning he gave her several hints about color, which assisted her much. He even once left his writing to put in a few touches to her picture with his own hand.

The tableaux were to come off that evening; but the unfortunate occurrences of the last two days had so occupied Kathleen's attention and taken up her time, that her painting had fared badly, and there was still a good deal left for her to do. Her spirits were, however, too much elated by the happy termination of Rose's troubles to be easily discouraged. She was too naturally inclined, when she had taken any work in hand, to throw herself into it with an impetuosity which nothing could check. So, very tired with the previous day's anxiety and distress, she had risen early and persisted painting the whole day, without allowing herself a moment to rest or scarcely to eat.

She had undertaken also to compose a song that cousin Jack was to sing, and in which the heroic exploit of the Sea King was to be narrated. In the middle of the afternoon Jack rushed into the painting-room to tell her "She must write the words to the tune of 'The Hardy Norseman's House of Yore,'" for that it was the only tune he could sing. Unluckily, Kathleen had already commenced writing her verses to another metre, and now her wearied brain could not change the measure. So Mr. Everard had found her, an hour before dinner, sitting pencil in hand, in the midst of an ocean of scribbled paper, trying with frowning brow to mend her rhyme.

"You are thoroughly overtired," he said, as he saw her pale face and the dark rings round her eyes. "You must go and rest before dinner. You have finished your scenery," he added, looking at her painting with critical eye, "and very successfully, too. I will get this hung up for you, and you can arrange the lights after dinner when you are rested. Is there anything else I can do to help you?"

He had so completely won Kathleen's confidence by the kindly interest he had shown both to her troubles and in her work, that, forgetting for the moment her extreme shyness about showing her poetical efforts, she held the paper she had been writing up towards him with a despairing look.

"Oh! Mr. Everard," she exclaimed, "if you would only write me a song about the 'Ship in a Storm,' to the tune of 'The Hardy Norseman's House of Yore!' Cousin Jack will sing it this evening. I have promised to write him one; I have been trying for the last quarter of an hour, and nothing will come in the right metre."

"I have not written verses since I was a boy at school," he replied, laughing; "but let me see what the style is to be."

He took the paper. It was headed, "The Idyll of the Sea King."

"He rose serene at that despairing cry; A sudden intuition lit his eye. He ruled with royal hand and stalwart form The bounding vessel on that night of storm!"

Kathleen handed over her lines to him without hesitation, quite pre-occupied with her eager desire to get him to finish them. Now, to her surprise and mortification, she saw his lips quiver with a strong effort to keep his gravity, as the title caught his eye. As he proceeded, the muscles of his face gave way, and he broke out in a paroxysm of laughter. Then he made a strong effort to regain composure.

"Do forgive my rudeness," he exclaimed. "It is not the lines, it is an absurd association that has upset me."

But it was all in vain. Something had evidently struck upon his sense of the ridiculous, and the more he struggled against it, the more he laughed. If he could only have told her why he laughed, it would not have mattered, but he had a reason which prevented him doing this.

Meantime Kathleen, with all the sensitiveness of sixteen on the subject of verse-making, more physically exhausted and tired out than she was herself aware of, felt tried beyond endurance, and, snatching the paper out of his hands, she tore it into shreds.

"There was no need for apology," she said, haughtily. "I might have known I was making myself an object of ridicule." Then, unable any longer to control her feelings, she rushed out of the room straight to her own chamber, where she locked herself in, and—shall I confess it?—indulged in a fit of tears.

Very much ashamed of herself she felt when she recovered and remembered what a little thing had made her lose her temper. Yet she could not quite forgive Mr. Everard. It seemed to her like a betrayal of confidence. He had drawn her on to trust in him with her thoughts, even her romances, and now she felt as if he had been quizzing her all the time. Conscience did whisper something of the kind help he had given her that morning, and how, when she was in difficulties over her ship, a few touches from his hand had made it send before the wind just as she wanted. But the offence of having made game of her outweighed it all. "It was too unkind," she kept saying to herself; and she valorously resolved keep henceforth to herself, and not accept help from him about anything.

"Most especially," she murmured passionately, "he shall have nothing to do with my poetry."

Having made this resolution she determined to avoid the least risk of coming across him. So she sent Rose down to clear away all the mess from the drawing-room.

"Just look into the small drawing-room as you pass, Rose, and see if my picture is put up. And if there is no one there you can put my paint-box on the table. I should like to add a few strokes to bring out the lights on my picture more sharply, after it is hung in the right place."

In a little while Rose came back, saying she had put the painting-room tidy, and that Mr. Everard had just finished hanging up her picture, and was gone to his own room. "And the picture looks beautiful, Miss Kathleen, just like real waves," added the girl, with sparkling eyes. "Mr. Everard said so himself as I met him at the door; and he told me to go in and look at it, and he said he hoped you were lying down to rest."

Kathleen's conscience gave another sharp prick as she remembered how exceedingly rude she had been to him. But she did not want to listen just then; and she ran down, forgetting her fatigue in her eagerness to secure the quiet half-

hour before dinner for certain last effects she had been contemplating.

She could not help feeling pleased as she entered the drawing-room. The recess (regularly prepared for the tableaux) had the most weird like effect in giving an air of reality to the scenery. The recess projected from the end of the small drawing-room parallel with a conservatory. Folding doors shut off the small drawing-room from the larger one.

To secure herself from all interference or obnoxious help, Kathleen locked herself in. Then with the breathless delight of a young artist, she set herself to put the finishing strokes to a work which had succeeded beyond her highest hopes—strokes of real phosphorescent light, which lit up the long green sweeps of translucent water, while brilliant high lights, edging the crests of mountainous waves, gave them the appearance of breaking foam.

Absorbed in the ecstasy of a young artist, Kathleen backed and backed to observe the effect she was producing, quite forgetting a candle she had taken down from the table and placed on the floor, in order to throw one particular dim ray of light that she wanted on the sea. She was recalled from dreamland by a sense of intense heat and a sudden glare of light.

The whole horror of her position burst upon her in one moment. She had locked herself in alone—and she had set herself on fire.

It is wonderful how many thoughts can condense themselves into a second of time when we are in great peril.

Kathleen's first impulse was to send forth one loud cry for help—her second, distinctly to remember that she had made it impossible for any one to get at her. Then there was a dim idea of trying to reach the door to unlock it, and a sense of there being no time; while memory vividly painted the wayward, undisciplined feelings which had made her so determined to have no one to interfere with her. She understood clearly the full danger of her position, shut into so small a space with all sorts of combustible materials around her. The woe of her parents when they should hear she was burnt to death—the horror of such a fate—all realized themselves as distinctly in that one brief moment as if each separate thought had had hours in which to develop.

Then all seemed to fuse into the one desperate effort to do battle with the fiery foe, as gathering the skirts of her dress round her, she flung herself on the door, and rolled herself to and fro over the jets of flame that ever and anon sprang up from portions of her dress.

But she could not put it out—and a sense of despair was seizing on her heart, when she heard the side of the conservatory come crashing in; something dark fell heavily upon her, and she felt so tightly rolled up that she could scarcely breathe. The next instant she heard Mr. Everard's voice in a tone of intense anxiety.

"Child, child, are you much burnt?" he cried. "Speak, I entreat you."

But Kathleen could not speak for a moment. She could not tell whether she were hurt or not. The rush of thankfulness that her life was spared seemed to overpower every sense. In a minute or two, however, she recovered enough to sit up on the floor and sob out:

"I'm not hurt, but oh! I'm so frightened!"

"My poor child," said Mr. Everard, tenderly, as he took off the heavy black cloak in which he had enveloped her. "You must be burnt—try and tell me where you are hurt."

"Only my arms; they are scorched behind," replied Kathleen, still sobbing, and shaking all over with the terror she had suffered. "Oh! let me go upstairs, Mr. Everard, before any one comes. Don't let my uncle know there has been a fire; it is his great horror. I'm not much hurt, indeed I'm not. Let me go upstairs before there is another disturbance."

Mr. Everard was greatly relieved that she was able to think of disturbances; and, unlocking the door, watched anxiously if she could walk without assistance. Kathleen seized a large shawl that was lying among the stage drapery, to cover her, and, turning a beseeching look to Mr. Everard: "Put it all straight, will you?" she entreated, "and don't let anybody know! They will say I am always getting in to scrapes. What would become of me if . . ."

Her voice broke down. "My dear child, you go straight and get your burns attended to," said Mr. Everard in a decided tone, "and don't forget yourself. I will see that all is put right here, and that your uncle is not vexed."

As he spoke, he opened the window to let out the smell of burning, and then began to remove the fragments of broken glass and burnt remnants that lay about, while poor Kathleen, whose burns were beginning to pain her sadly, could only give him a look of gratitude, and with one faint, "Thank you," left the room and made the best haste she could upstairs.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the folding-doors were thrown back, and as the party collected in the drawing-room before dinner, every one, even those who had seen the painting in progress, were almost electrified at the effect it produced, while Lord Melton, from whom it had been kept a profound secret, was quite enchanted. The poor little artist's utmost expectations were exceeded; but she herself was enduring far too much pain to be able to enjoy her triumph; and, anxious of another "disturbance," she was compelled to resign herself to Nurse and Rose's doctoring, sending a message down to Eleanor, "that she had slightly burnt herself, and should not be able to come downstairs."

In the course of the evening, both Eleanor and Mary came up to see how she was; full of regrets for what had happened, and eager with their accounts of the admiration the sea-piece had called forth.

"You will find yourself quite a heroine when you come down again," she added, making a comical grimace. "Why! there was Lord Melton with his own noble hands altering and rearranging the lights to make the effect better; and cousin Jack got quite excited, and improvised the sea-song that you, faithful creature, forgot to write for him."

"I heard Lord Melton and Mr. Everard talking it over together, after the tableaux were finished," joined in Eleanor, "and the former said he could have sworn Mr. Everard had painted it himself, it was so true to life. And, Kathleen, dear, you must tell me exactly how your burns are, for Mr. Everard seems quite anxious about you."

"Oh, yes!" laughed Mary, dancing round Kathleen's chair "you have made quite a conquest of little 'inky fingers.'"

"Hush, Mary dear, don't call him that—it is so rude to a visitor—and don't talk nonsense!"

"Well, I'll behave myself," interrupted Mary, sitting down and primming up her mouth demurely, "and I won't speak ill of your love; only remember—it is not lawful to marry your grandfather."

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